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Pyramid of the Sun

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PYRAMID OF THE SUN

By

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Bachelor of Arts in History
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1993

Bachelor of Arts in Spanish
University of Massachusetts at Amherst
1993

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English
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ABSTRACT
Pyramid of the Sun

by

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Pyramid of the Sun is a novel which is experimental in structure. It weaves traditional prose with original poems based on Aztec creation myths. The narrative is not strictly linear, but approaches the plot from several angles – past, present, and future – simultaneously. It comes back to its starting point at the end, like a snake devouring its own tail. The novel takes the Aztec and Mayan belief that time is circular and never-ending and reinterprets it in a contemporary, hard-edged setting that touches down at various points across the globe, including Moscow, Seville, Seoul and Las Vegas. Pyramid of the Sun explores a world where gritty realism, lyricism, and mythic themes combine. It is a world where the borders between cultures, languages and sexual identities blur and fade until they become almost meaningless.

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*“And look, the child
Is there in the almond tree,
Standing upright,
Like a string of boats arriving in dream.*

*He climbs
Between moon and sun. He tries to bend toward us,
Through the smoke,
His laughing fire,
Where angel and serpent have the same face.
In the clusters of words that now have ripened,
He offers us
Once more from the fruit of the tree.*

*And the mason is already
Bending over the depths of the light.
His spade gathers up its rubble
For the impossible mending.”*

Yves Bonnefoy, “The Earth”

Phase 1: Temple of the Feathered Serpent

Meztli: Teotihuacán, Mexico

Meztli was more otherworldly creature than human, more cobwebbed prowler on the shadow side of the stone ziggurats than resident of Earth. She hobbled up and down the steps of the pyramids, reaching her clawed hands into the abandoned recesses and cavities of the ruins, plucking out shiny trinkets; stray buttons and coins which fell from the pockets of tourists who scaled the monuments. Meztli hoarded them, stuffed them into the ever-expanding folds of her shawls, which wrapped around her like the layers of clouds enveloping the surface of one of the large outer planets of the Solar System.

The sun set and the moon slipped into the wide expanse of sky. The stars shone brightly, and dimly. Meztli saw the sky as both clear, and hazy with pollution at the same time, as if time were happening not as a sequence of events, but as a continuous circle, and she was somewhere in the center of it, able to see it all at once. At night she found her way back to the Citadel, back to the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. She sought dampness, darkness, and warmth. These were the conditions that could sustain the fragility of a heart which beat so slowly it had almost stopped entirely. She found her way through cracks in the walls barely big enough for a tiny person to fit through. Then

she moved through fissures in the stone floor smaller than that, unseen. She melted into the undiscovered passageways below the temple, retreated to the sacred space at the heart of the ancient center of spiritual power. It was a small cave that pulsed with the vibrations of the cosmos. She curled into a fetal ball and placed her fists into her mouth. That's when the visions came. Sometimes, Meztli thought of this time as simply her life, and the time she was awake and scampering around above ground in the heat and the dust as her purgatory, her waking nightmare. The sun an angry god glaring in her eyes, boring into her thoughts and burning out any shred of happiness and tranquility she may have ever felt. She wanted to stay in the cave below the temple forever, but she had to go out into the world above, to forage for food, to pick up coins and trade them for bags of peanuts and husks of corn with chili and lime. She had plenty of water. It dripped onto the rocks of the cave from an unknown source, its sound an incessant lullaby from the belly of the earth itself.

The visions came to her from other lives. Places she had never been and couldn't comprehend. She dreamt in languages she didn't understand when she woke. She saw boats sailing from a land of snow-covered birch forests, a family separated by boys dressed as soldiers, tears the color of amber falling into the ocean. She saw the boats running aground in another land of snow-covered birch forests, she saw them coming to shore in a place of dusty, rolling plains and horses.

One night, Meztli received a powerful visitor, someone who thrived in dampness and darkness. Mictlantecuhtli, the lord of the underworld, drifted through her cave, skeletal and otherworldly. He was adorned in robes of bark and his hands were enormous claws and his hair was glittering with stars. The first time he passed through Meztli's

cave, she was both terrified and oddly aroused. Had he come to see her? Had the coziness of her cave piqued his interest? But her hopes of an otherworldly ravaging were dashed when his consort, Mictēcacīhuatl drifted in after him, her face a gruesome skull, her skirt a writhing, hissing mass of fork-tongued serpents. The couple left a chill in the air in their wake which left her shivering. Their dog paced behind them in measured steps. Meztli took an instant disliking to the scraggly little beast. He glared at her with malicious, spectral eyes, and she glared back, not willing to give an inch of ground in her own territory, in the cave that until then had the warm, rhythmic sensation of a cosmic womb, protective and inviolate.

The dog, affronted by the incident, sought vengeance on Meztli. He found a way to materialize during the day in the physical realm, or perhaps, like her, this was his natural state of existence. She was at the base of the Pyramid of the Sun, her head wrapped to protect her from the harmful rays. She was reading the palm of a tourist. His face was one she had seen before, in a vision. First in the cave below the temple, and then, above ground, standing in front of her, placing his hand in hers, his eyes open and trusting, placing his whole heart in her hands. And Meztli knowing, he would lose everything. But then he could begin again.

The dog came back just as the tourist left. He snarled at her, but she stared him down. No, you will not drive me from this place, dog of death. No, I will not let your masters take me before I am ready. They stood there at a frozen impasse while the universe ground to a standstill around them. Then, slowly, the planets resumed their orbits. The sun set. The moon began to shine. Their faces went up in flames as if someone had struck a match to them. The tourist snapped a picture, looked down,

embarrassed, and rushed away. The dog followed him. The tourist didn't notice. Meztli knew the dog would not catch up to him. He would be back, this tourist, he knew how to travel lightly, how to keep moving, even if it meant leaving something behind, or everything. At least he would be free. He would make his own choice. If he knew what their great grandfather told her in dreams, he might return, he might take her place.

Meztli returned to the Citadel, to the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the place to which they had found themselves drawn, all the faces she had seen in her visions over the years, or perhaps they were minutes or days or lifetimes. The first had come with another young man. He looked like he was in love. Meztli told him he was going to suffer in a cold land without borders, and he accepted it. The next came with a pair of twins with hair the color of common copal. He got lost. He found his way. He got lost again. The rest she didn't know. The next understood her but could not answer. Love eluded him. The stars guided him. The last was the most important, and the one who suffered the most. He had the strength of the warriors of antiquity, but his heart was afraid to use it. They all returned to the womb of the cosmos. They had all come from the same place, the same energy, the same DNA. Go back far enough and the gene pool is one, the branches of the tree shrink back into a single root, divisions and tribes and languages disappear, borderlines sink into the ground, nations wither, but somehow there is always war, always a dagger in the heart, a sacrifice, an angry god demanding vengeance and justice and masses of devotees to adore him, to love him, and somewhere, a goddess, beyond all, with her arms spread wide to embrace us and her legs spread wider to welcome us back to the place we began.

The Jaguar Sun

The earth

filled with giants

Tezcatlipoca at the height

of sacred sky 676 years Quetzalcóatl

used his staff to knock his rival into the seas at the

farthest extremes of flat earth black Tezcatlipoca rose angry

from salt waters darkness shrouded land jaguar god of night raced a plague of

jaguars hunted giants drank blood Tezcatlipoca leapt into the sky a jaguar constellation

Phase 2: Perestroika

Alex Baron – Moscow, Russia

*Vino con otro muchacho que tiene cara de latino pero habla español peor que él.
Tiene cara de enamorado. Va a sufrir mucho en una tierra fría sin fronteras. Se lo digo
a él y lo acepta.*

When the gruff woman behind the counter finishes with her current victim and moves on to the next, everyone in line tenses. No one waves the next person forward. There is just a shuffling of weight, a heave and lunge among the crowd, and then muddy, booted feet jostle for position along the creaking floor.

“Careful, you are crushing my bread.”

“I need to be next. I’m receiving medicine from my daughter in Kaliningrad.”

The women in line flash their gold teeth at each other like fangs. Their breath forms dense clouds of condensation as they speak. They are not looking at each other. They have trained their eyes to stare away while they talk to strangers in public.

When it's my turn I push my way past the squirming old ladies and secure my position at the window. The sea of bodies is so close behind me I can smell their breath and sweat, feel their plastic bags full of newspaper-wrapped kielbasa crash into the backs of my knees. My fingers are numb as I pry them out of my pockets. Minus twenty Celsius outside and it feels just as bad inside. I've been away from the States for a year now, barely the halfway point in my stint as a Peace Corps volunteer, and already the waiting rooms from back home are hard to imagine. In the States there are rooms where you can take a number and sit down and wait till you are called, heated rooms with magazine racks and carpeting, where the floor isn't wet and muddy and full of landmine-sized craters.

“Fill these out.”

The woman behind the counter shoves a stack of forms at me. I spend excruciating minutes forcing my scrawling Cyrillic penmanship to look as neat as possible, the curly, fluid letters threatening to burst through the non-negotiable borders of each box. The woman retreats to the back and tries to hide in a curtained-off area to eat a steaming, meat-filled pastry. When I finish I wave my arms to catch her attention. She huffs her way to me and then plants four slick fingers, shiny with grease, on my top form.

“No, no, no. This won't do.”

She points out my appalling errors: not shaping my numbers correctly, not using the right color ink even though she's the one who gave me the pen, not having a Russian name.

"Fill these out again," she barks. "And do something about that name, it sounds too foreign. Couldn't you just write another name? A more Russian-sounding name?"

A few younger men, all unemployed, with nothing better to do than run errands for their families, are sprinkled in with the horde of grandmothers. They are almost interchangeable, with their identical wool hats and leather jackets, their steely jawlines that could crack open a bottle. I try to blend in with them, keep my hair buzzed short, wear a jacket I bought at the outdoor *rynok*, gloss over verb endings in Russian so I won't sound like a foreigner. I pretend to be surly instead of ignorant of the proper declension and conjugation of verbs of motion. I routinely kill the urge to smile at strangers. The less you stand out here, the safer you are from the foreigner-bashing skinheads, the money-hungry criminals, the post-Perestroika mafia who follow no code of ethics, who leave frozen, bullet-ridden corpses in front of the Metro stations where you have to step over them just to catch the next train.

When I finish, the woman behind the counter inspects my forms, disappointed there are no points for her to dispute this time. She retrieves my package from the curtained-off area, a beat up cardboard box wrapped in twine and crisscrossed with rows of colorful stamps. It has already been opened and reopened and tossed around by the customs officials. The cash-strapped government employees are known to ransack packages for anything valuable to sell off. One of the other volunteers received a box

with an album of her sister's vacation photos that was half-empty. Sometimes the customs officials take the scenic photos and sell them as postcards on the street.

“Are you sure there isn't anything else for me?”

The face of the woman behind the counter is statue-still and impassive.

“Please, *please* just tell me if there is another package that came with this one. I'm begging you.”

And then she sees something in my eyes and her face changes almost imperceptibly to deep, sincere sympathy. The very narrow range of emotions most Russians allow to pass over their faces in public makes the slight change as dramatic and meaningful as the sun reemerging from the black disk of an eclipse. She turns without saying a word and disappears behind the curtain for several minutes. An old woman steps out of the crowd behind me and presses her bundled body into the counter. She tries to elbow me out of her way. I ignore her but she does not go back to her place in line and we stand there in a hostile showdown, shoulders pressed hard into each others', neither one of us willing to give an inch of ground.

Finally the woman behind the counter comes back with her head lowered. I notice for the first time her hooded eyes under too much make up. They are an unusual shade of gray. She comes as close to me as she can with the counter in between us and says in a soft voice.

“There is nothing else for you.”

She doesn't say I'm sorry, but Russians don't express these sorts of feelings with words. I can see from her lowered head, her tight mouth, her open, vulnerable eyes.

Outside the post office the snow has started to fall in thick, spidery gobs. When the trolley screeches to a stop in front of me the usual sense of dread knots itself into my stomach. One group of people rushes out the door like a tidal wave, another group fights against the undertow to get in. I force my way in with the crowd, all sharp elbows and gritted teeth.

We inch our way through the snowy streets, past faded old buildings painted ochre or beige or salmon, badly in need of repair, past ornately-carved statues and war memorials that look weather-beaten and shoddy. Everything looks like a remnant, a neglected relic from a more confident time, when the people here were Soviet citizens and believed they were on top of the world, launching cosmonauts into space from Baikonur. But the Soviet Union broke apart and Russian society has started to fall apart too, even though Perestroika was supposed to make things better.

I used the Peace Corps as my excuse to restructure my life after my dad died, after every conversation with my mom ended with her holding back tears, looking away, trying not to let herself be reminded of my dad's face when she looked at mine. I needed a reason to get as far away as I could. Soon after I was accepted, I ruthlessly pared down my material possessions to what I could fit into two suitcases and a carry-on. Then I tried to box up the rest of the artifacts I had accumulated during my life and give them away, like an ascetic monk taking a vow of poverty. But there were some things I just couldn't part with. I ended up with a box full of photos that made me feel nostalgic, mementos that were useless to anyone but me. I remember them now as intense flashes of color, like neural pulses: the chili red stucco of my dorm in Austin, the white sand of the beach

at Isla Mujeres, the cornflower blue of the sky behind me as I stood at the top of the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán.

I left the box in my mom's attic, in the house where I grew up, where I thought she was going to live out the rest of her life as a widow. Last month my mom emailed me and said she is dating someone long-distance now, maybe selling her house, so she wants to clear out the attic. She seems to think I'm going to be in Russia forever, that I've moved here permanently, and sometimes, I feel the same way. My mom told me to expect a package and shipped it off before I could reply, not knowing that most of it wouldn't arrive, that some of it would fall off and get lost like the booster engines of a rocket being jettisoned as it launches into orbit.

A fat ticket lady hustles through the trolley, squeezing her way through the crowd and hunting down anyone who tries to shirk the two thousand ruble fare.

“Pay the fare citizens, don't forget to pay the fare. You, yes you, you must pay the fare.”

Most people haven't been paid for at least six months and are willing to risk being scolded every day by the army of ticket ladies who patrol the overcrowded trolleys and buses. The ticket ladies haven't been paid either so they go after people like efficient predators, hoping some of the money they spend their days collecting for the city will someday find its way back to them.

The ticket lady halts the trolley and pushes a group of young fare-dodgers off. They scream and spit at the ground and flip her off from the side of the road as the trolley rushes off without them.

“Next stop, Radio Technical Institute.”

The announcer rattles off the stops with tangible boredom and resentment, sighing heavily into the microphone after each one. We pass by street after street of somber, snow-covered, high rises.

“Next stop, Red October Chocolate Factory. Pay the fare citizens. Don’t forget to pay the fare.”

A mass of hunch-shouldered factory workers struggle to push their way into the overcrowded trolley. Before all of them can get on the doors close and squeeze the stragglers out as the trolley staggers forward again. The rest of the crowd starts to get irritable. The trolley is too slow, too crowded, even for Russia. The snow is too thick and the winter too cold and too long.

There is a commotion behind me. The crowd makes room in the center of the trolley where a man lies sprawled on his stomach on the wet, muddy, cracked wooden floor. His fur hat has come off and his face is slick with drool. The ticket lady’s cheeks are frostbite red. She yells at him, furious.

“What do you think this is? Naptime? You think you can just sleep here on the floor? Like some dog?”

She throws her fur-jacket clad arms up into the air, the purple lipstick on her tight lips straining as she pouts, then screams, pouts, then screams.

“This isn’t a place to sleep, this is a trolley. You want to sleep? You want to curl up on the ground like some mongrel because you’re so drunk? Go home, then. Go home to your wife. See if she’ll let you into her house.”

“No...” The man’s voice is a whiny croak. “I can’t go home right now, not like this. Dasha, she’ll be angry.”

The ticket lady keeps screaming, drowning out his protests.

“I don’t care where you sleep, just go away. Go sleep in the street with the dogs for all I care.”

The trolley lurches forward without warning. The ticket lady throws one gloved hand up toward the driver in an exaggerated halt motion.

“Hold on, Vanya. We’re not going anywhere. This lout has to get off the trolley and find somewhere else to sleep.”

She starts to kick the man in the stomach to punctuate her demands.

“Get out!” she screams. “Get out, get out, get out!”

Finally she squats down next to him and tries to lift him. She manages to drag him a few feet toward the back door. Wheezing from the effort, she pauses and scans the crowd for recruits to help her.

“You. And you.” She points with her chin at two reluctant male students with Adidas caps and sullen eyes. “You two young people help me get him out of here.”

One rolls his eyes and nods at the other and they slowly move toward her in unison. She scans the crowd again, looking for someone else to enlist.

‘And you too,’ she says, nodding toward me. There’s nowhere to set my box down on the crowded trolley and no one I trust to hold it and not scamper out at the next stop. I shamelessly try to ignore her.

She keeps mumbling at full volume. “You’re men, you must help me. Come now, you young men must help me get him out of here.”

She gets up and strides through the crowd and is on me, just like that, her face in mine, the front of her long jacket pressed into the side of my box, in between us like a shield.

“No.” I level my eyes at the ticket lady.

She doesn’t answer. Several other passengers are looking at me too, curious. I had answered her in English. Not *nyet*, but no.

The ticket lady shakes her head, dismissing this as a prank, convinced I’m a Russian student just mocking her with a refusal in English. She reaches past the box and latches onto my jacket, starting to pull me.

“No.” I repeat, squirming out of her grip. Still English. More curious stares now.

The woman waves her hands in the air and shakes her head as she retreats back to the drunk man on the floor. With just a little help from the two boys, she drags the man to the door. He is grumbling and slurring the whole way. As they get closer to the door he is whining and almost crying. She heaves and tosses the man out the back door and head first into the snow. His face is turned to the side, cheek flat against the frozen ground, moustache wet with dirty slush. His legs are twisted at a painful angle upward, his feet still caught in the steps of the trolley’s back door. The trolley starts to move again, slowly. The man’s face begins to drag along the ground. The wheels pick up speed.

“Vanya hold up!” The ticket lady shouts and the trolley jerks to an abrupt halt. “We haven’t got him out yet.”

More annoyed than concerned, all by herself now, she gets down on her knees in the stairwell and on the third push sends the man's legs out into the street where they flop into the snow next to the rest of his rag doll body. The trolley starts again with a jerk. Now the drunk man's legs have fallen in front of the rear wheel. I find myself almost hoping something tragic is about to happen, anything to take my mind away from the deadening boredom that tinges every day of the long Russian winter.

The trolley stops short again. The other people on the trolley are standing as complacently as I am. No one moves or talks still, but now everyone is watching, maybe hoping for the same thing I am. The announcer's dreary voice comes on the loudspeaker.

"Next stop, Pedagogical Institute. Don't forget to pay the fare citizens. Move the man's legs out of the way so the trolley doesn't crush them. Next stop, Ped Institute."

The two boys who reluctantly helped the ticket lady now exchange a few unintelligible words with each other in hushed, self-conscious voices, their eyes on the ground in front of them. One follows the other off the trolley. They spin the man around roughly in the slush and barely make it back onto the trolley as it pulls away. The man is a bizarre snow angel now, crash landed in front of the Red October Chocolate Factory.

Everyone on the trolley is breathing a sigh of relief. The man is writhing on the ground as we pull away. He reaches one hand out toward the trolley, not wanting to be left alone in the snow. I feel the right thing to do rising like bile in my throat. I choke it down, but it's still there. There's no avoiding it.

"Stop the trolley," I say, in English.

More mutters and stares from the passengers. A silence falls like a heavy blanket, broken only by the accelerating motor.

Then in Russian, in a loud, clear, authoritative voice, I say it again, imitating the stern tenor the *militsya* officers use when they stop me and ask for my passport.

“Stop the trolley. Now.”

I nearly lose my balance as the driver slams on the brakes and the crowd sways. People bunch up onto each other like marbles landing in a jar. I lift my heavy box with tired arms and hurry off the trolley, pushing my way through the crowd, not caring who I elbow or knock off balance. As I step into the snow I drop my box and leave it by the side of the road as the trolley rushes off, splashing me with dirty slush. I hurry back to the broken man on the side of the road, sweating through the cold by the time I reach him.

“You have to get home,” I say. “You’ll freeze to death if you stay out here.”

The man turns to face me, his eyes blurry, looking more defeated than drunk. He waves one hand at me, mumbling, “Go away. Leave me alone to die in peace.”

But he doesn’t resist as I lift him to his feet. He slips on the icy ground a few times, clutching me like a scared animal, bunching the sleeve of my jacket between his bare, frostbitten fingers. He tells me which trolley we have to take to get to his apartment. The stop is a short walk away but seems to take forever because he is hobbling along, using me as a crutch. Just before we board the next trolley I turn and see my unopened box lying in the snow, a distant pinprick of color in the white haze, about to be shrouded by the early darkness of the afternoon. By the time I get the man home, probably by the time our trolley makes it to its next stop, my box won’t be there anymore. All that will remain is a shredded carcass of cardboard and twine, plundered and gutted like a fish.

The man's apartment is a short ride away, and he sobers up some on the way, leaning on me less and less, rubbing his hands together to warm them up before stuffing them into his pockets. It would be easier to take a taxi instead of hauling him along onto another trolley but neither one of us can afford it. My meager Peace Corps stipend is paid in rubles which are worth less every day as inflation makes more and more things unaffordable. He insists I come in and drink something with him. I walk him up the stairs from the *podyezd*, which is grimy and foul-smelling and dimly lit like the entryway in my apartment building too. I steer the man through his door, not bothering to take off my dirty boots. He staggers into his kitchen and tries several times to strike a wooden match to light the stovetop before he finally succeeds.

"We can have some tea," he says. "I don't have much else until Dasha comes home with the shopping."

The man fills a teakettle with water, splashing it on himself, struggling to keep his balance. Then he turns toward me, leaning back against the counter.

"My son wants to be a doctor," he says, "But I can't afford to pay for his school anymore. I lost my job and my wife doesn't know yet. I can't bear to tell her. She works so hard herself it makes me ashamed."

I tell him I understand, even though I probably can't. I tell him things will get better here, even though I don't believe they will. The man looks up, tries to focus on me without getting dizzy. He cocks his head and narrows his eyes.

"You have an accent," he says. "Am I right? Are you Latvian? Lithuanian?"

Usually, I play up my ancestry and claim I'm from one of the Baltic States, where Russian is still a *lingua franca*, in order to explain away my accent. But I tell him the truth.

"I'm from America."

"What in the world are you doing here then, in this shit hole?"

I don't know how to answer him. I shrug and he accepts this and nods. One of the few good things about Russia, usually people understand if you don't want to talk. The man stands up as straight as he can and recites a poem as if presenting it to an audience.

Although this is not my native land

Forever the memory is in me

Of the tenderly icy sea

And the fresh waters.

"Akhmatova?" I ask.

"Not as great as Pushkin. He's our best poet." The man closes his eyes, maybe imagining when he first learned the poem in school, when he sat at his desk and memorized the lines, had something set in front of him to accomplish, had structure and routine and the stability of lessons to fill his days. He takes a deep breath and chokes back the threat of a sob.

"A man has a duty to feed his family. I'd sell my own eyes for them if I had to."

I picture the man sitting on a makeshift stool at one of the outdoor markets in the city, sandwiched between the other vendors who sit in the cold and spread whatever scraps they have to sell out on shoddy blankets. I imagine him there trying to haggle with the people walking swiftly by, offering to make a deal with them for the two glistening orbs in front of him, still twitching and dangling severed optic nerves. Two for the price of one, while blood seeps from the empty sockets on his face.

I sit patiently at his kitchen table, wondering if he's asleep on his feet. The teakettle starts to whistle and the man jumps, startled. He turns and takes it off the stove, leaving the burner on, letting the flames flicker in the chilly air. He pulls two teacups from the cabinet and cradles them to his chest. Then he starts to sway and wobble, as if the drafts in his apartment are hurricane winds buffeting him back and forth. All of the sudden, his body goes limp, and before I can make it across the room to catch him, he collapses like a flimsy old building, crumbling into a pile on the floor, letting the cups fall and shatter next to him with a loud crash.

I heave him halfway up and drag him to the next room, hauling him onto a sofa which sits beneath a large Oriental rug hung from the wall. Then I return to the kitchen. I pick up the large, broken pieces of ceramic and throw them away, then use a newspaper to sweep the tiny pieces under the refrigerator. I turn off the stove and hear the flame extinguish with a popping sound.

As I close the cupboard door I see that the shelves underneath where the cups are kept are full of chocolate bars. Not onions or potatoes or rice, just rows and rows of chocolate. Savory dark squares wrapped in paper, with illustrations printed on them which are so exquisite, they could be mistaken for hand-painted, miniature works of art,

hanging in a museum the size of a dollhouse. A row of bars printed with a scene of the Kremlin blanketed in snow next to a row of bars printed with a smiling, Soviet baby, red-cheeked and healthy. The bars lined up in neat rows like soldiers in formation.

I hear the man snoring from the next room. The man whose family is living off chocolate. The man whose salary has been paid in chocolate for months and months on end.

I reach into the cabinet and run my fingers over the neat rows, savoring the feel of the man's only currency, the neatly-wrapped bars, precious as the contents of any vault. I carefully lift a few of my favorites out of the cabinet and pocket them before I leave.

Phase 3: Glasnost

Alex Baron – Moscow, Russia

Saturday night I'm fighting the crowds on the Metro all the way to Tverskaya station. The corridors heave with shuffling bodies. Everyone keeps their fur jackets buttoned up and leaves their gloves on even though it is furnace hot inside. When I reach the exit and walk out into the bone-chilling night the cold is so intense it feels like an assault. Something primal in me responds to it and almost panics, a vestigial survival instinct from pre-evolution. Vlad and Archimedes are waiting outside, unaffected by the cold, or maybe ignoring it.

"So nice to see you again Alexei," Vlad hisses, extending one gloved hand out to shake mine firmly. He smiles and stretches his frostbitten cheeks too tightly.

"Just Alex is fine when we're speaking English, okay?"

Vlad arches one tweezed eyebrow at Archimedes who shrugs while he shakes my hand. Archimedes and I are American, but we greet each other with the firm handshake Russian males use every time they meet, even with close friends. No high fives or knuckle punches in Soviet land.

“Let’s head in,” Archimedes says, taking the lead as we trek through the freshly-fallen snow. We pass by gleaming fortresses of glass and steel, hotels half-filled with a sputtering stream of businessmen from Germany and Scandinavia. They pay exorbitant rates for lousy service and lackluster rooms, but the lobbies still look luxurious to me. They are dripping with dim, ornate chandeliers and polished silver tea services. They make me feel bad about my tiny apartment, with its unreliable heat, and my tiny Peace Corps stipend, which barely covers the basics as winter edges on and the price of vegetables doubles every week.

We walk down a small alley off of Tverskaya, to a cramped cellar bar called *Dariy Morye*, which means Gifts of the Sea in English. The atmosphere is cozy, with ten tables and sets of chairs arranged in a circle around a tiny dance floor. Russians want to sit around a table with friends, not mingle with the other patrons. The word mingle doesn’t even exist in Russia. Too many years of informants and secret police and bugged apartments have made a generation of Russians guarded and suspicious, unlikely to say anything more than they have to in public. The décor is garish nautical, with anchors and rope nets hanging from the ceiling, garland around the boarded-up windows, and fish tanks along the walls that fill the room with a flickering glow. The crowd is mostly waifish boys in sweaters with sleeves that are too long and cover half their hands.

We have miraculous luck as we walk in. A pair of young lovers finishes paying their bill and vacates a small table where we can sit. There are only two chairs, but Vlad just lands on Archimedes’ lap where he stretches out his long, lean legs. We even get a

waitress right away. She is plump and plucky and oddly coquettish with us. The kind of waitress I'd expect to find in another part of the world, not here.

“What can I get you to drink, *dorogoi*?” the waitress purrs, one hand on her fleshy hip.

“Two Heinekens,” Archimedes orders in accented Russian. He's been working here for years but his accent is still terrible. Better than average though, maybe because he has a Russian boyfriend. Most embassy staff can't even order a drink in Russian.

“Alex, what do you want? They have Corona here.”

“Real Corona?”

The waitress stands patiently, smiling at our exchange in English. Heineken and Corona are exotic, expensive beers here.

“Sure, I'll have a Corona.” I mumble my order and the waitress nods and eyes me suspiciously as she walks away. By now my accent in Russian is passable enough and I've gotten as skinny as the rest of the boys here so she's not sure what to make of me.

A pudgy man with slicked back hair approaches the table. Vlad leaps up to greet him.

“Mark, how *are* you?” says Vlad, embracing him. The newcomer pats Vlad's behind playfully while Archimedes looks tactfully away.

“Alex, this is Mark Limonov.”

I shake his hand, say nice to meet you. He says, pleasure, with a British accent.

“Your accent is quite good,” he tells me.

“Thanks, I've been practicing.”

“Alex is American,” Vlad slaps Mark’s belly and lets his hand linger there, “Silly goose.”

“Mark writes for the eXile,” says Vlad.

The eXile is the alternative English-language newspaper in Moscow, written by a notorious cadre of degenerate expats. They are best known for their Death Porn section, graphic photos of bodies mutilated by grisly stabbings or shot full of bullets, along with captions that are meant to be funny, but which never make me laugh.

“Which section do you write?” I ask, mildly interested.

“Are you a reader?” he asks.

“*Somos pocos, pero locos*,” I say, mimicking their front page slogan.

He nods. “I write a travel column called ‘The Wandering Jew’. And I do club reviews for the ‘Queer Nation’ section. And of course there’s my baby, Death Porn.”

“How did I know you were going to go there?”

Mark beams, swills his beer, belches loudly. Vlad pulls him away, into the crowd. “Come,” says Vlad, “There is someone I wish for you to meet, Mark.”

Hours later Archimedes and I are toasting our good fortune. Vlad and Mark do the closest imitation of mingling I have seen here, chatting with table after table. Vlad introduces Mark to his young, attractive friends. Mark gives them his card, buys them drinks, pats their asses before moving on to the next table. Occasionally Vlad slithers by and plants a wet kiss on Archimedes’ puffy lips.

“Archi darling, are you feeling bored yet?” Vlad glances at me as he pulls Archimedes’ head to his muscled chest. His eye meets mine as if we are the only two in

the room, in the whole city. I feel his thoughts like hailstones on my temples. *I'm watching you Alexei. This man is mine. This city is mine. Don't get too comfortable here.*

“If you are bored, we go, *dorogoi*.”

“I'm fine baby. Alex and I are just making another toast.”

Vlad ascends from Archimedes' lap and hammers his mouth into a crude smile.

“Ah yes, toasting like Russians.” *No matter how much you act like us, you will never be us.*

And he is gone again, disappearing into the crowd, leaving me with my shot glass still raised. The Coronas wash down shot after shot. Archimedes knocks back twice as many as I do and can still focus and speak without slurring and hunching his shoulders. He leans back and talks over the music.

“You know before this posting in Moscow I worked in Israel for years.”

“Did you celebrate the Jewish holidays there?”

“Why would I do that?” Archimedes smiles.

“We have to learn how to fit in with the Russians, don't we?”

“You do if you want to survive. Especially if you don't live on the compound”

Archimedes is one of the few American Embassy staff in Moscow who doesn't live on the antiseptic compound where Russians are to be seen, not heard. Most of the locals there are hard-working men and women who clean, answer phones and serve coffee. The rest form a small corps of deferential translators who can present an English version of a Russian document as fast as most secretaries can type. They scamper around like house slaves, in perpetual fear of losing their padded salaries and stable jobs, looking

over their shoulders as Russians who have it good tend to do. They used to be afraid of exile to a Siberian gulag, now they just fear the good life will end and they will end up in the same hardscrabble, bare bones city the majority of Muscovites occupy. A city where too many fight over not enough. A city of food shortages and skyrocketing inflation. Criminals rule and prosper. The educated and the talented scrape by and wonder how everything went so wrong.

“To our health. *Na zdarovye.*”

“*Na zdarovye,*” I answer, inhaling the scent of the bread before I toss another shot of vodka down my throat. Archimedes and I reach for the same pickle. I defer, choose another. He is paying after all.

“Let’s toast to all the good things here in Mother Russia.”

“I’ll start,” I say, my mind awash with possibilities but only a few finding their way into my voice. “You don’t have to say ‘excuse me’ when you bump into someone.”

Archimedes raises his Heineken. We are in-between shots at the moment.

“*Na zdarovye.*”

More booze filling me with warm optimism. Life could be okay here after all. Maybe I could be okay here too.

Archimedes lifts his bottle.

“Here you can smoke and drink anywhere you want.”

More beer, the tastes of pickle juice and vodka mix on my lips.

“You can buy CDs and they only cost a few thousand rubles, anything you want, pirated to order.”

“Vodka is cheaper than water.”

“The train to Riga only costs twenty bucks.”

Archimedes looks somber for a second. Maybe he’s a weepy drunk after all, I’m thinking. But no it’s just a passing cloud, a black-winged bird fluttering across his face.

“In Russia you can laugh at death.”

“I’m not laughing yet, Archimedes.”

“You will.”

Archimedes looks away, inhales, lights a cigarette. We sit for a moment with nothing but the Russian techno music pulsing in our ears. He turns to face me, leaning over the table as if he has a secret to tell me.

“Here in Russia I can be a pervert. I can have a hot young boyfriend and no one calls me a troll and no one calls Vlad a gold digger.”

“Isn’t he though?”

“You don’t get it, Alex. That’s normal here. No hidden agenda. I love him for his body. He loves me for my money. Everything’s out in the open. It works out perfectly.”

“Were you a pervert back in Israel too?” I scan the room for his lean, muscled boyfriend, trying to catch sight of the reflection Vlad’s glasses cast in the fishtank glow.

“Let me tell you how great life was in Israel, Alex.” Archimedes gets even closer, inhaling his cigarette deeply, then not bothering to blow the smoke away from my face.

“In Israel I traveled a lot for work, all over the country, in a nice, air-conditioned embassy car. I started out with a driver but then one time I had to travel to Haifa and no one was around to take me. So I drove myself and decided to pick up a hitchhiker along the way.”

“Sounds like the beginning of a scary movie.”

“No, Alex, more like the beginning of a porno. There the soldiers all hitchhike everywhere. And these guys are hot, super rugged, and their military uniforms are so tight you can see their whole package. So I started driving myself everywhere and kept some porn under the seat. I arranged it so it would slip out when I hit the brakes hard and I would get them to look at it until their hard-ons were bulging out of their uniform pants.”

I tilt my head to show him that I’m listening but I keep my eyes down. The plates on the table are empty. I motion to the waitress for more bread.

“You wouldn’t believe how many of them fell for it.” Archimedes continues. “They would let me unzip their pants and blow them right there on the side of the road in the middle of the desert.”

Now his face is getting closer to mine. He leans in and places one hand on my leg under the table, resting it there. His breath is sour with vodka and garlic.

“They were always quick, too, because I’m *very* good at what I do.”

I lean back, trying to make space between us. Archimedes’ hand is still on my thigh and he keeps it there until Vlad appears through the crowd like a bad dream. At the same time the bill appears and Archimedes produces a thick wad of money, with a motion as smooth and quick as a magic trick. More money than I get paid here in two months.

I struggle getting up from my chair. Vlad grabs underneath my arms in an iron man grip, hauling me up like a sack on a cargo ship. He puts one arm over my shoulder and smiles at me. *Stay away from my man, Alexei.* I push my way ungracefully through

the crowd and slide into my familiar winter jacket, hands going instinctively to the pockets to pull out the hat, the gloves, the scarf, the necessities of a winter night in Moscow.

On the way out I bump into two young guys, much cuter than the ones inside. Nice bodies, sporty imitation brand clothes, unselfconscious stances. I see Vlad and Archimedes disappearing down the alley that led us here. They'll notice I'm not there in a minute, stop, have a cigarette, ignore the chilly wind.

"*Privyet,*" says one of the guys to me. The less cute of the two. He addresses me informally, like a friend he already knows.

"*Privyet,*" I greet him back.

"What's your name?"

"Alex."

"Alexei."

"Just Alex."

The less cute boy turns to the cuter one and smiles, raising his eyebrows. "An English name?"

"American."

"An American? Here? I was guessing you were Polish, or maybe from the Baltics."

Now they are both full of questions, but I just want to get out of the cold.

"Sorry, I think I'd better go find my friends. They seem to have left without me."

The cuter one looks at the empty alley, then turns and leans in closer to me. The air starts to tingle as I smell his cheap cologne mixed with sweat.

“Alex, can I ask you something?”

I feel the hair on my arms stand up, a swirl in the back of my throat.

“Of course.”

The cuter boy pauses, narrows his eyes, “You wouldn’t happen to have a few thousand rubles would you?”

I roll my eyes, annoyed, and try to push my way past them. The cuter one grabs my arm and I stop short. He is stronger than he looks.

“Wait, Alex. Look, we don’t ever do anything like this. It’s just that now we need some money.”

The woman who read my palm in Teotihuacán hadn’t asked my permission, but she still demanded I pay her a few pesos. She clutched my arm and mumbled in Spanish. I was still with Carlos, a fifth-generation Chicano from Texas, who made me translate for him. Her eyes glazed over as she told me, you are going to suffer in a cold land without borders. Carlos and I stayed in a *pensión* in the Zona Rosa, where the bathtub was surrounded with a hand-laid mosaic of blue and white tiles. He scrubbed the pollution of the city from underneath the half-moons of my fingernails with a coarse brush made of horse hair. The water smelled like corn and at night we slept together under a blanket to protect ourselves from the hungry mosquitoes and I felt safe. I was different then, before I came here and started covering my body with thick layers of clothes that are wrinkled and carry a whiff of body odor since I have to wash them by hand in a bathtub that never gets clean, no matter how much I scrub it.

“Alex, there are ways that we can convince you to give us some money.”

He’s holding my arm firmly. I notice that he is hiding something under his jacket. I’ve seen enough gun-shaped bulges here to know what it is right away. My legs get weak and I feel adrenaline surge through the veins in my neck. I look quickly to both sides. No one else is in the alley, the door man is out of sight, and Vlad and Archimedes are long gone, just muddy footprints in a dirty alley. Shadows and garbage cans and rats, right behind the ritziest street in Moscow, in all of Russia. One big, fucking Potemkin village, this place.

“Look, I really don’t have any.”

The cuter one looks down, gets bigger as he takes a deep breath. He lifts his head and looks directly into my eyes. I’m frozen, not sure what to do. We rise into the sky, his hand still clutching my jacket. Below us the alleys fill with prowling jaguars who before I thought were other street hustlers. They stalk the snow-covered streets, tense and hostile. All at once, they leap into the sky above Tverskaya and join us, a constellation of jaguars.

My photo is on the front page of the eXile, a corpse riddled with bullets, clutching a wallet with nearly worthless rubles stacked neatly inside. The caption says, ‘Peace Corps volunteer carousing outside bar notorious for attracting male hustlers and the men who love them is blown away, not in the way he planned either. The victim now has a few more holes, making him the belle of the ball at *Dariy Morye*. Now serving *pederast* number...’

My laughter startles the boy as much as it does me. Suddenly, so suddenly I can't believe it's happened, he lets go of my jacket and is standing in front of me, deflated, dejected, looking ashamed. We are back on earth, both of us human again.

"I'm sorry things are such that we are forced to do this."

The boys look sheepishly at each other and start to back away. They turn and slink off to a corner of the alley, talking in the hushed voices of Russians speaking in public.

Voices emerge from the door of *Dariy Morye*. Mark steps into the alley, his arm around a scrawny Russian boy wearing an oversized scarf which makes him look like a little boy.

"What's all this about?" he says, slurring his words slightly. The boy he is with goes wide-eyed and runs back into the bar. The cuter boy of the two who held me at gunpoint is still holding his weapon.

"He's quite the looker," says Mark, "Ask him how much?"

"Hey young man," I call after the cuter one, "This guy says he likes you."

"Tell him fifty dollars, U.S."

"He says it's a hundred." I tell Mark.

"Does the little whore take credit cards," says Mark, pulling out his wallet. "Now turn around and bend over you little bugger and I'll just slide this thing right through."

The boy walks quietly over to Mark, one resolute footstep through the snow at a time.

"I'm just joshing. Here's your money," says Mark, pressing a stack of bills into the boy's outstretched hand and leading him by the shoulder down the street.

I walk in the other direction out of the alley and find Vlad and Archimedes standing on Tverskaya, smoking cigarettes in the cold, waiting for me, as if they had planned on doing this all night from the beginning.

The Wind Sun

The air
provided light
for the next age of the
world Quetzalcóatl wind god
performed creation humans ate seeds
of mesquite trees 364 years Tezcatlipoca swept
sky and people from earth to revenge his rival darkness
fell after the hurricane everything was still survivors clambered
into branches of trees became monkeys calling in the echoing dark

Phase 4: Spanish Lessons

Victor Vaitkunas – Seville, Spain

Su cara y su nombre me viene en sueños. Se pierde. Se encuentra. Se pierde. Lo demás no lo sé.

There was war in the Middle East. At first I protested the stretchy camouflage shorts, the military hat, the combat boots, the socks that bunched around my ankles. I fought against the plastic rifle hanging from the shoulder strap over my freshly-shaved chest. But before long, I gave in, compromised first one thing, then another, for the chance to make some money. Mariano suggested I wear a g-string under my shorts but that was where I drew the line.

I wore Moroccan-made firecrackers over one shoulder like rounds of ammunition. At the end of my act, on cue, I got on both knees, leaned forward, and flirted with a man near the front of the small stage, flicking my thumb and finger in front of my face and

licking my lips. The man put his unlit cigarette into my mouth where I let it hang from my moist lower lip. When he flicked his lighter and produced a flame I turned my head, quick as a magic trick, and instead of lighting the cigarette, he lit the top of the row of firecrackers hanging over my chest. There was a staccato series of crackling sounds as the firecrackers started to explode. I tossed them onto the stage behind me where they danced and flared like a ballet of fireflies and gunpowder. Some of the horny old men in the audience ducked. Most of them laughed and cheered and applauded.

Lesson #1: *correr*, to run. A verb. Add the reflexive ending and the meaning changes. *correrse*, to have an orgasm.

A few days before I auditioned to work at Mariano's bar I was up even earlier than usual and had time to sit for a *café con leche* at a wobbly iron table at one of the open air cafés that lined my side of the Guadalquivir River. I was wide awake by the time I crossed the Puente San Telmo, the bridge that took me to the university, just as the sun was inching up over Seville's cityscape of worn stone buildings and modern, whitewashed high rises.

When I got to class I took my place between my buddy Jack and Laura, the Mormon girl with cornflower blue eyes who tried to pretend she wasn't watching me. I scribbled notes and showed them to Jack so he could copy them when he couldn't keep up. We were studying reflexive verbs. Our instructor wrote '*correr*' on the board, and '*correrse*' below it. Then she wrote 'to run' on the board and below that 'to have an orgasm'. She was dressed in a tailored suit with a bright, patterned scarf wrapped neatly around her neck. She always had that put-together, ultra-feminine look Spanish women

are famous for and when she said the word 'orgasm' in English, with her thick accent that sounded like she was chewing gum, it sounded too big and out of place in her mouth.

Jack stopped scratching his pen across his notebook and started laughing. He elbowed me in the side, trying to make me laugh too. Laura said, "You guys are meant for each other." Then she turned to face the instructor, who had moved on to the next definition.

After class, Jack and I headed out to Bar Arena and filled up on tapas and olives while we knocked back shots and tried to talk to Spanish girls. They blew smoke in our faces and smiled at us as if we were kids trying to tag along with our older sister's friends. Laura and some of her friends from class came in and did their best to avoid us. I told Jack I wanted to get out of there and go to a bar where they only let guys in. No girls allowed.

"Dude," he said, "You're my best friend here, but that's one place you'll have to go alone."

I wandered through the maze of streets for a long time before I finally found the club that was down so many twisted alleys I was sure I would never be able to find it again. The doorman peeked through a face-sized screen on the front door and looked to both sides before he let me in. It was hot and smoky inside. I went straight for the dance floor and fell in with the music. I danced by myself, ignoring the guys around me trying to get my attention, my eyes half-closed, in something like a trance that bordered on rapture.

When I needed a break I stepped off the dance floor and ordered myself a drink. I was leaning against the bar under the warm glow of the red lights and drinking *tinto de verano*, Fanta mixed with sweet red wine, when Mariano's men approached me. There were two of them, with thick arms like bouncers and angry veins bulging from their necks.

"Mariano would like to speak with you," one of them said, and I followed without question, as if I had been beckoned to an audience with King Juan Carlos. Mariano was wearing shades inside the dimly lit club, his hair slicked back, a long, fur-trimmed jacket hanging off his shoulders and exposing a vest worn with nothing under it, his smooth, bulging pecs supporting it like a bodice for his male cleavage. He looked me up and down and extended one hand to me with his fingers curled under, knuckle-side up, as if I were supposed to kiss it in old-school, courtly love style like something out of *Don Quixote*.

"*Vos, me gusta como bailas,*" he said. His accent was from Argentina and, I suspected, overdone. But it did lend him a certain air of mystery. More than his two lackeys. More than the shades inside and the fur draped over his sculpted, half-bare chest.

"I like the way you dance," he told me. "I want you to audition for my dance company. You have training as a dancer?"

"No," I said. "But I have lots of experience."

Mariano didn't ask me when I could come. He just motioned to one of his assistants to write down the time and date he dictated, along with an address, on the back of one of his business cards. Then he dismissed me and I rejoined the crowd on the

dance floor. Mariano stood at the bar and watched me after that, nursing his drink. Whenever he lifted his glass, the sharp flash of diamonds from his rings caught the light and flashed at me like a warning beacon. I waited till he was gone before I left the club, but when I got outside Mariano was still there, sitting in the back of a black car with the tinted windows halfway down.

“Get in,” he said.

“I like to walk,” I answered.

One of Mariano’s assistants stepped out of the car and grabbed my elbow. I shook him off.

“You shouldn’t refuse Mariano’s offer,” he said, trying to grab me again.

“I’m not. I’ll be at the audition.”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said.

I pretended not to understand him. I waved goodbye and skittered away. The car trailed me through the cobblestone streets until I turned into an alley that was only wide enough for pedestrians. I could hear Mariano cursing at his driver as I rounded the corner and slipped away, hurrying back home through the snaking *callejones*. The air was ripe with the scent of orange blossoms. The echoes of guitar music trailed my footsteps, melancholy with promise, somewhere around the corner, just beyond my reach. By the time I reached the Guadalquivir River and crossed the Puente San Telmo, the sun was just inching up over the horizon, spreading over the still water and erasing the stars from the pre-dawn sky.

Lesson #2: *leche*, milk. A noun. Also a slang term. *leche*, semen.

The day of my audition I was still trying to decide whether or not I would go. Mariano had told me to come in the afternoon, just after siesta, so I had lots of time to think about it. I wanted to tell my buddy Jack, but I wasn't sure he would understand, so I kept quiet. Jack and I were sitting on the sidewalk in the shade of the cathedral, watching the horse-drawn carriages pull up to the street beside the plaza. We often rode out the somber mood of the afternoons together, when most of the stores were shuttered and deserted, spending siesta time sitting close to the ground and letting the shade and the cool breezes surround us like whispers.

Jack was drinking a bottle of milk. "I think I'm getting it now, dude," he said. "I was dreaming in Spanish last night. Now I have to start thinking in Spanish when I'm awake too."

He held his bottle up in front of me and shook it, letting the thick milk stick to its sides and slide down to the bottom like melted ice cream. "Like I look at this," he said, "And this is *leche* dude. I just think *leche* and nothing else."

And something about sitting there with Jack, noticing the familiar way we were with each other, most of the time not saying much, suddenly made me scared. I thought I might be missing out, coming all the way to Spain and then just hiding out in the shadows with another American all the time, wrapping myself in a comfortable blanket of English. That's when I made up my mind to go to the audition.

When I got there the first thing Mariano said was, "Take your shirt off." I felt more naked than I should have, something about being in a dark bar in the middle of the afternoon, a harsh stage light spotlighting me, my jeans hanging around my waist, my

chest sprouting patches of wiry hair that Mariano seemed to disapprove of. He turned on some Euro pop and told me to dance.

“Give me some hip hop,” I said. I needed something with a beat, something for my American soul to groove to. He found something that sounded German, and it had a bumping bass and a catchy riff and was close enough so I just went with it and danced, closing my eyes and moving to my own rhythm. I let the music talk to me, let my body improvise and pull from nights out on the dance floor, nights that didn’t end till sun up. Shirts off and moving as one heaving, throbbing organism, a crowd of Spanish men and me, the one foreigner, still talking like a Puerto Rican from back home, not *castellano*, not the –tha –tha of peninsular Spanish. Not the over the top Spanish *palabrotas*. *Hostia tío. Me cago en la puta madre.*

One man came in every week to see me dance. Mariano said he was one of the bar’s best customers, so I made sure to crouch in front of him and smile and run my fingers under the bottom of his chin, which was wrinkled and sagging like the wattle of a turkey. When I spent too long at the edge of the stage, the other men began to crowd around me like tigers closing in on their prey. Sadness hung around them as if they were condemned men rather than paying customers. Buy you a drink after the show? Their fingers clutched like tiny monkeys, snatching keys and sunglasses and bags of peanuts from tourists. They clawed at me, as if they wanted to break off a piece of my body and steal it, hide it in their pockets and keep it balled up like a used handkerchief.

The head bartender, Luis, who was muscley and shirtless all the time, was one of those guys who once had smoldering Latin good looks, but now was graying and crow's footed and had his nose broken too many times. He looked out for us, watching us protectively and stepping in if we got in over our heads. I managed to keep out of trouble, but some of the other dancers, like Nando, the bad boy in our line-up, always seemed to be getting into something. Nando often got too drunk or too drugged up and ended up getting into fights and needed Luis to come to his rescue. One time Nando even passed out in a customer's lap, but the man seemed happy enough so Luis didn't bother to step in. He even laughed as Nando, snoring and dead to the world, got deftly molested by the elderly patron.

Luis watched me more closely than he watched the other dancers. Maybe because I was foreign, or maybe just because he liked to look at me. I was getting used to the fact that there were men who liked to look at me. He let me keep my dictionary behind the bar. No one there spoke English, so when I got stuck on a word, I had to sneak behind the bar and flip through the pages until I found the definition, crouching near the crates of freshly-washed glasses where neither the customers nor Mariano's assistants could see me. When Luis saw me struggling to read in the dim lighting he pulled out a thin flashlight, which he always kept hooked into his belt, and shone it on the pages of the book, hovering above me and smiling his crooked smile.

When Nando offered me a line in the dressing room I said no at first. But he was persistent and I ran out of reasons to say no so I ended up giving in, letting the powder mix with snot and spit at the back of my throat, still an amateur. Then later, after work,

he pestered me to grab a bottle and go back to his place, which was just around the corner, and I took him up on that offer too.

We split a bottle of tequila as we sat on his bed, trying not to wake his roommates, a short-haired lesbian couple who I sometimes saw in the courtyard at the university, defiantly holding hands. Next to the bed, Nando had stacked piles of large, coffee-table books with glossy reproductions of paintings by Spanish artists: Miró, Dalí, Picasso. His favorite was Goya.

“Look at the way he uses chiaroscuro in this one,” he said, pointing at the white shirt of the man about to be assassinated in *El Tres de Mayo*, the way it stood out against the dark, gloomy background of the painting.

Instead of walking all the way across the river back to my apartment, I spent the night there, falling asleep with my head in Nando’s lap, the wild eyes of the *campesino* in the painting watching me from the open book, pleading with me to save him from the men who surrounded him, pointing their guns at him like erections, ready to shoot to kill in the name of the *Patria*.

I woke up late and didn’t have time to shower. I was reeking of cigarettes and still drunk on tequila, but I got up and made my way to class anyway, squeezing into the last seat, which Jack saved for me. Before long I felt nauseated and dizzy. In Spanish the word for how I was feeling was *mareado*, which also means seasick. Here in the middle of an arid plateau, the Moors built a fortress in the center of Seville, across from the cathedral, where the Giralda soars into the cerulean skies. Inside they used patterns of blues and greens in their tile work. The ancient artisans staggered and checkerboarded

them along high ceilings and the tops of walls. They wanted to be reminded of water. People in the desert always long for water. People everywhere long for something scarce, something rare, something that can only be found far, far away.

I leaned over my desk and put my head in my hands, scratching absently at my hair, still plastered with leftover gel and glitter from the night before. Some of the glitter got caught in my fingernails and some of it sprinkled down onto my desk.

I drew pictures of Moorish arches like the ones at the top of the Giralda, where the muezzin used to call the city of Seville to prayer. Then I sketched more and more of them until I had created an entire fanciful medina on a page of graph paper in my notebook. I rubbed my hands through my hair quickly, as if trying to start a fire. The glitter drifted down like golden, sparkly snow, covering my fairy-tale Moroccan bazaar like the inside of a snow globe.

Laura wrinkled her nose like a puckered lemon. I started laughing, just chuckling to myself at first, but then laughing for real, out loud, like a crazy person. The whole class stopped and stared at me. The instructor had a pained expression on her face. I got up and walked out, figured class was a waste of time. My buddy Jack said, “Dude, don’t go,” clutching my arm. But I shook him off, shrinking away from him as I had done so many times with the men at the bar.

Mariano was lingering too long in the dressing room, watching every move as we squeezed our asses into sexy underwear and jock straps and boy shorts. He dangled a g-string on one finger in front of me, letting it swing back and forth.

“You are going to wear this someday, Victor,” he said.

Mariano told me I wouldn't need a big size because I wasn't as big as the other guys. Most of the other dancers had wrinkly foreskin and long, thick dicks that flopped around like fish on a boat. I tried to tell Mariano I was a grower, not a shower, but I didn't know how to say it in Spanish, so it came out all wrong and he just shook his head at me as if I were a slow child.

“If you don't put this on soon, I'm going to slip something into your drink and put it on you myself when you are passed out.”

Mariano described the things he would do to me while I was helpless, things I had never heard of, things I barely understood in Spanish. Nando and the other guys laughed along with Mariano, but something about the way he smiled without opening his mouth, the way he snuck up on you so quietly you didn't even notice he was there, something about Mariano had started to scare me.

One night when it was slow at work, I sat on a bar stool with my dictionary while Luis fussed over me, refilling my water, wiping down the counter near where I sat over and over. He promised to warn me if he saw Mariano or one of his thugs come in so I would have time to pretend I was busy with the few deadbeat regulars there that night.

My dictionary was dog-eared and smudged with oily fingerprints. When I flipped through it, cocktail napkins with phone number scrawled on them and business cards men had given me fell out, along with some glitter. I let my mind wander as I browsed through the pages, calculating how much I could make at the bar by the end of the year, how much I could make if I stayed through the summer. I wanted to get away somehow,

forget about the return ticket at the end of the year and just take the ferry down to Morocco, backpack through the desert and let myself land wherever I chose.

I looked up words at random, letting the dictionary fall open and then skimming through the definitions. Almost by itself, the book opened to the word *soledad*, and I found out it has two meanings. It means both solitude and loneliness. In Spanish there is no difference between being alone and being lonely.

Lesson #3: *chaperos*, a noun, escorts? companions? rent boys?

From the guys at work, in the dressing room, before the shows, I learned how to formulate verbs I never learned in class, by taking a noun and adding a verb ending. Most of the time by adding *-ear*. *Maricón*. A fag. Add *-ear*. *Mariconear*. To flit around. *Putá*. A whore. *Putear*. To whore around.

And outside the dressing room, in the bar, I learned to speak like a native. Instead of deconstructing verb charts and running conjugation exercises with the gringos, I spent nights talking with older, lonely men, like a courtesan, or a male geisha. Except without the sex. It never, ever led to sex. That's what the *chaperos* were for. I never figured out exactly what it meant. They were skinnier than most of the dancers, and some had a tooth or two missing. They looked like tweakers, but still could be sexy if you were drunk enough, which our customers were by the end of the night. The *chaperos* led the men downstairs and did whatever they wanted in the darkened rooms which lined the dormitory hall, for a price. *Chaperos*. Hustlers? Hookers? Whores? I never got it straight. It wasn't one of those words I could just look up in my dictionary.

I finally decided to wear a g-string. Mariano insisted it was just what I needed to step up my game and get the guys really worked up, get the liquor flowing and the wallets open. It would be a way for me to make some serious money, he assured me. Mariano was big picture and all details at the same time. Before our show, in the dressing room, he covered us with baby oil, rubbing and poking into every visible part of our bodies, and some not so visible, or at least he tried.

He spent more time on me, even though Juan was the biggest of us all. Juan spent hours in the gym every day. His muscles were corded and his veins throbbed with eerie vitality. He was healthy too, would never drink anything but water. He was the opposite of Nando, who wasn't as cut as the rest of us in the middle, and who didn't have definition like Juan, or even like me. Juan never touched anything backstage, including the other dancers.

Mariano got on his knees and rubbed oil on my legs, spread it out over my ass, which was firm with muscle from walking all over Seville, roaming alleys at night after wrong turns, feeling the city unwind and unwrap itself like a birthday gift. He reached into my g-string and squeezed.

“Not as big as Juan, or even Nando,” he said. “But I hear it gets bigger.”

“Who told you that?” I asked him.

But everyone knew it was Nando, even though Nando told me not to tell anyone I was spending the night at his place. Mariano and Nando used to be an item. Now Mariano had his eye on me. He kept his hand gripped on me, squeezing and massaging, getting his face really, really close to it. I got hard even though I wasn't thinking of

anything like sex, even though I hadn't done a line of anything with Nando and the other guys backstage. Mariano got everyone's attention.

“*Che*. It does get bigger when it's hard. A lot bigger.”

Mariano released me and my dick stood at attention, bulging and veiny and saluting the rest of the dancers like a *soldado*, a real soldier, not a lost boy in body glitter and camo underwear, shaking his ass for money.

Mariano gave me cherry bombs to ignite at the end of my act. I pretended to pull the cord from a plastic grenade just after I lit the wick. When the ear-popping boom exploded as the song came to an end, I hurled a handful of glitter into the audience where it rained down on them like shrapnel.

Lesson #4: *follarse*, to fuck. A reflexive verb.

The man who came in every week just to see me was Italian. Straight from Italy, in town every week on business, like a lot of our customers. He wore a leather jacket, smooth as a lambskin condom, smooth as Nando's double basketball ass. The first time Nando told me, “I want you to fuck me,” I was still going to class. I recognized the subjunctive. In Spain the verb was *follar*, to fuck. *Quiero que me folles*. Subjunctive form, expressing a wish or command.

The old Italian man's name was Angelo, and he fell in love with me. Every time he came back to the bar, he brought gifts. At first just flowers and candy, but soon he was bringing me bracelets and rings and small pieces of jewelry I knew I would never

wear. I tried to refuse, but Mariano stepped in, pulled me aside from where I had been sitting on Angelo's lap.

“*Vos tenés que aceptarlo.*” Mariano said. He used ‘vos instead of ‘tú’ just to keep up his exotic, South American pretensions. You have to take it, he told me. You can't offend our customers.

So I took Angelo's small gifts and I let him plant small kisses on my cheek. And soon, his gifts grew, in frequency and in size.

Lesson #5: *caerse*, to fall. A reflexive verb.

One night I couldn't find Nando anywhere. It was almost time for him to go on stage. Mariano rushed into the dressing room.

“*Vos, Victor, serás el próximo.*”

You're next, he told me, just as Juan was finishing his routine. I wasn't sure what to make of the change in the line-up, but I knew something had changed, something big. Mariano pointed with his lips to the stage, holding the curtain up with one arm, getting frustrated that I was taking so long.

“What happened to Nando?” I asked.

“*Nando se cayó.*” He said. Nando fell.

I stopped in front of Mariano. The music was fading out and Juan was leaving the stage, slowly, giving me time to come out.

“Go now,” said Mariano.

“What do you mean he fell? I don't get it?”

“Go!” he barked. “Or before you know it you’ll be down there sucking cock with the *chaperos* too.”

I walked past Mariano and shuffled out onto the stage, dragging my feet. I felt a sharp crack on the back of my head and my neck snapped forward. I stood there stunned for a minute, angry enough to turn around and punch Mariano, but scared and unsure enough just to shake my head and do what I had been trained to do. The show must go on, no matter what.

Juan finally exited the stage, glancing at me, scared, as he passed by. My eyes watered as I reeled from Mariano’s blow. I heard the music start to play again. I moved slowly at first, then gradually let the moment take over, let the magic of being on stage cast its spell over me. Half-naked, under the filtered spotlight, with ripples and waves like an undersea habitat, I felt larger than life. I felt like more than an object, more than a fantasy. I was something these lonely men looked at and felt something for. They knew it wasn’t real, but they wanted it to be so badly they pretended it was. And maybe it was real. Maybe it was.

Most men see something beautiful and they lose their minds. They act like fools. They will do anything to stake their claim and try to possess it. Men are idiots. Men are geniuses. Men cling to beauty, fresh and inspired, like a Miró. They find beauty in something that stands out in the darkness, illuminated by a spotlight. The bright spot of a chiaroscuro painting by Goya. The glow of white against the gloomy canvas. The one pale face on stage. Foreign, exotic, dressed like a stripped down soldier. Tough and dangerous, but still offering them a piece of what they want, one shaved off, curlicue ribbon of soul at a time.

I fell into the music, let my body move and twist and turn and watched the men standing below me in the crowd lick their lips and whistle with excitement. I stayed away from the edge of the stage that night, afraid I might get pulled down by their clutching hands, dragged to the ground, crushed under their feet like a cigarette butt tossed carelessly aside.

After work, late at night, I wandered through Calle Sierpes, the street of luxury shops that twisted through the center of Seville like a snake. The shops all had metal bars pulled down over their windows but I could still see some of the items they had on display through the cracks, barely lit by the dim streetlights. I spotted one of the rings Angelo had given me in the display case of a pricey jewelry store. It cost a fortune, much more than I expected.

I was thinking that one night I could just slip out of the bar and make my way to the bus station. Mariano knew everyone in Seville, so if I got into the wrong cab, I would end up right back at the bar. I would have to walk, like a tourist, with everything I needed stuffed into my backpack. I could make it to the ferry by noon and cross the Straits of Gibraltar into Morocco before sunset. I could pawn the gifts Angelo had given me and have enough to keep me going for a long time in Morocco. I could learn to conjugate verbs in French, or Arabic, learn to forget how to think in Spanish.

“I want you to have something,” Angelo said one day. He spoke Spanish with a thick accent and no English at all. By then I recognized the subjunctive so well it had disappeared. I accepted his gift, let him clasp a diamond-studded bracelet around my

wrist, which was shaved, like every other part of me, since the guys like their show boys hairless and muscled and oiled. He wanted me to come live with him in his villa in Italy.

“With my wife and me,” he said. “You will have your own private apartment and I will give you anything your heart desires.”

I backed away from him, slowly, caressing the smooth diamonds with my fingers.

“I will not take no for an answer,” he said.

I told Angelo to wait for me. Then I slipped backstage to get dressed. Nando was there, snorting something. He looked awful, twitchy and nervous that Mariano would come in and find him upstairs, instead of down in the basement with the other *chaperos*. I did one last line with him, for the road. I kissed Nando goodbye, the dust of white powder drifting down from his nose to his scabby lips, where they met mine and made them numb.

On the way out the back door of the bar I ran into Luis, emptying a garbage can into the dumpster. He set it down and pulled a cigarette from behind his ear and lit it, offering me a drag while he leaned against the wall.

“Where are you going, *mi amor*?” he asked, smiling.

“I have to leave. Please don’t tell Mariano.”

I wrapped my arms around his bare torso, pulling a fistful of bills out of my pocket without bothering to count them and stuffing them into the back pocket of his jeans.

“Thanks for everything, Luis,” I said.

I leaned around the corner and looked down the alley to the street. I could see Angelo's town car parked in front, its engine idling, the driver with his head on the steering wheel, adjusting the air-conditioning vents so that they blew onto his face.

As I turned to leave I felt a hand grab my wrist and yank me back.

"You can't just leave. Mariano doesn't let anyone go that easy."

Luis was glaring at me, his eyes hard and cold. He was pulling me close to him, leaning into me, twisting my arm.

"How are you going to make me stay?" I said, looking into his eyes until they softened. I pushed him against the wall. He grabbed both my wrists and pulled them down, holding them at a painful angle. His breath was heavy and hot on my face. I kissed him so forcefully it was like smashing our lips together. I forced my tongue into his mouth and he bit it until I tasted blood. He let go of my hands and I ran them up and down his back, then grabbed his muscled ass and squeezed hard.

Luis was struggling with me still, trying to catch his breath. I unbuckled his belt, yanked it off, and threw it onto the dirty ground. I reached into his jeans and cupped his ass in my hands. He told me to smack it, hard, and I did. I grabbed one of his shoulders and spun him around. He resisted at first so I pushed him against the wall with everything I had. Then I pulled his jeans down around his ankles and wrapped my arms around him, rubbing my crotch into him, feeling myself get rock hard.

"Give it to me," he said. "*Dáme tu leche.*"

I started to unbuckle my belt as I backed away from him, making as much noise as I could to try to distract him. I had already slipped over the half wall behind the bar before he noticed I was gone. He turned around and swore, *me cago en la puta madre*,

then tried to run after me. His feet got caught up in his jeans and he fell hard on his face. I sprinted through the maze of alleyways that led to the bridge. I kept looking back over my shoulder, only slowing to catch my breath after I had made it to the other side of the Guadalquivir. Along the way *palmas* erupted in staccato bursts like gunshots. They followed me through the streets like the songs of crickets, gypsies clapping in the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Phase 5: The North Star

Victor Vaitkunas – Swift River, Massachusetts

One of the employees at our farm had a cousin named Rafa who was married and a lot older than me, but who was not so bad looking. Rafa had caramel skin like baked flan left out in the sun too long and a sort of sexy, roughneck way of spitting sunflower seeds onto the ground. He came at me hard when he saw me returning his curious glances one morning when he came to drop his cousin off for work.

“You want to go for a ride?” he asked, keeping his voice low, even though we were the only two on the side of the road.

I was done with my chores for the day and it was summer and the lazy day stretched before me as limp and dingy as the neat trails of dirt that lined the fields like ant tracks. I jumped into his truck and he drove us all the way to Springfield, where he parked in front of an old, brick building and led me up three flights of stairs to his apartment. He must have shared it with a bunch of people because there were more

unmade beds around than I could count; birds' nests of pastel, Easter-egg colored comforters and threadbare sheets.

Rafa spoke with a thick accent like the freshmen from Puerto Rico at my school, only he chopped the edges off his words as if they were withered appendages he no longer had any use for. He sat me down at the kitchen table and handed me one beer after another from his fridge, even though I was only sixteen. I didn't know how to refuse so I just went along with it and let my head get lighter and my body heavier as he plied me with drink after drink. I poured them down, one after another, as if I were taking my dosage of medication, grimacing and doing as I was told.

By late morning I was buzzed and dizzy. When I tried to stand up, I stumbled. It felt like I was trying to walk on some planet with twice the gravity of Earth. Rafa pulled me down to sit in his chair with him. He started running his fingers up and down my legs, lingering on the spots where there were small tears and rips in my jeans, reaching in and rubbing the hairs he found there between his fingers. He traced the outline of my kneecap with his thumb, making a small swirl like a whirlpool.

When he asked me to go into the other room with him and lie down on his bed, the one he probably shared with his wife, I went along with that too. Rafa started to paw at me once we got there. He tried to unbuckle my belt with his clumsy, calloused hands. I stopped him again and again but he kept at it so long and I was so out of it by then that I just did what he wanted. I let him slip my pants down to my ankles, quick as a magic trick. I closed my eyes and let him put his hands and his mouth wherever he wanted, all over my stomach, the inside of my thighs, in all the places only I had touched before

then. And it didn't feel terrible. There were times when it felt pretty good, when I wasn't wincing or cringing or feeling dizzy.

Rafa forgot the little English he knew and started whispering to me in tender Spanish. In his native language, he made even the raunchiest request sound formal and charming. He told me the different ways he wanted to molest me so many times it became lyrical and turned into poetry.

On the drive home Rafa was quiet so I asked him, "Have you been here long?" and he answered, "I have one year here." There was something sincere about the way he really didn't know how to say it correctly in English that made me feel sorry for him. I decided to talk to him in Spanish instead. I was thinking he might have something more interesting to say, but he kept shaking his head and repeating, over and over, "But how do you know Spanish so well? Have you ever lived in a Spanish-speaking country?" I told him no, not yet anyway, I just studied hard and hung out with the Latin mafia at school. But he refused to believe it, which is sort of a compliment if you can tell for sure that whoever says it is not bullshitting. The way I was bullshitting when I told him, "But your English is so good for someone who's only been here a year, Rafa," making him the one who blushed and looked down and shook his head, no.

One afternoon I was walking home from the fields, tired and sweaty, with my dirty t-shirt hanging out of my back pocket and my chest bare and soaking up the sun. Working on my family's farm gave me the easy, natural-looking muscle tone of a swimmer on vacation. I was small and wiry and always trying to put on bulk but never succeeding. I looked younger than sixteen and I was still learning that this is what drew

the looks of certain men, the seductive power of looking statutory. Our farm was near a shortcut that locals from the rural towns of Southern Vermont took to get to Springfield, or to New York.

Sometimes when I was walking alone, guys slowed their cars and asked if this road would get them to the I-91. They eyed me as if they wanted to chew my flesh and swallow the gristle and marrow as a way to resuscitate their own sagging cheeks, their shrunken, skeletal faces. I played dumb and nodded yes and pretended I didn't see them out of the corner of my eye, licking their lips and trying to get my attention. They usually gave up after I ignored them long enough and drove away until they were nothing but a pair of hungry eyes in the rearview mirror, disappearing down the road in a cloud of dust.

But the guy who stopped to talk to me that day was bolder than the rest. He wasn't emaciated like the others, but he wasn't attractive either. He rubbed his hand over his crotch when he talked to me, slowing his car to match the pace I was walking.

“Want to take a ride with me?” he asked.

“I've got work to do,” I said.

“Won't take long.”

I looked out over the leafy onion fields, letting my eyes sweep over the land around our farm, the wide expanse where nothing could hide.

“We're kind of out here in the open.”

“We can go down to the rest stop.”

I shook my head, no, after every offer he made. But before he left I made him tell me about the cruisy rest stop; when the best time was to go, and how to avoid the State troopers. I knew from checking out the guys who drove by our farm what kind of crowd

it drew; guys who were too old, or too wasted away from AIDS, to hook up in bars. They went there to grope each other and get their rocks off in the thorny brambles and bushes on the side of the road. But still, I was hoping maybe there was someone like me there, someone who was too young to get past a bouncer, too scared to respond to a personal ad with a photo, looking for the same.

That night I went to check it out, shivering even though it was summer. I let my eyes adjust as best I could to the dim moonlight and made my way through the well-worn paths that were so close to the highway you could hear the cars whizzing by and sometimes feel the rumble of a truck like a tremor passing through your body. I passed men who stood statue-still, except for their eyes, which followed my movements carefully, tracking me from sunken eye sockets. Their bodies leaned toward me like trees swaying in the wind. I came upon a clearing where a man was leaning against a boulder. There was another man on his knees in front of him, slurping and snorting like one of the horses on our farm that I fed in the morning. I moved closer and stood there for a few minutes, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness. The man was kneeling in a patch of mud and wild grass. He was old enough to be someone's grandfather. His hair was gray and wispy and sprang out of the pale, doughy flesh on the back of his neck.

Soon the other men started crowding around me. Every one of them was either wrinkly or fleshy or gray-skinned. When someone like me showed up, someone fresh, who they had never seen before, the men got excited and desperate. The circle started closing in around me. One of them reached out and brushed his hand against my crotch. I spooked as easily as a deer in the wild. I darted through the winding paths in the dark

all the way back to the parking lot, letting fear and instinct guide me. I swore I would never go back again.

North Quabbin Academy was in a small town in Massachusetts, but most of my classmates there came from Manhattan or Long Island or the ritzy suburbs of Boston. On the first day of the school year, after their parents dropped them off and they settled into the cramped residence halls, they had their first panicked flashes of culture shock. They considered everything outside of New York or west of the 128 to be the boonies, irredeemably backwoods since there was no pizza delivery after 10PM, and the nearest city was a long drive through winding, tree-lined roads that were pitch black at night. I was one of the only townies, a local boy from Swift River, a small town just a few miles away, with one intersection, one Dunkin' Donuts, and miles and miles of monotonous green fields.

The North Quabbin parents were old money. But my old man was different from the others. He owned a farm, where he made me work alongside the laborers he hired, mostly Puerto Rican guys who were down on their luck or who had a criminal record and were unemployable anywhere else. My dad said he still believed in the value of hard work. His grandparents were immigrants who worked their asses off to turn the small plot of land they managed to buy into a successful business. His dad worked to turn that business into something of a budding empire. Now my dad paid cash for everything, including land, and he owned a fleet of trucks outright that sped through the Pioneer Valley and the rest of New England, spreading the name far enough that it was

recognized right away by my roommate, Chaz, a pimply boy with an expensive haircut and a mother who hovered over him as we moved into our fourth-floor dorm room.

“Vaitkunas?” he asked, standing nervously beside the naked metal bed frame across from mine. “Like on the trucks?”

“Guilty as charged.” I said, keeping my head down.

“That’s quite an interesting name,” cooed Chaz’s mother, as she shooed him away from the bed and began spreading sheets over the mattress, snapping them in the air with a sharp cracking sound. “What’s its origin, Victor?”

“Lithuanian, on my dad’s side.”

She straightened the sheets. I walked over to help her by holding one side while she pulled the other side tight.

“And what does your father do for a living?”

“He’s a farmer,” I said.

Behind me I heard Chaz chuckling. His mother turned sharply and said, “What’s funny, Charles?” He busied himself unpacking another box.

“What does your dad do?” I asked, trying to break the tense silence that fell over the low-ceilinged room.

“He’s a heartless, money-hungry attorney for an evil corporation that exploits Mexican workers,” said Chaz without looking up, his hands busy pulling books and wrestling trophies from a box and stacking them onto a desk he had decided was his.

I looked up at his mother, expecting her to reprimand him. She sighed and said, “That about sums it up.”

She walked out into the hall to retrieve another box from the landing by the elevator. Chaz sat down on the newly-made bed, causing one of the corners to slide up and come undone.

“Hey Vic,” said Chaz, “I bet it was cool to grow up on a farm. At least your dad taught you how to do something useful, like grow your own food and milk your own cows and shit, right? Man, I would change places with you in a heartbeat.”

“It’s not so cool when you have to wake up at the butt crack of dawn every day to feed the animals and gas up the equipment,” I said.

“Yeah but now that you’re living at the dorm you’re off the hook, right?”

“No such luck. I still have to pedal my ass over to Swift River every morning to get my chores done before class.”

Chaz leaned back, causing another corner of the bed to come undone.

“That’s so close by you’ll hardly break a sweat getting there. Why not just keep living at home?”

“He’s got a girlfriend that he doesn’t think I know about. I think he just wants me out of his hair.”

“No shit,” said Chaz, sitting up in his bed. “What’s your mom got to say about that?”

“Don’t feel bad or anything but, my mom’s dead.”

“Okay.”

“What’s that mean, okay?”

“Okay, you said, don’t feel bad, and I don’t.”

Chaz's mom came around the corner, struggling to squeeze a large box through the narrow doorway. I jumped up to help her.

"Thank you, Victor," she said as I took the box from her arms and set it down near Chaz's bed.

"Vic's used to heavy lifting. His dad makes him work on the farm," said Chaz.

"Wonderful," Chaz's mother beamed. "It's so important to learn the value of hard work. Don't you agree, Victor?" She glared at her son and made a show of pushing up her sleeves and putting her fists on her hips. Chaz busied himself with his trophies, pretended he didn't see her staring, trying to make her point.

Chaz and I slept with the windows wide open year round, through the long, dark, snowy winter, when the building's ancient radiators made the attic room feel like a sauna. I started having violent dreams that made me anxious before bedtime. I paced the halls before the R.A. called lights out, taking as long as I could to floss and brush my teeth, to rinse and gargle and repeat, until it was down to the last second. I had to be teased, then scolded, then threatened before I finally conceded and went to bed.

The dreams began as a sensation. Warmth, heat, searing, burning. The sun, pain and exposure, the feeling of being ripped apart and stretched across hot stone. Then visions, the angry faces of gods: Tezcatlipoca, Quetzalcóatl, Tláloc, Chalchiúhtlicue, Tecuciztécatl, Nanahuatzin. My heart tossed into a stone urn. Two pyramids. The sun. The moon.

When I woke up I saw the faces of the gods, and I saw Chaz's face, at the same time. It wasn't a trick of the mind or a hazy recollection of a dream. It was as if time

were slippery and malleable, and somehow the night's visions had loosened its grip on me. The faces of the gods were surrounded with feathers, and they wore paint along their strong noses and jagged cheekbones. The paint was midnight black and sky blue. The lines formed constellations that were no longer visible from Earth. Chaz's face was dotted with white acne cream which had mixed with his pus-filled scabs overnight. He shook my shoulders and said, "Wake up, Vic." The wall beside my bed was dented where my fists had cracked the plaster. Chaz wrapped my sheets around my hands. My knuckles bled into them, the stain spreading like an abortion. He put one knee on my chest to keep me from flailing around. The scabs from his dried pimples came loose while we struggled and the flakes drifted onto me like snow.

I kept having the dreams after I graduated from North Quabbin. I got a scholarship to Amherst College, in another cow town, close to where I grew up. I was still one of the only townies. The students came from farther away. But I still didn't see Amherst as anything more than North Quabbin without curfews and mandatory attendance at school events. There were more pretty, caramel-skinned boys to smile at, but I was still too shy to talk to them.

I enrolled in an Art History of Latin America course and lost myself for hours in the assignments. One night I sat in the library poring through huge, glossy books with full page reproductions of the works of Kahlo and Rivera, just browsing, already finished with the assignment for the week. When I returned the book to its place in the stacks, a plain-covered book that jutted out from the shelf caught my eye. I pulled it out and sank to both knees, letting it fall open. There was a two-page spread of the Pyramid of the Sun

in Teotihuacán. I knew the exact image from the dreams, but I doubted myself, thought maybe I had seen a picture of it before, or that the blurry edges of the dream came into focus differently after opening the book, rearranging the proportion, the color, the scale. But the feeling was like a battery on my tongue. It jolted me with a force as strong as the bitter, metallic taste in my mouth, the frozen in stone look on my face like an Olmec statue.

In college there was no lights out. My freshman year I spent most nights studying, reading and going over my notes obsessively, so that exhaustion would send me into a dreamless sleep for a few hours at most. I scored a 4.0 without even breaking a sweat. I got so far ahead of my classmates that by my sophomore year I took to prowling the halls of my dorm after midnight, hungry for other restless souls.

Roberto and Rey, two red-haired *chilango* twins who lived on my floor, liked to stay up late too. We met up in our dorm's lounge and laughed and made jokes and sometimes just watched the leaves turn brown and fall off the trees outside while Roberto strummed his guitar. They looked exactly alike, except for their haircuts. Roberto had a long, lion's mane of fiery curls and Rey's head was buzzed short like a soldier's. Roberto got kicked out of the prep school they attended together in Mexico City. He never said why but I figured it was for drugs since he was always stumbling into the lounge high on something which he never shared. Rey derided Roberto's school as the 'gringo school.' But it was there that Roberto had learned to speak English. He switched effortlessly back and forth as they told me stories about their hometown. They both

agreed it was too big, too corrupt, and too polluted. But they loved it. And they missed it with a nostalgia that often made them teary-eyed.

The twins were planning to go home in the spring for a week and invited me along. They asked me in November so I could get a cheap airfare and said not to worry about any other expenses. Their family would take care of the rest. When I brought the idea up to my father, he liked it right away.

“It’ll be good for you to get away for a while, Vic,” he said, over Thanksgiving dinner. It was just the two of us, sitting in the old, white farmhouse I had grown up in. It was chilly that day, and quiet as a tomb, since the farmhands had been given the long weekend off. There was no background buzz of tractors outside the rickety windows, just the rhythmic cantering of horses around the fenced-off fields next to the stables.

“Consider it an early birthday present,” he said, “Trust me that’s pocket change compared to your tuition bill. That bursar’s office rakes me through the coals every goddamn year.”

“I get plenty in scholarships, Dad.”

“Yeah, well they don’t cover everything. And someone will have to pick up your slack when you’re away.”

After dinner I cleared the table and then my dad told me to come outside with him and tend to the horses. While he fed and watered them, I swept up their stables.

“You’re getting slow at that, Vic,” he said, even though I wasn’t any slower than before. He was impatient to finish up and go see his girlfriend Bianca, a scrawny thirty-year old with a seriously rural haircut who complained she didn’t get to see him on the

holidays, which was when she really wanted to spend time with him. But my dad insisted we eat together on the holidays, out of respect for my mother. Bianca worked as a bookkeeper for my dad. He didn't think I knew about them, but Bianca had already pulled me aside once when he wasn't around to tell me what was going on.

“Don't say anything to your dad,” she said, “That we talked about this, I mean. I just wanted you to know that if your dad and I ever become official, I'll insist he let me sign a prenup. I don't want anything out of the relationship other than what I came into it with.”

She had the whole future of their relationship and subsequent break up all planned out. That was the thing that mystified me about women; they thought so much about the future, it made me feel bad for them, like maybe they weren't enjoying any of the moment-to-moment joys of their lives, instead always fretting about setting things in place. Maybe it was because they had the ability to bear children. Maybe being concerned about the future was some long-ago encoded strand of DNA which carried strongest in females.

“I'm on my way to Bible study group, Vic.”

“I'll take care of the rest of this, Dad.”

“Good boy.”

Bible study group was code for going to Bianca's house. He didn't want any of the employees on the farm to get the wrong idea, even though everyone knew. There were no secrets that lasted too long in a town like Swift River. I spent the night in my old bedroom, which hadn't changed since I left. It was separated from the rest of the house by a crooked hallway, part of an ungainly annex that had been added right after I was

born. As soon as I was old enough to be away from my mom she got the idea to put me somewhere far enough away that she could have some privacy. That's what I remember most about her. She needed daily moments of solitude the way most people need coffee in the morning. She got uneasy during the holidays, when the employees and their families used to take over the house for the day and most of the night. Now that she was gone, my old man fell out of the habit of inviting them over, since my mom used to take care of the details. He kept it simple. The two of us ate, not saying much, like an old couple.

When I left, my dad would end up here alone on Thanksgiving, not knowing what to do with himself. He would stay as long as he could, out of respect for my mother, or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he would leave early and spend the whole day with Bianca. I just couldn't imagine him holed up in her vinyl-sided apartment in Hadley, wearing God knows what to bed since I never saw him take an overnight bag with him when he left for her place. The only thing he took with him was a basket of choice vegetables from the garden that he claimed was for the ladies at Bible study group.

In my Religion in America class we were talking about which values we might define as intrinsically American. The class threw out one idea after another and Professor Burgess wrote them on the board, even the ones that didn't make much sense. After erasing the misfits, we ended up with: idealism, hard work, democracy, pluralism, multiculturalism, rule of law, transparency, freedom of press, and freedom of sexual expression. "Let's jump off of this rule of law idea," he circled it on the board, "And talk about ethics."

The professor sat at the table with the rest of the class. It was an upper level section with only seven students. We were gathered around one long table as if we were attending a fancy dinner party somewhere on Nantucket, or in the Hamptons.

“Let me share with you something that happened to me when I was driving in from Boston this week.”

I sat with my pen poised, looking up from my notebook.

“I was driving through a town I like to call ‘Shit River’, because that’s what it is, a shitty place, full of shitty people.

The other students shifted in their seats and busied themselves with their notes. Professor Burgess was a few years away from elderly and, until then, had never used a word like shitty in class.

“As I drove under the overpass, some punks dropped a large rock onto my windshield. I could have been killed. What does this tell you about the people in a place like Shit River? What sense of ethics do these people have?”

I sat quietly in my seat, staring at my notes until they became lines and blurs. I was still a townie. If I made one sound, one disapproving facial expression, I would be found out, and everyone would know that I didn’t really belong there, with the rest of the students. If I broke into a sweat, someone would notice that the stink of the farm still stuck to my skin. I underlined words at random to look busy. Then the lines became triangles. And the triangles became pyramids.

When spring break came, Roberto and Rey drove me around Mexico City, and I soaked in every detail: the sooty traffic jams, the tile-covered Metro stations

underground, the cracks in the foundations of buildings left over from centuries of earthquakes, the street vendors on the corners, even the hookers their uncle hired for us late one night, painted to look like slutty Frida Kahlos, all very patriotic and avant-garde, they assured me. And I performed my patriotic duty, out of respect, for my Mexican hosts, and for the people of America, the continent, not the country. The twins loved sharing their world with me. And Rey was glad he didn't have to stumble through his painfully slow and contorted English. He was himself again, chatting up girls and flirting and swaggering, putting his fingers to his mouth and whistling, knocking back shots and laughing as if this city belonged to him. It did belong to him. It belonged to all of us.

The twins took me to Teotihuacán and we spent the day walking along the Avenue of the Dead, scaling the Pyramid of the Moon, taking pictures of the faces I had seen before on the walls of the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. A woman in the shadow of the Pyramid of the Sun approached me and grabbed my hand. She looked through me and said, "You will get lost. You will find yourself. Then you will get lost again. The rest, I cannot say." Roberto and Rey pressed green American dollars into her hands and shooed her away. I wanted to hear more. When I turned to try to find her she had disappeared.

I had always been fascinated with learning Spanish. My mom usually said she was 'Heinz 57'. But one day, about a year before she died, I asked her what I was, besides Lithuanian. She had drunk more white wine than usual and I think she knew her time was growing shorter so she told me for the first time she didn't have much to say to her family, so she didn't know for sure. She could tell me that she was mostly Spanish,

French, and some Native American. Which kind of Spanish, she didn't know, or wouldn't say. I thought that might be why I learned Spanish so fast growing up, some sort of genetic blueprint reshaping itself in the gray matter of my brain. I talked to everyone I could, from the rough-around-the-edges Puerto Rican employees on our farm, to the snobby, put-together, preppy Latin American kids I met at North Quabbin and Amherst. My accent coalesced into something more *boricua* than anything else. The twins taught me some *chilango* slang and I was sure I could pick up the accent if I had the chance. I longed for a place that was hot, chaotic and bursting with life, as far away from the sleepy, ramshackle towns of the Swift River Valley as possible.

Roberto begged to come see the farm where I grew up until I finally gave in. I knew he wanted to see a slice of rural American life, something very different from his own experience growing up in a sprawling, polluted metropolis. The farm was a separate world, my own world, and I was protective of it. But Roberto had given me the keys to his kingdom and now it was time to reciprocate. Luckily Rey didn't want to tag along. He had a tremendous GPA and his written English was impeccable, but he still got freaked out having simple conversations in English, and he didn't enjoy the thought of using Roberto and me as his translators with my dad.

Roberto made me stop the car next to every podunk country store and fern-shrouded glade along the side of the road so he could take pictures. As we arrived at the farm, we passed one of my dad's long-time employees riding by on a tractor. I greeted him in Spanish and Roberto said, "So this is why you speak such good Spanish, Victor."

I loved the way he pronounced my name. Stress on the first syllable, a rolled R at the end, made me feel like another person.

On our way into the house, Roberto stopped to take pictures of the ugliest parts: the peeling paint on the side of the barn, the rusted gutter pipe along the side of the garage. I expected to find my dad ready for us, boasting over dishes of home-grown vegetables from the garden he had just prepared. But the kitchen was empty.

We found him in the greenhouse, where he kept a small garden of vegetables and herbs for cooking. I wasn't expecting to see him there during the day. He had picked up many of my mom's kooky habits; planting and watering by moonlight, paying attention to the lunar calendar, even leaving a glass of water inside the door of the greenhouse, to soak up any bad vibes that tried to find their way in. My dad stood when he saw us and patted dirt and dust off his work jeans. There was dirt caked under his fingernails when he offered it to Roberto to shake.

“Aw balls, Vic. That was today?”

“Mr. Vaitkunas. It's a pleasure. The house is fantastic.” Roberto smiled widely and gripped my father's hand with both of his, unfazed by the dirt. He had his hair pulled back into a ponytail and was wearing shiny black shoes and a white button-up shirt, but he acted as if he were lounging around the dorm in sweats and a t-shirt.

“My grandfather built the foundation of this house with his bare hands. Let me drop these veggies in some water and we can have a look around.”

Roberto pushed me forward and said, “A picture first, if you please sir.” My dad and I stood on opposite sides of a tomato plant.

“A bit closer together.”

“Then you won’t be able to see the plant,” said my dad.

Roberto backed up until he was in the doorway. Just as he snapped the picture, he stepped sideways and knocked over the glass of water my dad kept there. The photo caught my dad just as the shock started to register.

“Ay,” said Roberto, “*Perdón*. I’m so sorry.”

He knelt down and set the glass upright, but it was already empty. The water was seeping into the dirt, creating a small patch of mud.

“It’s fine, son, just leave it there,” said my dad.

Roberto looked down and said, “But this is for...Victor, *como se dice, las malas vibras?*”

“Bad vibes.” My dad gave me a warning look. “It was sort of my mom’s thing. Like a tradition we keep in her honor.”

We stood in silence for a moment, breathing the fragrant, greenhouse air. Roberto said, “This tradition, with the glass of water. It is a Mexican tradition. Your mother, she was Mexican?”

“She might have been, we don’t know for sure,” I said.

“She was part Spanish, if anything, Vic.” My dad’s face started shriveling like a dry plant.

“But back then Spanish just meant Spanish-speaking, her family could have been from anywhere.”

“Even Mexico!” Roberto swelled with pride. He pronounced Mexico in Spanish with an H sound instead of an X.

My dad shook his head. “I’m afraid Victor has always been a dreamer. He likes his stories. Don’t pay him no mind.”

“But Victor speaks Spanish fluently. I thought for sure he learned from his mother.”

“Ha. His mom didn’t speak a word. She was from upstate New York. I don’t know where Vic gets it from.”

Something about Roberto, I had never seen my dad open up like this, not even in front of Bianca, at least not when I was around. The spilled water was forgotten. Roberto was warming my frigid dad with his effortless, infectious charm. My dad leaned on a painted work table.

“You know Vic might just get this from his aunt and uncle. They were born in Argentina. My grandfather left a brother behind in Lithuania when he came to Massachusetts. He tried to come join him here in America but there were only so many ships running at that time and the only one he could get on was heading to Buenos Aires. So he settled there and started a family and eventually I heard they moved to Mexico and tried to cross the border that way.”

Roberto was smiling, engrossed in my dad’s story. He had no idea it was the first time I was hearing it.

“Did they finally make it?” asked Roberto, cautiously, since there were so many ways the plan could have gone wrong and we all knew it, but Roberto sensed my dad was a man who would rather tell it like it is and would rather be asked point blank.

“Well that I can’t tell you because we lost touch, what with the move and all and it was harder to keep up with people back then, before all this technology that we have nowadays.”

I put my palms over the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes. Roberto put one arm on my shoulder, probably thinking I was just reliving an old hurt, not reeling from the shock of this new revelation. I had a family, maybe, cousins, somewhere, maybe, or I didn’t. Where was I going to put this feeling, once I figured out what it was?

“So maybe they stayed in Mexico?” asked Roberto.

“Oh Christ no, what would they want to do that for? If they survived I’m sure the kids hauled ass over that border as soon as they could.”

I opened my eyes in time to see Roberto catch my father’s eyes and then look down. He was probably counting to ten, in Spanish.

My dad lifted a bushel basket of tomatoes from the ground and carried it to the kitchen.

“Show your friend around, Vic. Supper’s within the hour.”

Over a rich stew of fresh tomatoes, pesto, and basil, with bread from the bakery down the road, my dad asked about my junior year abroad.

“Narrowed down your choices for next year any, son?”

“Roberto and his brother have told me a lot about Mexico City. I thought I could study there for the year. Maybe in Coyoacán.”

My dad took a long time to chew and swallow his food before responding. “Last time you were with Roberto’s family. Isn’t it awfully dangerous for you to be there on your own?”

“I’ll be fine, Dad.”

My dad eyed Roberto, who had been quiet since the greenhouse. “Is Mexico going to be safe for someone like Vic? If they kidnap him I don’t know if I can afford to buy him back. I don’t know if I even want to.”

Roberto looked up and smiled. “They do kidnap lots of gringos.”

I glared at him. “*Cállate ya, puto.*”

He laughed. “If you go there alone, Victor,” he pointed a thumb and finger at his temple like a gun and pulled the trigger.

My dad said, “Couldn’t you go somewhere else Vic, seriously? Isn’t Spain a lot safer if you want to study Spanish?”

Roberto said, “They speak a very pure Spanish in Spain. And it’s safer than Mexico to go to by yourself.”

“Vic’s not so good at defending himself.”

“Only thing you have to watch out for in Spain,” said Roberto, “Is the gypsies.”

Driving back to campus, I said to Roberto, “Hey *vato*, you owe me, big time.”

The summer before I left I borrowed Roberto’s fake ID to try to get into the one bar in Northampton where I might be able to meet some boys. Roberto had a resident student identity card that was easier to reproduce than an American driver’s license. It

listed all his details correctly, including his height and weight, which were about the same as mine. The only thing stated falsely was his date of birth, which made him twenty two.

The bouncer was a chubby dyke with piercings all over her face, seated on a stool outside the door. She was chatting with the old lady who pushed her shopping cart through the streets of Northampton in the summer, and the warmer side of fall and spring. I wondered where the shopping cart lady went when the first winter chill blew into town. Maybe she slept under a bridge somewhere, or in the abandoned state hospital in Easthampton, if she didn't mind the fact that it was haunted.

“ID,” the dyke said, holding her hand up like a claw.

I handed it to her, kept my head down, but not too far down, trying not to look suspicious. There was a good-looking, older guy standing just inside the door, checking me out. I smiled at him because he reminded me of Rafa. He had the same baked flan skin and the same almond-shaped eyes. Maybe this guy was a little more wrinkled, had deeper crow's feet. But he was more put together too, dressed nicely, stood up straight as corn stalks stretching toward the sky under the summer sun.

“You don't look Mexican,” said the dyke.

“Neither do you,” I said.

I was wearing a baseball cap to cover my head so the picture would look more like me, and was speaking in an impromptu approximation of a Spanish accent.

“Nice try,” said the dyke, pocketing the ID. “Get out of here now and I won't call the cops.”

I turned and walked away, cursing under my breath. Roberto would be pissed when I told him I lost his fake ID. I turned the ignition and started the car and sat there

for a few minutes staring at the driver's wheel. There were places to go in Springfield, and further south in Hartford, but the ID checks were stricter than in Northampton. I put the car into gear and drove without thinking. I let myself get pulled closer and closer to the rest stop on I-91.

As soon as I parked I rushed to get out of the car. I took long, deep breaths of the cool summer night air. The brambles at the bottom of the slope off the highway were hidden in the darkness of a new moon. The path down was lit only by the rhythmic flicking of lighters, producing flashes of sparks and tiny flames like lightning bugs. A few glowing, orange embers of lit cigarettes floated down to the brambles and back again. Walking down the slope I fixed my eyes on them and followed their trail.

The place was packed, men brushing against each other with a heightened frenzy and daring. Every clearing was filled with awkward groupings of two, three, or more. I could barely see by the dim light of the stars. The men made animal noises and grunts and muffled moans of pleasure.

A man approached me, just a dark shape in the night. He got closer and I could just make out the outline of his face. Something about him felt familiar, his stance, his smell, the profile of his nose, jagged as a carved stone dagger. He reached one hand out to me as if he were asking me to dance. I placed my hand in his. Instead of leading me further into the bushes, he led me back up the path to the overflowing parking lot. He stopped to make sure I noticed the places in the path where roots had snaked their way across it, so that I wouldn't trip on them.

"I saw you at the bar," he said.

"I didn't get in," I said.

“I know. I saw the whole thing. How old are you, really?”

“Nineteen.”

He nodded and stood quietly for a minute. I stepped a little closer to him, trying to get a better look at his face. When I realized it was the almond-eyed man from the bar earlier I swallowed hard and looked away so he wouldn't catch me staring.

“Do you want to come to my place?” he asked.

“Where do you live?”

“Just up the road,” he said.

“Amherst?”

“No, Vermont.”

It took over an hour to get to his house. I followed him along miles of winding roads. Driving there felt like being in a submarine, the headlights of my car casting two lonely beams of light into a dark, undersea habitat. When we finally got to his place I had a weird sense of déjà vu, maybe because the layout of his house was so similar to the one I grew up in. The same white clapboard walls, the same rambling porches, but surrounded by a dense field of wild grass cleared of trees instead of the cultivated fields and stables at our farm in Swift River.

He led me in by the hand, told me his name was Tom, or Bob, or Bill. He shoed his two excited dogs out of the room and sat me down on a couch covered in their hair.

“Stay here,” he said.

He lit a few candles and left the room. I saw a light come on in the hallway and then heard the sound of running water somewhere in the distance. The room was lined

on every side by books, stacked haphazardly onto dusty shelves. I wandered over to a shelf that was overstuffed with coffee table sized books of the stars and planets. The candles made the room glow faintly. I flipped through an illustrated book of constellations. Minor chords from a classical étude floated in from down the hall.

“You like stargazing?” he asked, when he came back into the room, wearing a robe and holding two glasses of wine in his hands. I slammed the book shut and put it back on the shelf.

“I thought I told you to stay put,” he said.

“Guess I’m not so good at following directions.”

He handed me a glass and made a toast.

“To possibilities,” he said. I clinked my glass with his and gulped down the wine. It was tart and dry.

In the bedroom, the comforter was pulled down and there were votives lit on every surface. The classical music was louder in here, coming from speakers in the corners of the room.

He took off his robe and stood in front of me, naked and fully erect. He grabbed my face with his hands and locked me in a kiss which made the blood rush to my face. Then he pushed me down onto the bed and started unbuckling my belt. I clamped my hands down on his wrists and pushed them away from me. I was small, but I was stronger than I looked, compact and wiry and determined not to get pushed around. I stood up and turned on him, shoving him down onto the bed.

“Don’t move,” I said.

I unbuckled my belt and pulled my shirt over my head, turning it inside out. Then I slipped out of my jeans. I pulled my briefs down to my ankles and stepped out of them. I was painfully hard. When he saw this, he let out a helpless moan that sounded like an animal trapped in a cage. He sat up and reached out to grab it.

I pushed his hand away, slapped his face with the back of my hand.

“I said. Don’t. Move.”

He made a sobbing sound that was ripe with the edge of ecstasy. I grabbed his shoulder and turned him over on the bed, flipping him like a pancake. When he lifted his arms over his head I pulled them into an X behind his lower back, as if I were about to handcuff him. I slapped his ass so hard it stung my hand.

“Don’t make another move. I’m in charge here, got it?”

He moaned, getting more turned on. I crawled on top of him, pushed his face into the bed. He turned his head so he could catch his breath.

“Anything you want. I’m yours,” he said.

I pressed my body hard into his, grinding his ass.

“Rape me,” he said. “Do whatever you want to me.”

I pulled his hips up and pressed myself hard against him.

“Wait,” he said.

“Shut the fuck up, bitch,” I said, slapping the back of his head.

“No, really, wait a minute. There’s a condom on the nightstand.”

I dozed off and on until 4AM. He was still asleep on the bed next to me. Even in the candlelight I could see the bruises starting to form on his back, the bite marks on his

shoulders. I got up and pulled my clothes back on, trying not to make any noise. As soon as I opened the bedroom door the dogs started barking and he jumped up, bleary-eyed.

“Where you going?” he asked, rubbing his eyes.

“Got a lot to do tomorrow.”

“At least let me walk you out.”

He got up and fumbled around for his robe, then slipped on a pair of hiking boots. As he walked with me down the creaking steps of his porch he looked like a vagabond, like the shopping cart lady in Northampton, always wearing robes and boots and weird outfits on the street.

The sky was just starting to get light at the base of the mountains in the distance, but overhead it was still deep violet and alive with stars. Instead of leading me to my car in the dirt driveway, he pulled me by the hand out into the field of overgrown grass. There was a flat-topped boulder in the middle of it, still moist with dew. He wiped the surface dry with the sleeve of his robe before he sat and motioned me to join him.

“Look up,” he said.

Above us was a cluster of three bright stars. I felt their rays warming me like sunlight on a summer day.

“That’s Vega,” he said, pointing to the brightest of the three. “See that triangle, those other two bright stars? That’s Deneb, and that’s Altair.”

The sky was getting lighter every second, the tilting planet a ticking clock. I stood up and told him I had to go.

“If you stick around there’s a lot more I could teach you. Did you know that Vega used to be the North Star? Right now it’s Polaris.” He looked off into the horizon, tracing lines between the dots of light with his eyes. “And in 3,000 years Gamma Cephei will replace Polaris.”

“I don’t think I can stick around that long.”

I felt closer to him than I had when I was inside him and he was moaning my name and telling me he was mine, that he belonged to me. I kissed him goodbye, lingering on his lips, savoring the sweet feeling of letting go, of leaving this all behind. As I drove through the winding dirt roads back to the highway I caught one last glance at the night sky as the brightest stars faded into the expanding blue. The next time I looked up I would see them from the other side of the planet, the constellations with glowing lines etched between them like drawings on maps leading me somewhere else.

The wind picked up and gusted through my open windows. I cupped my hand and tried to catch it as if it were a lightning bug or a butterfly. Soon the stars were swept from the sky and I knew it meant I would never find my way home

The Rain Sun

After the
hurricane Tláloc
took charge of creation
people lived on lilies 312 years
Quetzalcóatl rained fire and destruction
on earth the flames swept the sun from the sky
people burned some hid from the fire their descendants
became turkeys, dogs and butterflies the era ended in a firestorm

Phase 6: Flower of Youth

Anthony Torres – Seoul, Korea

Me entiende pero no me puede contestar. El amor se lo evita a él. Las estrallas lo guían.

You can tell from dancing with a guy what he'll be like in bed. The first night I met Noi, we ended up on the dance floor right away, the place where I was always happiest. The music was blaring and intense and made me push myself harder. Driving synthesizer beats rising into a crescendo while sirens wailed in the background. Vocal tracks of big black soul mammas belting their hearts out flooding my senses. The countdown like five beats leading to the end of the world. Five, four, three, two, one...

Noi wore loose jeans and no shirt and had a glow-in-the-dark pendant hanging from his neck. He was all smooth chest and spiky hair. His dark eyes swallowed every flashing, pulsating light in the club, every longing glance from the men that surrounded us. I felt the music grow inside me. I fell into the groove and Noi fell in with me. We moved our bodies in synch with the intimacy of lovers. We stepped back from each other

and wordlessly agreed to something like a duel. We kept one-upping each other, the energy building, drawing the attention of the crowd. I popped and locked. He busted out some acrobatic moves. I fell back onto the palms of my hands and broke it down, old-school, break dance style, spinning like a grounded helicopter on the glowing white dance floor. The crowd made room for us. Some girls with Hello Kitty ribbons in their hair snapped photos. Flashes and dots of light scarred across my field of vision. My body and Noi's moved as if we were possessed, filled with something powerful and mysterious, some outside force, like a relentless demon.

By the time we left the dance floor I knew more about Noi than I did about anyone else I had met in Seoul. We had that crazy chemistry that alters your thoughts the minute you come into contact with each other. I knew I was screwed. This guy was in my head. And I wouldn't be happy doing anything until I had him in bed, breathing hard and fast and moving to the same beat, his body and mine part of something bigger and more important than our lives put together.

It felt like fate the night I met Noi, the fulfillment of an omen. The woman in Teotihuacán who read my palm told me that love eluded me. But she also told me the stars would guide me. I was on summer break from my job at L.A. Unified. My brother Joseph invited me to Mexico City for a week and said he would help me do some soul searching because he could sense I was unhappy. His girlfriend read my astrological chart. She told me I longed for a clean slate, and that I should follow the stars east.

With teaching credentials and experience, getting online and getting a job teaching at the Samsung Academy took all of one week, and I was scheduled to depart

for Seoul before the end of the summer. A few weeks before I left, I made an appointment at the Korean Embassy on Wilshire. I was anxious to get my passport stamped with a brand new visa that was still shiny with wet ink. I was done with L.A., done with everyone who thought they were a 9, looking for a 10.

I waited half the afternoon at the Embassy with the clusters of Korean families, scattered around the waiting room. I camped out in the row of uncomfortable plastic chairs near the back, my nose buried in a Korean language phrasebook. One nice old lady, whose smile reminded me of my mom's, invited me to sit with her and share the snacks she brought to eat, picnic style; *kim chi* and rice, Pringles, and home-brewed iced tea, which she poured into the plastic cups she pulled from her bag. She taught me some Korean phrases: *My name is Anthony. I am American. I love Korean food.*

"What is your reason for going to Korea?" she asked. Her eyes looked closed, as if she were sleepwalking.

"I'm going to teach English." I said.

"Do you like to meet someone special there?"

The way she said it, the question like a statement, it made me believe I might find love in Seoul, the right person for me.

"You want to meet nice Korean girl?" she asked.

"Something like that," I said.

It took some getting used to, seeing row after row of students with the same color hair, the same color eyes. Something eerie and unnatural about the way their shiny heads lined up like orderly flocks of crows, perched in neat, symmetrical formations. When the

sun streamed in over the Seoul skyline, through the windows of my eleventh floor classroom, I squinted my eyes, and the rows of students blurred into straight lines, a picture of dark precision.

They were not the timid, quiet students I had expected to find in Korea. Poor kids had to play that role all the time. They started the day before sunrise, rushing out the door with lunchboxes packed with rice and *kimchi* and thermoses full of hot soup. They sat in rows wearing pressed uniforms all day long in class with teachers who allowed zero insubordination. Then they spent the afternoon in piano or violin class, and then went to *tae kwon do* or gymnastics after that. By the time they got to my class in the evening, they were worn out. At 10PM, when we finished, they had to take a long bus or metro ride home, where they did hardcore homework, helped around the house, and then woke up at the butt crack of dawn the next day to do it all over again.

They expected their Western teachers at the Samsung Academy, the *hagwon* where I worked, to be more lenient. As the hot sun fell into the shadows and the streets of Apkujong began to light up with the radiation glow of neon signs, my students started to crack around the edges. They chatted with each other. They flirted. They gossiped. Sometimes they stalled because they weren't in the mood to do work. I felt bad for them, but at the same time I had to get my job done, so I reeled them in and got their heads back in the game. I sat at my desk looking stern while they scribbled rapidly across their papers. When the students finished their in-class assignments they sat patiently at their desks and folded their hands.

“Tell us something about your home please, Teacher.”

I looked up at their expectant faces, their trusting looks which put me somewhere between eccentric uncle and benevolent dictator in their eyes. I closed my grade book and collected their papers, then sat on the corner of my desk.

“Back at my school in the States, we had guards posted around the campus, and the students had to walk through metal detectors on the way in.”

Kang, one of the older boys in the front row, tilted his head and said, “Explain please.”

“Metal detectors,” I said, standing and walking over to the doorway. I exited and entered the room a few times, making beeping noises. “Like at the airport.”

Some of the older students cupped their hands to the ears of the younger ones and translated this into Korean until they all nodded that they understood.

Kang said, “But Teacher, why in a school?”

“To make sure no one brings a gun or a knife.”

They made surprised faces and started chattering with each other. As long as they were listening to English, I was still doing my job. I told them that at my first teaching job, when I was fresh out of grad school, I waited in line every day with the rest of the students for my turn at the metal detector. I stood there, patiently and stoically, as the line shuffled along as slowly as gridlock on the 405. I never complained, even when the metal detectors were glitchy and set off false alarms, and the guards made me lift my arms so they could run the hand-held detectors over my body in efficient, emotionless swipes.

After I had been working there a few months, one of the gawky cougars in the teachers lounge started speaking to me instead of averting her eyes when I walked in. I asked her if there was a separate line we could use. She laughed at me.

“Teachers don’t have to go through that way at all. We have our own entrance.”

“With our own metal detector?” I asked.

She looked at me with that suspicious, half-amused look that meant she wasn’t sure if I was kidding.

“No,” she said, “No metal detector required for faculty. The guards must have thought you were one of the students.”

The students knew who I was, but they never told the guards. They let me wait in line with them every day, laughing at me behind my back.

My Korean students thought it was hysterical. They laughed for real. Not the polite, cover-your-mouth-with-your-hands thing you see in movies about high class, East Asian women. They let it all out. They guffawed and slapped their desks. I calmed them down and gave them the assignment for next class. Their comprehension in English was good. The younger ones understood the rest of my story without needing any of their older classmates to translate it for them.

The Samsung Academy put me up in a grungy, shoebox apartment which was walking distance from the *hagwon*. It was located in Apkujong, the ritziest, highest rent district in all of Korea. The neighborhood was filled with upscale clothing stores, swanky restaurants and well-dressed young couples walking arm in arm, but the *hagwon* still managed to find a low-rent apartment building to house its foreign employees. My

place was cramped and shadowy and hidden down a series of unmarked alleys where even the taxi drivers got lost.

My roommate was a tall, buff Korean American, what the locals called a *kyopo*. He said his name was Dakota. While he was in the shower one day, I rifled through his wallet and found out that his real name, his Korean name, was Young Suk Dong. He changed it as soon as he moved to the States with his family when he was ten. Dakota grew up in K-Town., not too far from where I grew up, if you measured the distance in sprawling, congested metropolis terms. In L.A. terms, or in Seoul terms.

In the middle of the night, I heard Dakota snoring. Even though our rooms were on opposite sides of the kitchen, it sounded like he was lying in bed next to me. He sneezed, and one of the neighbors banged on the wall for him to be quiet.

“Bless you,” I said.

“Thanks bro,” he said.

Neither of us had to shout.

In the morning I watched Dakota slip out of the shower with a towel wrapped loosely around his waist, flexing his muscles in the mirror and running a cheap plastic comb through his long, thick hair. Dakota was strictly eye candy because I knew he was a hardcore player when it came to women. He had a series of super hot Korean girlfriends who made muffled gasps of pleasure in his room late at night and then cleaned the kitchen and cooked steaming bowls of ramen soup for both of us the next day. Dakota was disgusting to live with. He was sloppy and left hair and slime all over the bathroom, making it look as if a snail had snuck in through the shower drain during the night and crawled all over the slick tiles. When he walked around shirtless and let his

jeans hang low off his waist, an unruly, wiry mass of hair peered out above his waistband and bunched just below his bellybutton. He left crushed cardboard containers of Chinese protein shakes all over the apartment, he always smelled bad, and he picked his nose while we were sitting together at the kitchen table, slurping noodles from our soup with chopsticks.

After class, I walked home along the crowded streets of Apkujong with some of the other teachers who lived in the same apartment building. I tried to read the jumble of signs in Korean characters that still looked like the backdrop of a Kung Fu movie to me. Dakota helped me sound them out, syllable by syllable, endlessly patient. I was the only newbie in the group. The other guys, all Canadians except for Dakota and me, had been in Korea for at least six months. Some were even on their second or third year. They chose to extend their annual contracts with the *hagwon*, rather than move on to better paying positions in Taiwan or Japan or Saudi Arabia.

We stopped at the gym for a late night workout before heading home. They had told me to bring a change of clothes, but didn't mention that I needed to bring another pair of shoes to wear inside. Dakota and the other guys were already leaving their outdoor shoes at the door in a muddled series of crooked rows. Some of the guys said, "Oh surry Anthony, forgot all about that." They pulled their gym shoes out of their bags and shuffled roughly into them, not bothering to sit down or undo the laces.

There was no getting around the rule so I walked around the gym in my socks and lifted weights, skipping the treadmill entirely. I ignored the amused glances of the other people there, who were all Korean, except for us. It's easy to get used to people looking

at you. On camera every single thing you want to hide ends up being magnified. On a soundstage you learn never to scratch your nose or let your mouth open too wide or get caught looking confused, because the one moment you want to forget about is always the one that ends up in the final cut, frozen and amplified on film. Something permanent and indelible, like a mortal sin on your soul that you would rather forget, but can't. Before I got certified to teach ESL, I worked off and on as a dancer. I hit auditions and landed jobs dancing back up for no-name performers in night clubs. I even showed up in low-budget videos now and then for long hours and shitty pay. It was a tough business. I worked hard, gave up a lot, and only ever got one big break. I landed a spot in a video for the biggest female hip hop artist around. I got mad exposure from that one, dancing as a corpse in a graveyard, with sunken eye sockets painted on and neon green contact lenses that made me look jaundiced and corroded.

I plodded around the gym in my socks and carried myself as if I were every bit as comfortable as the regulars, with their brand new workout sneakers, and their acres of rosy muscle.

When the weekend came, Dakota and the boys took me out drinking in the Itaewon district, where the expat-friendly bars, staffed with foreigners and English-speaking Koreans, lined both sides of the streets. We started the night drinking liter bottles of beer in the back seat of the cab on the way there and planned to finish it pretty much the same way, riding home just as the sun was starting to come up behind the skyscrapers and massive billboards.

The first place we went was called L.A. Bar, where Korean women, if they were hot, were encouraged to come in, but Korean men were hassled and detained at the door. Dakota didn't recognize the bouncer, so he kept his hand near his pocket, ready to whip out his passport and wave it in front of him like a shiny, blue Get Out of Jail Free card. Dakota was taller and more muscular than most Korean guys, so the bouncer just assumed he was *kyopo*, and waved him in with the rest of us.

We made our way to the side of the bar. Christian, a Canadian who Dakota and the other guys were friendly with, worked there as a bartender six nights a week. He overloaded our drinks with booze until they were blackout strong and we tipped him obscenely in return, even when we found out that the owner took a fifty percent cut from the tip jar before returning it to her employees to divvy up amongst themselves. Christian had a French Canadian accent and a smile that lit up the room. He wore a sleeveless shirt that showed off his guns and a straw cowboy hat, cocked to one side on his head. He flirted shamelessly with every girl who ordered a drink from him, leaning over the bar to kiss their cheek and wink at them, telling them he was glad to see them.

I ordered another drink. Christian caught me checking him out as he turned around to grab a bottle from behind the bar. He paused and tilted his head to one side as he slid me my drink. Then he put his large, sweaty hand on top of my wrist and pulled me in close to him, leaning over the bar and putting his mouth to my ear so I could hear him over the loud music.

“Anthony, let me ask you something,” he said. “Do you like guys or girls?”

I wasn't sure what to say. He grabbed the back of my neck to pull me in closer, squeezing it with his thick fingers.

“Well I like girls,” he said, “But I know where you can find some guys you might like.”

I leaned back, grateful for the smoky air, the dim lighting that hid my reddening face.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“Buddy,” he said, “You have been eye-fucking me since the minute you walked in the door. But it’s okay. I like the attention.” He beamed at me, his smile wide and proud as a student reciting a correct answer in front of the class. “I’m totally secure in my sexuality.”

“I can’t really get away tonight,” I said, “I’m out with the boys.”

“As if they give two shits. They can get by without you this once. I’ll keep an eye on them.”

Christian squeezed my wrist tightly, then slammed his palm down hard on the bar, making the half-full glasses jump up as if they were startled.

“Now go out there and get yourself some ass.”

After we left L.A. Bar, Dakota and I followed the crowd up the steep, cobblestone road that led to Hooker Hill. We landed at Kim’s Soju Kettle Lounge, a popular, low-class dive that catered to American military personnel stationed at the nearby army base. I got separated from the guys so I went downstairs to look for them. The crowd was drunk and rowdy. Military boys with worked-out bodies and buzz cuts danced with their shirts off to bass-grinding hip hop, boxing in every halfway decent-looking girl that got too close. They dueled with each other to get the girls’ attention. It was a classic sausage

party set-up, and all the macho, aggressive energy made me want to go to a place where the guys might actually like me back.

I went upstairs to the lounge area, where Dakota and the boys were sitting at a table that was littered with empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. Dakota was bleary-eyed and barely held himself up as he barked at the indifferent waitress in Korean. She brought them a tray weighed down by *soju* kettles, colorful concoctions made with the strong national liquor of Korea. They glowed like magic potions under the spotlights above the bar; gritty pink lemonade and sour green grape. I'd been warned that they went down smooth as children's cough syrup, and that after you drank too many, an aggressive bout of drowsiness snuck up on you slowly before slamming your muscles into submission all at once. I figured Dakota and the boys were just about down for the count so I took it as my opportunity to slip away unnoticed, into the winding, unfamiliar streets of Seoul.

Farther up the road in Itaewon, just past Hooker Hill, there was a second street that sloped upward at a steep angle, an area which Christian had called Homo Hill. The street was lined with upscale bars that spread themselves out like a welcome mat. Their names were written in English on the signs that hung above the entrances: Bar Amsterdam, More than Friends Bar, West Hollywood Club. One of them stood out as the largest and sleekest. The sign out front was stark and minimal. Just the letter Q, etched like a magic, glowing rune on the dark night.

After paying the steep cover at the door and talking with Jae, the bartender Christian had told me to find, I learned that Q was the go to place for trendy Seoul boys to gather. The drinks were more overpriced than any other place in Itaewon, but Jae kept

waving his hand and told me not to worry about it. I ended up tipping him more than the drinks actually cost. After I knocked back a few and soaked in some of the attention I got for being a new face in a new city, I squeezed through the crowd and out onto the dance floor. It was pristine, glowing white and crisscrossed with laser thin pencils of intense light; red, blue, and yellow, mixing primary hues at their intersections, creating the effect of a blurry spider's web. The lights shifted from one end of the color spectrum to the next, illuminating the bodies of the shirtless boys who gathered to dance in their warm, spaceship glow.

A fairly good-looking, slightly older man approached me when I stepped off the dance floor. He introduced himself as Tony, not bothering with his Korean name, or maybe it was a nickname everyone used. I told him my name was Tony too, sort of, though I preferred to be called Anthony. He asked if I wanted to sit at his table with him and his friends. I gladly accepted, by then shirtless and sweaty and ready for a break.

His table was in one of the sky boxes upstairs, where the bottles were super pricey and the VIPs sat in their roped off, private booths. The entryway was blocked by a duo of beefy bouncers whose dour expressions made them look like the ancient stone guardians in Jeju-do, the balmy island at the southernmost point of the Korean Peninsula. I felt self-conscious as we passed them and pulled my shirt on before my sweat had a chance to dry. When I sat in Tony's booth, along with some of his friends, the air-conditioning blasted me in the face and made me shiver. Bottles and fruit wedges were lined up on a glass and metal tray in the center of the table. Tony poured me a drink and introduced me around to his friends. I got the impression I had stumbled into an A-list

gathering of Seoul's power hip. They had that relaxed, prosperous air of people at the top of their game.

From here the dance floor spread out below us like a flashing landscape. Tony moved closer to me. He poured me another drink with one hand and grabbed my arm with the other, feeling my bicep, squeezing it, then rubbing it. As I gulped down my drink Tony put one hand on my leg and left it there, close to my crotch. His friends took notice and started saying something in Korean I didn't understand and giggling. I pretended to be oblivious to his advances, pretended that I thought he was just being friendly. This had happened many times before at after-parties, with casting agents and self-styled producers. I had turned away much hotter guys before, when I was much drunker and much younger.

"So what do you do, Tony?" I asked. He told me he was a talent manager. He seemed genuine, not your usual wannabe who prints up business cards and starts calling himself a producer, or worse, an agent, using creative visualization and affirmations to try to manifest himself into something he has yet to become, if ever.

"You are military, no? From Yongsan?"

"No," I said. "I'm a teacher. I work at a *hagwon* in Apkujong."

Tony pulled his hand away. He tossed some Korean words at his friends and they looked down, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Usually if a new foreign guy comes in here, he is military. Most guys with short hair and muscles are military."

"Don't worry about it, Tony." I said.

Tony looked down again, his head forming the hint of a bow.

“It’s just that, here in Korea, we have great respect for teachers.”

Back in L.A., I dated a tattooed bodybuilder named Willy who had spent time in the big house. Willy gave me tips on how to load up on protein after my workouts to pack on more mass. He also taught me how to improve my relationship with Jesus Christ. When I told him I was frustrated at my substitute teaching gig at L.A. Unified, just before I decided to leave for Korea, he schooled me on how to control the little bastards in my rowdy classroom.

“You got to roll in there the same way you roll into the yard the first day of lock down,” said Willy. “You find the biggest, baddest motherfucker in that bitch, and you beat the fuck outta them. Nobody gonna start no trouble with you after that. After that you the king.”

The baddest motherfucker in my class then was a kid named Blas. He was a tough *cholo* who sat in the back, surrounded by a posse of other tough *cholos*. He badmouthed me in Spanish, which I understood. I walked over to his desk, invading the barrier his followers had set up around him, their desks pushed an inch or two closer to his, their energy around him like a protective cocoon.

“Get the fuck out my face, motherfucker.”

I stood in front of his desk. He stood up, almost as tall as me. He punched the air near my face. I felt a whoosh of air. I didn’t move but I closed my eyes halfway, not sure if he would go through with it or not. My adrenaline starting pumping. Blas pounded the desk with his fist and leaned in, face to face with me, puffing out his chest. I

turned and walked calmly to the phone near the front of the room and called for security to escort him to the vice principal's office.

Blas fumed, started cursing me in Spanish. Called me everything from *chaparro*, which just means short and stocky, to *puto* and *culero*, which both mean faggot. I shuffled papers at my desk, rechecked the attendance sheet and waited for security. The officer arrived with handcuffs and a billy club.

"I didn't do nothing. This is bullshit right here," Blas screamed through the halls all the way to the main office. When the noise faded the room was deathly quiet. Two Hmong girls in the back started whispering to each other, but they stopped when I looked up at them.

"If anyone else has something to say, now's the time."

The rest of the semester was a success. Blas never came back. The other students were actually interested in learning. Willy was right. No one started any trouble with me after that.

The baddest motherfucker in my Korean classroom turned out to be a fourteen year old girl named Min Ju. She had a perpetually sulky attitude. She handed me her homework and quizzes with one hand instead of two, which Dakota told me was rude. And she never bowed her head when she turned in her work like the other students did. Nothing more than a miniscule tilt while her eyes locked defiantly on mine.

It was still hot, muggy, Indian summer weather in Seoul the day I decided to put an end to Min Ju's subtle insubordination. She strode into the room, barely on time, wearing a white shirt and a plaid skirt, her navy blazer slung casually over one shoulder.

She wore glasses and had henna streaks in her hair, underneath, so they only showed when she flipped it off her neck, flashing red like exposed arteries. The late afternoon sun lit her face and made her look like a mischievous cherub, or some playful imp disguised as a charming, confident schoolgirl. There was something fiendish in her smile, something used to challenging the stifling world she had to live in. I actually admired her non-conformity, and almost backed out of my showdown with her that day. But I stuck to my guns. Min Ju sauntered over to her seat, blowing a bubble with her gum and then popping it with a loud smack which startled the rest of the class.

“Min Ju” I said, in a voice which stopped everyone but her in their tracks. She glanced up at me and continued walking.

“Min Ju!” I repeated, this time so forcefully that she froze and looked up with something getting closer to fear in her eyes.

“Throw your gum away, now.”

She complied, without hesitation, rising from her seat and walking over to the trash can. She grabbed a tissue from the box on my desk and swiped the gum away so fast it was like a magic trick. Now you see it, now you don't.

“You are not to come into my classroom again chewing gum. Do you understand?”

Min Ju settled into her seat. She turned to look at the clock on the wall, then faced me and said, “But class hasn't even started yet.”

Her English was so fluent it was spooky. She had gone to middle school in New Jersey, and she switched effortlessly into English and back into Korean when class was over.

“I don’t care what time it is. Throw it away before you come through that door.”

Min Ju sat up, defensive now. “But Teacher, what’s the big deal? I’ll throw it away before we start, I promise.” She tried to get cute with her body language, flirty even.

“Min Ju, don’t argue with me, just do as I say. Otherwise I’ll ask you to leave.”

“You can’t ask me to leave. My mom already paid my tuition.”

I walked to the front row of desks, getting closer to her.

“Min Ju, leave the classroom please.”

“But, you can’t...”

“Leave now.”

“But Teacher, where will I go?”

“Stand outside until I call you back in.”

Min Ju stood up, but hesitated. I took two steps closer to her. Min Ju shrugged and walked out of the room, sulky and defiant to the end, glaring over her shoulder at me as she closed the door behind her.

One minute before I wrapped things up, I was about to call her back in so she could get the assignment for the next class. I looked up at the window in the door. The director of the school, a stern Korean American named Charles Park, was standing behind Min Ju, a serious expression on his face. I dismissed the class and held my breath as the students stormed out, running to catch their late buses and subway trains home. Min Ju walked in, Charles Park guiding her from behind with one hand on her shoulder.

“What happened here Mr. Torres?” he asked in a somber voice, the same tone he might use for a student in need of discipline.

“Min Ju was disrupting the class, so I sent her outside.”

“We don’t do that here.”

Min Ju let her head sink down to her chest, which was supposed to look like deep regret and shame. But she was peeking up at me and smirking, knowing that Charles Park couldn’t see her face from where he was standing.

“I didn’t see that there was any other way to deal with the problem. And I thought the time had come.” I said.

Charles Park tensed up.

“This has been an ongoing problem?”

“Since the first day of class.”

Min Ju’s smirk evaporated. She lifted her head and looked up as if she had been slapped.

“I see,” he said. Then he said to Min Ju, “You can go now.”

She paused for a moment. She was always pausing, calculating.

Charles Park dismissed her again, this time in Korean, all hard-edged syllables and sharp, truncated endings. She obeyed. Charles Park and I waited in silence while her footsteps faded down the hall. He cleared his throat and said, “Don’t do that again, Anthony.” Then he turned and left the room.

Later that week, as I was dismissing class for the day, I saw Charles Park standing outside my classroom with a petite woman. She was dressed in a sleek rain jacket which cinched at the waist, and an expensive scarf which tied neatly around her neck. The

students rushed out more quickly than usual, some of the younger ones running through the hallway, their overloaded backpacks bouncing painfully on their backs.

Charles Park stepped into the doorway. He looked at me with a blank expression and presented a very formal, elaborate introduction in rapid-fire Korean, with his head slightly down and his arms stiff at his sides. The woman bowed as he left the room. I bowed to her and motioned for her to come in.

She sat across from me in front of my desk. I sat silently for a minute with her, not knowing if she spoke any English, but assuming she must since Charles Park didn't stay around to translate. She bowed one more time, her head almost touching the desk. Then she sat up very straight and tall and brushed a strand of silky black hair out of her face. Up close, she was stunning. Her make up was minimal, but looked professionally done. She took a deep breath, then spoke.

"Mr. Torres, my name is Su Jung Kim." She spoke perfectly enunciated, slightly accented English. "I'm Min Ju's mother."

She looked me directly in the eyes and extended one hand for me to shake, as if she wanted to introduce this Western-savvy, English-speaking, side of herself too.

"I am here to express my deep regret for my daughter's behavior the other day in your classroom."

"I apologize for overreacting Mrs. Kim. She does A-plus work all the time. She just gets a little excitable sometimes and unfortunately, I had to make an example of her."

Mrs. Kim was shaking her head from side to side.

"No, no. Min Ju knows better than to act the way she did."

“I don’t want to stifle her individuality,” I said. She was so fluent in English that I didn’t bother trying to find a simpler way to say stifle.

“Please,” she said, “Accept my sincerest apologies for the behavior of my daughter. She is learning so much in your class. You have been a great influence on her already.”

Neither one of us was sure what to say. Finally I insisted all was forgiven, and that it was my pleasure to have Min Ju in class. She winced every time I said something nice about her daughter. Before she left she turned and said, “I assure you, Mr. Torres, that Min Ju will cause no further disruption.”

Mrs. Kim had her head bowed, her shiny black hair spilling over her shoulders, her neck curving downward as naturally as a swan’s.

“Just don’t be too hard on her Mrs. Kim.” I said lightly.

“Well, we’ll see about that.”

She put one hand on her hip, flirtatiously.

“And Mr. Torres, call me Sue.”

A flash of her close-lipped smile and she turned and was gone, leaving a trail of expensive perfume in the air as I closed the door behind her.

The next time I went to Q, one of Tony’s friends invited me up to the skybox level to sit with them at their table. Tony had the same section reserved every Saturday night, where he held court with his stylish circle of friends and lured new foreign boys with expensive bottles of vodka. Tony had already hooked a gangly Southern boy named Ethan who was all bones and angles. They were making out and pawing at each other so

I sat at the edge of the balcony and watched the people in the club below. I zoomed in on one of the shirtless boys on the dance floor for so long I got dizzy when I took my eyes off him and turned around to order another drink on Tony's tab.

When Tony and Ethan finally came up for air, Tony noticed me watching the beautiful boy on the dance floor. He came to sit next to me and leaned over the balcony, catching the boy's attention and waving him up. I was panic-stricken. It felt safe to watch the boy from the protective distance of Tony's VIP booth. Now, as he was making his way up the stairs and past the massive bouncers, I felt naked and exposed, a Peeping Tom sitting in the dark when suddenly someone rips open the curtains and turns on all the lights.

The boy eased into a seat next to me where Tony invited him to sit. He was smiling shyly at me. He looked twenty-something, but it was hard to tell with these boyish-looking Korean guys.

“Anthony, this is Noi.”

I shook his hand and rolled his name over on my tongue. I was thrilled to hear both of our names in the same sentence. Anthony and Noi. I was seeing two of him. The polite, almost timid Noi sitting next to me, and the other Noi I had been watching, moving on the dance floor, drawing everyone's attention without even trying. I was imagining us together on the dance floor, happy and carefree, dancing as if the night would never end.

As if he had read my mind, Noi asked me if I wanted to dance. He took my hand and led me downstairs. There was nothing but Noi then. Noi and our bodies moving and the crowd at the club and their energy filling me like a promise. The feeling delicious

and full because it was fleeting, only lasted until we got separated, until Noi said he had to go, disappeared again, ephemeral as the new moon in the starless sky, lost in the glow of the neon signs, blocked by the gray skyscrapers, hidden by the dark that comes just before dawn, the stagger home, the fading buzz, the spinning room and tunnel vision that makes everything black, black as the moonless sky above the city.

Sue Kim came into the *hagwon* to pick up Min Ju after class a week after we had our talk. She sent Min Ju to wash her hands before they left, buying us a few minutes alone. She laughed politely at my jokes, which weren't all that funny. And she told me again how pleased she was that I was Min Ju's teacher.

"How long have you been teaching, Mr. Torres?"

"A few years now," I said.

She paused to consider my answer, then asked that loaded question, "And what did you do before?"

I straightened my papers on my desk, checked over her shoulder to see if Min Ju was back yet.

"I was in the entertainment industry."

Sue's eyes got wide and she smiled with her lips closed. It was more polite than a toothy, American smile.

"I know a little something of the entertainment industry myself."

What she didn't tell me, that I found out later from Dakota, who found out from Charles Park, was that Sue Kim was a former Miss Korea. It was easy to believe. She still tied her scarves around her neck as if they were beauty pageant sashes. Sue had

moved to the U.S. and worked on daytime dramas before she got to that age when show biz types realize they haven't made it big yet and probably never will, so they get realistic and devote their time to something more reliable. She focused on her family and moved back to Seoul, where she opened a 'talent school', teaching young girls how to walk and how to pose for the camera, how to infuse their personality into their look, let the camera see through them and get a glimpse of that vulnerable, innermost part of them that fascinated the audience.

“And what exactly did you used to do in the entertainment industry?” she asked.

“I was a dancer.” I said quietly.

“Oh lovely,” she said, “I used to know many dancers when I was younger.”

Min Ju rushed to her mother's side, burying her head in Sue's jacket.

“What kind of dancer were you, Teacher?” asked Min Ju.

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I looked to the side, thinking how best to answer.

“Min Ju,” said Sue, “We must respect Mr. Torres' privacy. You ask too many questions.”

The next weekend I went out with Dakota and the boys to Itaewon and started off the night at L.A. Bar. Dakota and I did shots at the bar. Christian lined them up for us, overfilling the large, round glasses until dark liquor spilled over the rims. Dakota swallowed every one the same way, scrunching up his face and shaking his head, then blowing a stream of air out of his mouth as if exhaling poisonous fumes, trying to detox his body.

Some of our Canadian friends pulled Dakota aside into a huddle, where they talked to each other in whispers. Dakota broke off from the group, grabbed my shoulder and said, “Anthony, we’re going to the *norae-bang* after this to meet up with Seung and Jin from the gym.” I had zero stage fright getting up to sing in front of a crowd, but Dakota and the boys needed to be liquored up before they had to balls to try.

When Christian came by to refill our glasses, Dakota asked, “Christian, buddy, where can we get our hands on some ecstasy tonight?” Christian told him he could score the best drugs at Q. “Anthony can show you guys the way,” said Christian, topping off my shot glass and then moving to the other side of the bar to take an order. Dakota insisted I take them there. I said, “No way man,” and he said, “Just forget about it then bro, we can find the way ourselves.” But Dakota got quiet and sulky and I could tell he wanted me to be their ambassador and at least escort them in.

When we got to Q, I bellied up to the bar and ordered a round of drinks. I asked Jae where Dakota could find what he was looking for. Jae motioned with his chin to Tony’s skybox. I told the guys to wait while I walked up to the VIP lounge. The bouncers recognized me and let me through right away. For some reason this startled me. Until that moment I had felt like a ghost just gliding over the surface of the streets of Seoul. I thought I would finish my contract in a year and no one would be able to remember my face. I sat next to Tony and accepted a drink from him.

“My buddies are here and they’re looking for something Jae said you would know how to find.”

Tony nodded and leaned over the table to say something to one of his friends, a quiet boy with a large piercing through his forehead. The boy calmly got up and made

his way down to the bar. One of the Canadians saw me and made a thumbs-up sign. Dakota slapped his hand over the Canadian's and gave him a stern look. The guy with the pierced forehead motioned for Dakota to follow him to the ladies bathroom.

“Did you come here just for that?” asked Tony.

“No,” I said, keeping my eyes on the dance floor.

“So you like Noi?” he asked me.

I nodded, guilty as charged.

“You know he has a boyfriend?”

“Of course I do.”

But I didn't know. It was like a slap, this news, but I tried to play it off. Tony offered me a drink and put his arm around my shoulder. He told me everything I wanted to know about the object of my affection. Noi was one of the owners of Q. He was younger than I was, but he had been much more successful in the entertainment industry. He made a ton of money while still a teenager, singing in a boy band trio of singers-slash-dancers called F.O.Y., which stood for Flower of Youth. They were famous for performing high-energy dance routines in their videos, which had made it close to the top of the K-pop charts but never to the very top. Noi cashed in on his early fame and sank his money into opening Q. His boyfriend was a Canadian named Tom, an executive with Air Canada, who was out of town on business for most of the year. Noi wasn't one of those hot local boys who hooked up with a rich foreigner in order to lead an easy, gracious life of cleaning ladies and expensive nights out and accumulate a rack of Prada, Gucci and Dolce & Gabbana. Noi was self-made. There had to be another reason they were together. Maybe it was convenience, or commitment. Maybe it was love.

“I don’t think Noi will be here tonight,” Tony said. “He has business to attend to.”

I tried to take the news in stride, but my shoulders began to sag like two-day old balloons. Dakota reemerged from the bathroom, hurrying over to the bar to round up the rest of the guys.

“Do me a favor Tony, don’t tell him I was asking about him.”

I gave Tony a quick kiss on the lips and went back downstairs.

I asked the kids in my advanced class if they had ever heard of F.O.Y. All of them said yes.

Min Ju sat up and asked, “Why do you want to know?” with an eerie, knowing look in her eyes.

“I met one of them.” I said.

“Which one?” she asked.

“The good-looking one.”

The students laughed. Min Ju said, “I know which one that is but I forgot his name.”

She leaned her elbow onto her desk and propped her chin on her fist.

“So, where did you meet him?”

“Somewhere in Itaewon,” I said, knowing right away that it had been a mistake. To them Itaewon was drunk expats, hookers and drugs. It was no place for anyone respectable, especially not a teacher.

I cleared my throat and went back to correcting quizzes and the students went back to their worksheets. Min Ju sat and watched me for a few minutes. When I looked up at her she smiled and said, “I used to love F.O.Y. I even had a F.O.Y. lunchbox.”

“Do you still have it, Min Ju?” I calculated how much she might want for it before I had time to think how inappropriate it would be for a teacher to buy a lunchbox from one of their students just because he had a crush on a boy.

“I don’t know where it is now,” she said. “It’s been a few years since they were popular.”

Dakota and I stopped at the *PC bang* near our apartment on the way home from the gym. It was up a steep flight of stairs and down a maze of concrete hallways. We sat down in front of two computer terminals, surrounded on all sides by rows and rows of other computers, where students played Lineage and Starcraft for hours, mostly to get away from their hyper-controlling parents. Some of them chatted quietly on headsets with friends, their faces displayed in a small square of video output on the monitor. Friends sitting in other *PC bangs* around the city, or around the country, somewhere in L.A., or New York, or London, somewhere in Orange County, Hermosa Beach, K-Town, somewhere back home.

Dakota set his gym bag down in the chair next to mine and went to the snack bar to heat up a packaged bowl of ramen in the microwave. By the time he returned, the entire *PC bang* smelled like warm noodles. He stuffed some of the overcooked noodles into his mouth with chopsticks, then tilted the bowl to his mouth and slurped loudly as he sat down.

“Dude,” he said, spitting bits of food onto his keyboard, “I just heard the World Trade Center got bombed.”

“By whom?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Some terrorists or something. I think that’s what that word means in English.”

I typed the URL of one news site after another into the browser bar. I kept getting the same response, a cursor frozen in time, the overexerted heave of the CPU as it hummed frantically, one error message after another.

“Something’s going on for sure,” I said.

I tried to IM my brother back home but he didn’t reply. He might have been on the road again, somewhere south of the border. Dakota and I stared at the blinking cursor while the rest of the room hummed with its usual activity, oblivious.

“Do you think they’ll send us home?” Dakota asked.

“Why?”

“Aren’t we, like, in danger? Cause we’re Americans living abroad?”

“We might be in more danger back home.”

“But what’s keeping us here, really?” he asked.

Dakota started shaking my shoulder. “Anthony, look,” he said, pointing at the screen.

An IM from my brother.

Anth, we are all fucked, the terrorists just blew up NYC, be glad you are not here.

Dakota and I sat in front of the TV in his bedroom, watching CNN most of the night. The towers bursting into flames and then tumbling into rubble played over and over, people as small as ants leaping from windows, close ups of faces in the crowd below turning their heads, covering their eyes, crying. I fell asleep in the chair by his bed and woke up at dawn when Dakota started snoring. I rubbed my stiff neck and shuffled through the kitchen into my own room. At work the American and Canadian teachers gathered in the lunch room and sat quietly in front of a small TV to catch updates in between classes. The mood was somber all week, but by the end of it we were ready for the weekend again, ready to party all night and stagger home through the streets at dawn.

That Saturday I went with Dakota and the boys to L.A. Bar and got good and buzzed. We clinked our glasses together and told each other funny stories and watched Dakota get shot down by one girl after another. We did our best to forget about what was happening in the world. Later in the night I gave them the slip and walked up the hill to Q.

I found Noi right away. His eyes lit up when he saw me and I knew the look was real, not the same as the one he used to greet everyone else who came to his bar. He grabbed me by the hand, laced his fingers through mine, and brought me out to the dance floor. He pulled me in close while we danced, both his wrists resting on my shoulders. That night we weren't showboating or grandstanding, just moving to the music together. He put his lips to my ear and said, "Wait for me, okay?" in his accented, halting English.

And then he was gone.

By the end of the night, I felt like a chump, waiting for Noi, watching the crowd disappear. I left Q and staggered down the hill to catch a cab before the sun came up. I

ran into Dakota and the boys, buying cigarettes at the 7/11 on the corner. Instead of going home, we walked to a street food stall and bought *dokbogi*, sitting on the chilly sidewalk and savoring the spicy, chewy rice dough as the neon signs began to fizzle out one by one. Dakota and I took a cab together back to Apkujong. As usual, he stank like Muscle Milk and sweat, but after being out all night, he stank like sour vodka and cigarette smoke too.

The next time I went back to Q, I knew I was only going for the chance to see Noi. I scrubbed and lotioned and tried on shirts till I found the one that fit the best and that would look good hanging from the back pocket of my jeans when I took it off. Sometimes when I looked at myself in the mirror it felt like another person's eyes were looking back at me, like an observer had entered my thoughts and was using my eyes to study me, the way a scientist might look through a microscope at a one-celled organism.

Noi was already on the dance floor. I stood at the bar and ordered a drink from Jae, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dark. Tony was waving me upstairs from over the balcony. I motioned to the bar, letting him know I was waiting for a drink. He nodded and went back to Ethan, or maybe to some new boy he had found.

I kept my eye on Noi but stayed cool. I would wait for him to come to me. I stood at the bar and smiled back at some cute boys as they ordered their drinks. One of them pursed his lips and looked me up and down. He was dancing to the music, shirtless, with a drink in his hand. His body was not flawless, like Noi's, but was smooth and sexy and exaggerated. He had a tiny waist and a naturally lean torso. A twink body, genetically predispositioned to be a whore. He started blowing kisses at me and finally I

gave up the hard-to-get routine and laughed at him. He took this as an invitation to come talk to me. When he got closer I saw that his teeth were a little jacked up and he looked really high.

His name was Moon. He spoke broken English but was flirty and funny and couldn't keep his hands off of me. Moon was easy to read: fun, drunk, drugged out, uninhibited. He was the slutty guy who let everyone know he was slutty. The party boy who would probably be getting banged bareback by a stranger by the end of the night.

Noi broke us up, which was a relief, because I kept resisting Moon, but the truth was he was tempting. But I was just passing time with him, waiting for Noi to come to me.

“Hi Moon,” Noi said in English.

“Hi Noi,” Moon said in more stilted English, all for my benefit I presumed.

Noi snaked his arm through mine and led me away to the dance floor. I gave a helpless look to Moon, who was standing at the bar pouting like a little boy as I walked away.

Noi pulled me in close.

“Where were you? I wait for you last time.”

“I didn't see you anywhere, so I left.”

Noi considered this, saw that I was annoyed, and nodded. I had to forgive someone with as sweet a face as Noi's, someone who sounded so timid and polite in English. Noi disappeared again and I made the rounds, accepted a few drinks from Tony in his skybox and then made my way back downstairs to belly up to the bar and talk with Jae.

I got tired of waiting for Noi, tired of trying not to look at Moon, tired of pretending I didn't know what Noi was up to, slipping off into the bathroom with strangers, then reemerging looking more and more high. I had seen enough drugged up people when I was working as a dancer to know what to look for, what to stay away from. But I couldn't stay away from Noi, not yet, not until I got what I wanted from him. I made my way out to the dance floor, alone.

Some of the girls in the club followed me out onto the dance floor and took pictures and videos of me. A few were gathered around in a group near the bar, holding tiny cameras over their heads to try to record me. I turned it on for them, even gave them a few poses.

Then all of a sudden there was a ripple of excitement in the crowd. Everyone was looking and pointing and getting worked up. For a second, because drinking makes you believe you are the best in the world at whatever you're doing, I almost believed they were crowding around me. As if they might be saying to each other, see that American guy, he used to be a backup dancer in hip hop videos, didn't you see him, made up to look like a corpse dancing in a graveyard with that famous American black lady?

But they passed right by me and crowded around a rail thin girl with straight, shiny hair. She was smiling demurely at the cameras, stopping to have her picture taken with her fans. I recognized her right away, the most famous singer in Korea, glistening with moisturized skin and flawless make up. She wore a dress made from sleek, silver-lined fabric which wrapped around her svelte frame. She looked expensive.

Her name was Karisma. She was a famous K-pop star, and I knew from trying to follow the news in Korean, with Dakota helping to translate, that she had been born a

male. The most famous transsexual in Korea, maybe the only transsexual in Korea, a country known for its conservatism and its strong traditionalism. But she was adored. And we were at ground zero of her fan base.

Security guards escorted Karisma through the club and up to the VIP section. She sat in Tony's booth. Before long Noi came to get me. He curled his hand into mine and pulled me away.

"I want to introduce you to someone," he said, leading me up the stairs to Tony's table.

I was more than a little star struck. Even though I had worked with famous recording artists before, I was always in the background, hired by a casting agent, sometimes only seeing the artist at rehearsal, having to fake that intimate, easy going feel when I was choreographed to dance near them, sometimes to gyrate on them.

"Tony says you like to dance," said Karisma, tilting her head to the side, more feminine than anyone who hadn't had to work so hard to become a woman could ever be.

I nodded.

"Let me see some of your moves," she said, clapping her hands together.

I shook my head, no, but Karisma got everyone in the sky box on her side. Tony pushed me until I finally agreed to stand up. Everyone was cheering. I could feel the energy, and the pressure. I felt the beat of the music playing and let my body make the decision for me, convulsing into a series of broken poses and staccato rhythm moves. The routine I still remembered so well from the video, animated corpse in a graveyard. I ended with a bow. Karisma applauded and the rest of the crowd followed suit. Feeling a

rush of embarrassment and adrenaline and relief, I sat down in the empty space that Karisma made next to her.

That night Karisma and I talked as if we were old friends, laughing and drinking, her hand slapping my knee whenever I made a joke. Karisma told me that she and Noi had gone to high school together in Bundang, before she had undergone her transformation, back when she had just been a fey, skinny boy with delicate features and even more delicate mannerisms. While Noi was climbing to the middle of the K-Pop charts with F.O.Y., Karisma was undergoing surgery and hormone regimens and voice coaching. She performed all her own vocals, pre-recorded, since she lip-synched at her shows. And she sounded phenomenal, with a smooth, ultra-feminine voice that made you forget that she had been born a boy.

Noi, Karisma and I sat in Tony's booth for the rest of the night. Eventually Karisma rounded up her entourage and security guards and made her exit, bowing very traditionally to me. Since she was a big star, I naturally bowed right back, making sure my head was lower and closer to the ground than hers.

Noi disappeared again before the end of the night. When the club finally closed he grabbed my arm and led me outside. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he leaned into me.

“We go to my place,” he said.

He saw me shake my head, no, even though I wanted to. Noi laughed at me, pulling harder. “Come on. No sex, just spending time together. First we go to Special K party at Tony's,” he said.

Noi and I huddled together to keep warm in the chilly, windy hours before dawn. We walked up the twisting, broken stone streets to the top of the hill, where Tony's apartment building rose like an expensive fortress above Itaewon. By the time we got there the party was in full swing. Tony, Moon, and some of the other young, good-looking boys that hung around at Q were there. Most of them had their shirts off. Some of them were dancing to the techno music that was playing, and some were sprawled out on the warm floor. I found a spot on the cushions and blankets next to them and spread out, enjoying the *ondol* heat. I watched the boys dancing in the center of the room, their bodies crisscrossed with laser pointers as if they were being sliced to pieces.

The music was loud but I could still hear the chattering of voices in Korean, most of it going over my head. I dozed off for a while. When I woke up I saw that everyone had gathered around one spot like shoppers huddled around a window display. Moon was at the center of them, about to dole out the Special K, which he was still cutting up. They looked like dogs begging, all of them crowded around, perfectly still, their eyes filled with longing.

Noi was lying on his stomach on the floor, leaning up on one outstretched arm, his other draped over the shoulder of a cute young boy whose name I didn't know. Noi was one of those people who looked young and beautiful no matter how many fucked up things he did to his body, no matter how many drugs he took or how many nights he didn't get any sleep. It was his gift, maybe his curse. He would look this way far longer than he probably deserved. The curve of his bare torso leaning up, his head poised, beautiful as poetry. He was waiting patiently, serenely, for his turn, but something in his eyes barely concealed how desperate he was for the next hit.

As soon as we got to Noi's place he started taking his clothes off. He was wearing sexy underwear with no back, like a designer jock strap. I stood transfixed as he slipped out of his pants, glided into the bathroom and started running steaming water into the bathtub, which was one of the many luxuries I didn't have in my apartment.

He sat on the edge of the bathtub and dipped his toes into it, testing its temperature. He didn't say anything, just smiled and looked up at me, as if we had been lovers for years and were enjoying a weekend together at a spa. When the tub was full he slipped out of his underwear and stepped in, wincing as he lowered himself into the hot water.

"Join me," he said.

I stripped down, tossing my clothes on the floor. I stood there, naked for a minute, before I stepped into the bathtub with him, letting him see me, making sure I turned and flexed a little, but still looked natural, as if I were posing for a photo shoot. Noi looked at me as if he were looking through me, seeing everything there was to know about me. He smiled again and pulled me by the hand into the tub behind him. We sat and soaked in the warm water, relaxing and letting the night catch up with us so we could wind down enough to sleep.

Noi handed me a sponge and a bottle of expensive bath gel from Japan and asked me to scrub his back. He played with a yellow rubber duck in the water in front of him, bouncing it off his knees, back and forth. He had the most beautiful knees I had ever seen.

“Karisma like you,” he said, leaning back into me and letting me wrap my arms around him.

“I liked her too.” I said. “I like you more though. I wish you didn’t have a boyfriend.”

“Tom and I,” he said quietly, “More like friends now. No more romance.”

I didn’t believe him, and he knew that, but he also knew I wanted to.

“Karisma like the way you dance. Tony tell her you are professional dancer.”

“Was.”

“She want to hire you. She need one more dancer.”

“I already have a job at the *hagwon*.”

“Have time. Can rehearse at night, and on weekend.”

After we had soaked and steamed and gotten really sleepy, Noi let the bathwater drain out and we stood up to rinse off in the shower. The sun had risen. Through the bathroom window I could see a sweeping panorama of rooftops and snow-capped mountains and the skyscrapers of Seoul scattered around us. Another luxury since I lived on the first floor of a dimly lit apartment that was boxed in on all sides by other buildings.

I took my time drying off, enjoying the view, sampling the different creams and lotions he had in his bathroom, taking the time to spray a few of his colognes into the air before returning them to the shelf where they lined up like miniature sculptures. Not one of the bottles had a speck of dust on it and I knew they must have a cleaning lady who came daily.

I went into the bedroom to join him. He was already lying on the bed on his back, wearing silk boxers and a sleeping mask, with the Air Canada logo mapleleaved across it. A reminder of his boyfriend who he said was not his boyfriend anymore. The sunlight was streaming in, diffused and warmed by the gauzy white curtains. It made him look as luminous as an angel, so lovely that I had to believe he was as radiant on the inside as he was on the outside. I crawled over the bed, planted one firm kiss on his kneecap and then lay down next to him. I was wearing boxers too, something we had in common. Nothing to build a life together on but it felt important and it all made sense to me.

In class Min Ju said, “Teacher, you look tired.”

“I’m taking Korean classes in the morning.”

“What have you learned so far?” asked Min Ju, folding her hands into a shape that looked like it would make a shadow puppet if you cast a spotlight on it.

“More than I knew when I first got here. I’m trying to study Korean as hard as you study English. That’s probably why I look tired.” I said.

“Are you sure that’s all you’re doing that’s making you tired?”

Kang and some of the other older students looked up from their papers and made wide-eyed faces, trying not to laugh.

“Min Ju, get back to work.” I said.

“But Teacher, I’m already finished.”

I looked down at my desk, continued entering grades from their quizzes into my gradebook.

“Check it again,” I said. “Make sure you didn’t make any mistakes.”

I was lying in my narrow single bed, in my tiny room that was always dark and looked like a monk's cell. All I could think about was how much I wanted Noi to be lying next to me, how much I wanted to hold him in my arms and pretend he was mine. He didn't feel like part of the same world. I couldn't imagine him in my cramped apartment with my sloppy roommate, living in perpetual, shadowy gloom. He was some glittering creature that inhabited a distant realm of luxury brands and stage lighting. Maybe I was naïve to think that I was the only guy he had ever taken to his place while his boyfriend was out of town.

Noi called to invite me to dinner with Karisma and a few of their friends. He said they were in Apkujong, not far from me, so I walked through the crowded streets to join them, making sure to tie my scarf just right and pull my hat on at a stylish angle. By the time I showed up at the restaurant they were already there, and there was a growing crowd of people outside taking pictures.

Inside, Noi and Karisma were sitting with Tony and some other people I recognized from the VIP skybox at the club. They smiled and bowed slightly when I joined them at their table. Tony stood up and shook my hand, making room so that I could sit between him and Noi.

The restaurant was an upscale take on the traditional Korean barbeque restaurant. Fresh strips of *kalbi* were spread out over a grill that was built into the table, fizzling loudly when the server turned them over with chopsticks. Our server was wearing a traditional *hanbok*, and constantly moved back and forth from our table to the kitchen, bearing trays full of tiny bowls of *kimchi* and sliced radishes and potatoes.

Noi pulled a few strips of *kalbi* off the grill when it was finished and set it down on my plate. After every few bites I took he fed me a piece of his own. This was what you did for your husband back in the day in Korea, he told me. Or if you were a *kisaeng*, a traditional geisha-style Korean companion, this was what you did for your patron. Noi fed me a piece of *kalbi* with his chopsticks then wiped the corner of my mouth with his napkin, lowering his head, smiling up at me, shyly.

Karisma was the consummate professional that evening. She was pleasant and gracious when her fans approached her or when they said, “We love you,” as they walked by our table. She posed for pictures after the meal was over. She even pulled me into the frame with her. I understood enough Korean by then to figure out that she was talking about me being one of her dancers. That’s when I knew the job offer was for real. I turned to make sure my good side caught the light as the flashes pulsed like fireworks on the back of my retina.

Karisma’s manager was Tony. It seemed everyone I met at Q was related somehow. Tony was the one who called me and arranged a time for us to meet at a small dance studio in Itaewon. At our first rehearsal, I met the choreographer. He looked young enough to be one of my students. He was Moon’s roommate. The other dancer Karisma had hired was Moon himself. I never imagined him having a job. He seemed too flighty and capricious. I always just thought of him as the slutty boy at the bar trying to pull my attention away from Noi.

We met late at night, after I finished teaching my advanced class. Most nights it was just Moon and me going through the routines with the choreographer. They argued a

lot over the moves, most of it going over my head. I tried to give them some input, to inject a little flavor into the routine, but they weren't feeling it, so I mostly kept quiet and followed along. Sometimes Karisma joined us, but she was doing more lip-synching than dancing, so it didn't take her long to get it down. Moon and I were the ones that danced through the choruses and did all the showy, acrobatic moves.

Moon was in a hurry to leave after we finished rehearsing and I had to get back to my place in Apkujong to get some sleep before teaching the next day. It was a good thing I only saw him at rehearsal because I could tell the boy was nothing but trouble, and drama was one thing I did not need.

The first night I performed with Karisma I was exhausted. It was a cold, wintry night and Q was packed. I had been busy all week grading papers at school, busy with last minute dress rehearsals. I remembered that feeling, living on pins and needles, running on fumes. The days and hours leading up to a performance filled with nerves and light-headedness and bouts of nausea, not eating much so my abs could look tight, living on caffeine and adrenaline.

There were so many people in the club, breathing heavily in the build up of energy, that condensation started to form on the walls, making them look as if they were sweating. The moisture built up on the ceiling and formed liquid stalactites that dripped steadily on the crowd below like an indoor rain shower.

Even though Karisma sang K-pop club music, Moon and I wore hip hop style clothes, or at least what a Korean stylist thought was hip hop; lots of baggy pants and hoodies and bandanas. I had to put in blue contacts before the performance. My eyes

were already blue, but the stylist wanted them really blue for tonight; luminescent, striking, cornflower blue. Moon had his hair freshly bleached and spiked and wore the same baggy pants as I did. He wore a hoodie with the front unzipped to expose his oiled chest and abs.

Karisma was radiant. A real star. A wonder how she could recover from the ordeal of a full cut and paste operation, years of hormone treatment, and the psychological minefield of transitioning genders in Korea, and emerge as this fresh, brilliant butterfly. Dakota and the boys and our buddies from the gym, Seung and Jin, had all come to see her. Even though she was dating a super hot Brazilian soccer player, the guys came with gifts, flowers wrapped in cellophane, or tiny stuffed bears with hearts on them, hoping for a chance to meet her after the show.

As the music started, Karisma stayed behind the curtains while Moon and I made the first entrance, sliding into the beat, moving in perfect unison to the routine, slowly at first, easing into it. The lights were dim, just barely picking up our movements. Then, just as the first lyrics were about to kick in, opening with a high-pitched wailing like a 70s disco diva, the lights flared up like an explosion and Karisma made her entrance, dummy microphone and mouthpiece attached to her head, her long, shiny hair adorned with tiny silver butterfly clips and splashes of glitter.

The crowd went crazy for her. Security guards had to hold back the first row. Q was one of the biggest clubs in Itaewon, but it still wasn't as large as a normal concert venue, so we were in close quarters. Moon and I had to pull back on some of the acrobatic moves near the edge of the stage. The crowd was leaning in and reaching their arms out, as if they were trying to summon Karisma closer to them. We made do with

the space we had. We didn't execute every move perfectly, but by the time the three song set wrapped up and we landed in our strong, warrior-like final poses, statue-still except for the heaving of our chests, we knew we had nailed it. That was when I knew I couldn't give this up. This was my second chance.

After the show, when we had changed out of our costumes, people crowded around us at the bar and bought us drinks. They tried to get our attention and asked us to pose for pictures with them. I spent the rest of the night drinking and dancing and spending a ton of money, feeling like king shit on the scene. Lots of people recognized me after the performance. I was thinking to myself, I am going to be remembered. I have left footsteps. I matter. I exist.

Dakota found me and clanked his bottle against mine. He wrapped me in a bear hug and kissed my ear. His breath made me wince. "Bro, you gotta hook me up with Karisma. I don't care if she used be a dude. I wanna fuck her so bad, man."

Noi grabbed my hand and pulled me away, making a quick bow of apology to Dakota. "Sorry, man, got to run," I said. Noi laced his fingers through mine and led me out the door. We walked hand in hand up the hill back to his apartment. It was icy cold and there was a dusting of snow on the ground.

Back at his place he drew a bath for us again. We sat in the tub for a long time. Noi even started dozing off. We got out and dried each other off with plush, hotel-style towels. I put on my boxers and looked out the wide windows for a long time, losing track of time while Noi went into the bedroom. The sky was still mostly dark. Stars bled through the glow of neon haze that hung above the city.

Noi was lying in the bed, wearing his sleep mask and nothing else. No boxers this time, just naked, like an angel resting on a cloud. He lifted his mask from his eyes and smiled at me. He motioned for me with one finger to come closer. Then he pointed at my boxers and told me to take them off. I obeyed, instantly hard, then I leaned into him and he gave me the sweetest, most delicious kiss I can remember.

He grabbed a bottle of lube from the nightstand and rubbed it onto me. It was alarming, the feel of it, chilly on my hot skin. Then he found a condom in one of the drawers and put it on me. I was thinking that if a married couple had condoms it meant one of them was fucking around, or both of them. Or maybe they had threesomes. For a second I didn't feel so special anymore. But then Noi pulled me toward him. His legs pressed hard into my shoulders. I felt myself slide over his smooth body, felt the resistance, and then, the rush, the feeling of being on another planet, the lightheadedness of Jupiter's moons. He writhed away slightly and then let out a sigh and rose up to join me. I knew then more than ever that I felt something I thought was love for him. I was connected to him.

Min Ju was back to her sullen ways in my advanced class on Friday. She refused to do her work. Instead, she stared out the window at the flickering Samsung sign that needed repair.

“Are your mother and I going to have to have another talk when she comes to pick you up tonight, Min Ju?”

“She's at my uncle's in New Jersey.”

“Then who's coming to get you?”

Min Ju ignored me. I didn't have time to get her on task because I needed to wrap up a few minutes early. I had a performance at 11PM and that was already cutting it close. I didn't have time to go home and change so I had brought what I needed with me to the *hagwon* in an Adidas duffel bag: a zip-up hoodie, tight silver pants, even a canister of body glitter in case the forgetful stylist dropped the ball again.

"That's it for tonight, class. See you Monday."

The students cheered and ran out, elated to have ten extra minutes in their overstructured lives. Min Ju sat slumped in her chair as I left the room.

"Turn the lights off when you leave, Min Ju."

I rushed to the elevator and descended to the street, still cramming textbooks into my bag. The canister of glitter fell out and clattered to the floor. I stuffed it back in as I rushed to Daechi Metro station to catch the next train to Itaewon. I stopped at the top of the massive flight of stairs that led to the underground and slipped out of my work shoes, trading them out for a pair of sneakers, so I could make better time. I had stepped in glitter in the elevator and left a sparkly trail of footprints all the way from the *hagwon* to the station.

I rushed into Q expecting to have to fight through a crowd. But it was dead. Tony wasn't there, and the skybox VIP section was closed for the night.

"Show's been cancelled," said Jae. He was leaning against the bar, reading a gossip magazine about Korean celebrities. "Business is slow lately."

As I was leaving the bar, I ran into Moon.

"Anthony, I need your help."

He said he was fighting with his roommates and needed a place to stay for the night. He was shivering, carrying a backpack that looked like it held everything he owned. I was taught to help people when they are in need, so I told him fine, just no sex. Moon looked miserable so I put my arm around him and he leaned his head against my shoulder. Flashes from the other side of the street caught my attention. A girl in a hoodie with a cap pulled low over her eyes was watching us through the lens of a camera, snapping photos. I flagged down a cab and we headed back to my apartment.

Moon asked if he could use the shower. When he came out, my towel wrapped around his tiny waist, he looked fresh as someone just hatched from an egg, none of the usual black eyeliner and over-gelled hair. He slipped into a pair of boxer briefs he snatched from his backpack and got into bed with me. He fell naturally into my arms and I held him and breathed in his clean smell as I fell asleep. His body fit nicely with mine. I suppose that was important.

I woke up and showered. On the way back to my room I tripped on Dakota's shoes, which were lying haphazardly on the floor in the middle of the kitchen, not right in front of the door with all the others. I could hear Dakota's wet, buzz saw snores through his closed bedroom door.

I sat at the foot of my bed and watched Moon sleep for a long time. He was lying on his stomach, his ass curved in front of me, making me ache. It was enough to make me believe I was happy.

Eventually Moon woke up and looked around, disoriented. When he got his bearings he rushed to get his things together and told me he had to run. He was still

putting on his shoes when I heard a knock at the door. I opened it without thinking, not even looking out the peephole first. Noi was on the landing, looking out of place. I didn't know how he'd found me, or what he was doing in my part of town. When he saw Moon, he was furious.

“What he doing here?”

“He needed my help.”

Moon had his head down, like a child who was about to be punished.

Noi sighed, and said, “And I come here because I need your help, too.”

He turned and hurried out of the entryway and back out onto the street. I ran after him in my bare feet, wearing nothing but boxers. It was freezing outside. The wind was like a wall I couldn't cross, whipping across the open entryway to my building.

“Noi, wait! What do you need?”

But it was too late. Noi was getting away from me. Moon ran past me and caught up with him, his overstuffed backpack bouncing on his back. Noi and Moon started bickering with each other as they walked together down the street, finally turning a corner and disappearing from my sight.

I went with Dakota to L.A. Bar, planning to ditch him later and head up to Q to find Noi. Christian waved me over. It was the first time I had ever seen him not smiling.

“Anthony, I wouldn't go up the hill tonight. I hear some bad shit has been going down over there.”

I nodded, thanked him for telling me, and told him that I would listen to his advice. But he knew I was lying. He looked like he was ready to jump over the bar to

stop me. He scanned the crowd for Dakota but couldn't find him. I turned around and rushed out.

Q was almost empty. A few shaved-headed German tourists wandered in but didn't stay long. Some Korean boys stood near the bar, moving half-heartedly to the loud music. The air was clear and free of smoke for once, not hazy and distorted. The loud music felt out of place, like air sirens in an abandoned warehouse, obnoxious and insistent, driving everyone out.

I waited for hours in the anemic atmosphere of the club. I was waiting for Noi to come find me, but he never did. After the night had dragged on into the early morning, I decided to head back home to Apkujong. On the way out the door I ran into Tony, smoking a cigarette and scowling, for once not the constantly jovial uncle. He looked surprised to see me.

“Anthony, wait. I just need to drop something off.”

He entered the club for less than a minute, then came out and hooked his arm into mine, leading me down the hill to an all night café. In the stark, fluorescent light Tony looked much older. He chain-smoked and kept his eyes down.

“Where's Noi?” I asked.

“No one told you yet?” Tony sipped his tea and exhaled like a drowned man at the bottom of the sea.

“Noi's in jail.” Tony said. “It was a sting operation. The police are going after drug suppliers.”

“I didn't know Noi was dealing drugs,” I said.

“He wasn’t,” said Tony. “But he’s the owner of a nightclub where there has been suspicious activity, and they needed to make an example of someone.”

The rest of the week I did just enough work in class to not get fired. I was testy with my students when they asked questions or got too far off task. I taught the book and nothing else, no small group work, no class discussions or special projects with extra grading required. I ran the class the way traditional Korean school was run. The teacher lectures, you listen. Strict and uniform.

I insisted the students hand me their papers with both hands, keeping their heads respectfully down. Min Ju finally spoke up on Friday evening, during the last class of the week.

“Teacher,” she said. “Why are you being so hard on us?”

“I think I’m probably easier on you than the rest of your teachers.”

“But it’s not like you’re one of our real teachers. It’s not like this is real school,” said Min Ju.

I felt a flash of anger so strong it made me want to haul her out of there myself, hook my elbows under her arms and toss her out like a passed out drunk. I inhaled and counted backwards from five. Five, four, three, two, one...

“Class, you can thank Min Ju for your extra assignment. You are going to answer the questions at the end of the chapter, write your responses, and hand them in to me before you leave.”

The students gave me pained expressions that almost made me feel bad for them. Except Min Ju. She closed her book and calmly folded her hands.

“Min Ju, this assignment is for the entire class, including you,” I said.

“I’m finished already, Teacher.” She smiled sweetly.

I sat at my desk and drummed my fingernails across the glass.

“Fine. Your speed defies logic, but bring it up and let’s have a look.”

Min Ju brought a Hello Kitty folder to my desk, opened it, and presented it to me with both hands, bowing. She stood there, waiting, while I opened it. Inside was a grainy, pixilated picture of me in Itaewon, holding Moon’s head to my chest, stroking his bleached hair. I closed the folder quickly before anyone else could see it. Min Ju was peering up at me, smirking.

“Impressive work, Min Ju. You get an A,” I said.

She lifted her head and smiled.

“You can sit down now, Min Ju.”

The next day I took the long series of subway trains and no frills buses to the prison where Noi was being kept. When I arrived it took me some time to find the right path to the visitor’s center in the jail since the signs were in Korean and I wasn’t familiar with a lot of the terms.

I expected the guard to be put off by my foreign passport, but he proceeded routinely, asking me in very slow, clearly enunciated Korean, punctuated with emphatic hand gestures, to empty my bag out onto a table, one item at a time. I laid out warm shirts and sweat pants, scarves, hats, gloves, and two thick, wool blankets. Tony had told me the prison didn’t provide anything for the inmates, and that Noi was freezing since there was no heat in the cell and no one had brought him any warm clothes to wear. The

prison didn't even provide him with a blanket, and Noi's family was too ashamed to come see him.

The guard inspected my items carefully, lifting them one by one with rubber-gloved hands and then tossing them haphazardly into a pile. He stood at attention when he was done and I rushed to put everything back into my bag. It barely fit now that it wasn't neatly folded and packed.

The visitors room was not one of those rooms with a plexiglass partition and booths with phones to talk to the inmates like you see on TV. It was just a regular room with tables and chairs and guards posted along the walls and near the doors. I found Noi easily. Stripped down, out of his put-together designer looks, wearing nothing but plain prison clothes, he still stood out. As I approached the table, Noi looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes. He was sitting with Tom, the only other foreigner there besides me. I offered my hand to Tom. He ignored it.

“Anthony, right?” he said, shaking his head. “Why did you come here?”

“I heard Noi was all alone.”

“He's got me,” said Tom.

I placed my bag on the table.

“I already brought him some warm clothes,” said Tom.

“Just take them anyway. Please.”

Tom hesitated, but then he relaxed, his eyes softening. He motioned to the empty chair and I sat down.

“Look Anthony, I appreciate your coming all the way here to see Noi. I really do. I should be mad at you, but I'm not for some reason.”

I didn't know what to say after that. Neither did Tom. I tried to look at Noi but it broke my heart to look at him so I just looked down at the table and felt the blood pound behind my ears.

Tom leaned in close to me and said in a low voice, "They're going to be looking for you, for questioning," he said. "Don't talk to anyone without contacting your embassy first."

"Is it that bad?" I asked.

"The police are taking in anyone associated with the bar. If I were you I would get out of town."

"Karisma is counting on me."

"Karisma can find someone else. She told Noi she wants someone less hip hop anyway."

I looked at Noi but he was shut down now. Tom was standing up as the guards moved closer and told us to wrap it up. I got one last look at Noi, sitting like a broken doll in his chair. Tom grabbed my shoulder and said, "Hip hop is dead, Anthony."

Sue Kim came to pick up Min Ju on the last day I worked at the *hagwon*. She brought me a round tin full of cookies with a card attached. The students were confused when I told them I had to leave in the middle of the year. But none of them pressed me for details, except Min Ju.

"Why do you have to leave now, Teacher?"

Sue gave her daughter a stern look and smiled at me apologetically.

"Min Ju, you must not ask these sorts of questions."

“But can’t you just wait till the end of the year? Then we can throw you a party.”

Sue shushed her daughter and pulled her close to her. Min Ju was almost as tall as her mother, almost as tall as me.

That night I packed what was left of my belongings and prepared for my flight in the morning. It didn’t take long since I had given so many of my clothes away to Noi. Dakota invited me out to celebrate my departure. But I wasn’t much in the mood to celebrate so I turned him down and he went out to meet Seung and Jin without me. I had already fallen asleep when I heard a loud knocking at the door. I thought maybe Dakota had forgotten his keys. I made my way to the door and looked out the peephole and saw Moon in the dim hallway lighting. When I opened the door he almost fell in.

“Anthony.” He was crying. He looked terrible, like he had been outside for days. I brought him in and we sat at the kitchen table eating ramen soup with chopsticks and spoons. He said he was on the run from the police crackdown so I told him he could stay for the night but had to leave when I did in the morning.

Moon showered and brushed his teeth with Dakota’s toothbrush and then got into bed with me. I held him close and before I knew it he was kissing me and then he was sitting on top of me, grinding me into him. I turned the radio next to the bed up louder to drown out the noise of Moon’s moans in case Dakota came home. One of Karisma’s new singles was playing. I knew the routine inside and out but would never get to perform it on stage with her again.

I did doze off for a while and so did Moon. Our breathing formed clouds of condensation which gathered in sweat-like beads on the walls and ceiling. Soon it began

to drip onto the floor, bathing the room in a light shower. Then it started pouring rain, a waterfall which roared in my ears yet somehow acted as a lullaby. The waters rose and soon we were underwater but Moon and I were both undisturbed. As I fell asleep I felt his body lying very still, wrapped in my arms. He wasn't my first choice, but we fit together almost perfectly.

Dear Mr. Torres,

I cannot begin to tell you how much your teaching has meant to Min Ju. She tells me often that you are the best teacher she has ever had and she will never forget you. Please enjoy these cookies and have a safe flight home.

Warm regards,

Sue Kim

The Water Sun

The rain

goddess brought

flood after 676 years

ocean waters enclosed land

on all four sides and rose into the sky

Chalchiútlícue made them crash down obliterate

life on earth people adapted turned into fish and whales

the flood lasted 52 years even the mountains were swept away

Phase 7: Pyramid of the Sun

Joseph Torres – Las Vegas, Nevada

*El que más importa y más sufre. Tiene la fuerza de los soldados de antigüedad,
pero su corazón teme utilizarlo.*

The casino was full of girls in tight dresses with smoky eyes, legs freshly waxed and bronzed and shimmering with expensive creams and youth. They sailed through the crowd in small flotillas of sweet-smelling perfume and bold smiles. The guys circled them like sharks, with their hair slicked and spiked and their eyes hungry for more. In the middle of this sea of non-stop party, at the center of all the action, was a cluster of blackjack tables arranged in a planet-shaped circle. It pulled the crowd in with a force like gravity, strong as the moon tugging at the tides. I was there waiting for them, standing straight and tall, with my hands clasped behind my back in a gesture like a prayer.

The pole dancers were writhing just above us on their raised platforms, glimmering in the spotlights and slithering back and forth across the stage. They were wearing go-go boots and black bikinis, men's white shirts tied into a knot over their belly-rings, bowler hats set at an angle on their heads. Together they were all moving limbs and jiggling booties and flirty smiles. The group of guys who came to play at my table didn't know where to look. Their eyes danced from one girl to the other. But mine always went to Jillian, with her pageboy haircut under her hat and the gentle, uppercase S-shape of her lower back when she grabbed the pole and leaned back, her mischievous smile, the way she made you feel she was singling you out of the crowd and looking only at you.

For the rest of the night I could only steal a second or two at a time to watch Jillian. I was busy pumping cards, sending out hand after hand, the cards shooting like rockets from my fingertips. I cheered along with the players when they won, gave them high fives and pounded knuckles with them and shared their excitement, or at least made a good enough show of it. Then I grimaced and sighed and shrugged when they lost. The group at my table was the usual weekend crowd, young, drunk, spoiled kids from Orange County. But they were in good spirits and didn't give a fuck if they won or lost. They were just there to have a good time, and that's what I showed them. I made the same old off-color jokes I've been using for years now. I teased them whenever I pulled a five or six card hand and told them I had twenty one when I had actually busted, sizing into their chips with a crooked smile, watching their faces go from shock, to disbelief, to joy when they realized they had won after all. They were a handful for sure, loud and needy, but good tippers, like most of our customers, and determined to have fun whatever the cost.

As the night wore on, some of the guys headed off to the club and some ran out of cash for the night and called it quits. They were replaced by more of the same, the late night, weekend, party crowd. Each new wave was more serious than the one before about winning. They focused on their cards as if trying to magically change the numbers through force of will alone. They cut their checks into neat stacks and lined them up to count and recount them. These were the players who thought they were actually in for a fight against the casino, praying and whispering to themselves, come on, one good run, just one good run is all I need. They got desperate toward the end of the night, each one convinced they would be the one to beat the odds, to rise from the crowd and come through the battle victorious.

But this was not a battle. It was not a mind game. It was not a test of will or endurance or a race to the finish. It wasn't even an unfair fight. This was a slaughter. It was certain as fate. Those of us on the other side of the table already knew how this would end. Most of the players knew too, and the ones that didn't, well, they didn't seem all that concerned.

In a way it was like one of the bullfights I saw when I was living in Mexico. The girl I was dating then, a vegetarian with kohl-smudged eyes named Lola, refused to go with me. She got upset every time I walked out the door with two tickets to the *corrida* tucked neatly into the pocket of my jacket, one for me, one for her, unused. She told me how unfair it was, how the poor bull didn't stand a chance. But what Lola didn't understand is that a bullfight is not really a fight either. It's more like a play, some sort of choreographed routine, a script being followed, open for interpretation by the actors,

but always ending the same exact way, the picadors sticking the bull in the shoulders, the matador piercing its heart.

I lived for years in a tiny apartment on the east side of Las Vegas. My buddies at work chided me about living in the hood, said I was just asking for trouble. But I was trying to save money and buy my own place someday, something I could afford on my own, where I wouldn't have to worry about flaky roommates or some gold digger trying to bleed me dry.

Driving into work I followed Flamingo toward the Strip into the sunset, the outlines of the high rise buildings that were under construction pasted against the sky up ahead, as if they were leading me somewhere higher and ethereal where everything was clean lines and minimal and organized, like a high end, modern hotel suite. Every new building in Las Vegas promised to be the next phase of shimmering development in those days. As the years went by and the economy started to tank and property values began to creep downhill, the skyscrapers got scaled back and ended up modest, sad-looking ten story buildings with ugly scaffoldings hugging their sides like the exoskeletons of enormous insects.

When I got home from work in the early morning, dog-ass tired, with the unwelcome sun just starting to peek above the smoggy horizon, I squinted and shielded my eyes like a vampire caught outside his coffin at dawn. Finding street parking was a bitch in my neighborhood, and I had to walk fast to my apartment to avoid the sketchy guys who hit me up for change if I got careless and made eye contact. Reeking of cigarette smoke and still vibrating with loud music and the din of the crowd and the car

alarms and noisy arguments of my neighbors, I showered as soon as I got home just to get the stink of the casino off me before I crawled into bed and passed out, never quite ready to face the whole routine all over again the next day.

My best friend Jarrell came to pick me up on Wednesday night. He texted me first to tell me what time he would be there so I could come out to meet him. Jarrell didn't trust leaving his car for too long in my neighborhood at night so he refused to park. Most of the full time dealers had Wednesday and Thursday nights off so we ended up hanging out together when we were off the clock too, our own close knit tribe, the A-list dealers of Vegas, working in one of the best joints in town. Where we worked you had to nail your audition, have the right look, the right attitude. It was a self-selecting club of cool.

We met up with our buddies Armando and Tommy at the club. Jarrell shelled out for bottle service and got us a table in the VIP section. He never let any of us pay, just made a sour face when we offered him cash and waved his hand as if he were swatting away a pesky fly. He took care of everyone, overtipping the valet, the barback, even the bathroom attendant. Tommy slipped cash to the waitress every time Jarrell wasn't looking. I took care of the bartender the same way. Armando just said he was broke with no trace of shame. Jarrell always carried his ass though, he prettied much carried all our asses.

"I'm doing alright," said Jarrell, when I tried to object. "What's the point of making all the money we make if I don't have anyone to spend it on? That's what it's for, good times with my buddies and meeting girls and big balling at the club."

Jarrell met lots of girls but he didn't hang onto them for very long. The ones that weren't good enough for him got weeded out after the first hook up. The ones that were too good for him didn't like the way he gambled and drank and blew his money at the club taking his boys out.

Tommy and Armando scoped out some corn-fed girls from Omaha with short denim skirts and bleached hair and brought them to our table. They were in Vegas for a bachelorette party. They raised their glasses and clanked them together so hard they almost broke. Then they put their hands in the air and screamed.

“Woooooooooooo.”

“Is it dark and good looking in here tonight or is it just me?” said Jarrell. He ordered another bottle of Belvedere. Our cocktail server made a show of pouring drinks for the girls, winking at Jarrell.

“Ladies, let me show you how the locals roll here in Sin City,” said Jarrell.

He peeled a crisp hundred dollar bill from his bankroll and presented it to our server. She made an affected curtsy to him and the girls all nodded appreciatively, as if they were memorizing this lesson in etiquette. Our server was beautiful enough to be on the cover of a magazine in any other town in America but here in Vegas she was just another nightclub employee, catering to the whims of tourists. She whisked away our dirty glasses as soon as they were empty. When she came back she had a full tray of drinks for the girls. She kneeled next to Jarrell and set them down on the table. “These are on the house, sweetie,” she said, brushing back a stray hair from where it had fallen out of her slick ponytail.

One of the Omaha girls screamed, “Woooooo. We love you. You’re our best waitress ever. And you’re so beautiful.” Our server said “Thank you,” and smiled, a radiant, well-rehearsed smile, rubbing Jarrell’s shoulder as she stood up and turned to walk away.

“Wait,” the Omaha girl said. Our server stopped and graciously accepted the five and ten dollar bills the girls produced from their clutch purses.

“Thank you so much ladies. Let me know if I can get you anything else.”

One of the girls went out to the dance floor with Armando and another started making out with Tommy in the corner of the booth. The rest of them swooned over Jarrell, competing for his attention with exaggerated giggles and lips moistened with quick flicks of the tongue to make them shiny and more supple-looking. They pretty much ignored me. I wasn’t as handsome as Jarrell. Though to be fair, none of us were. And I had zero game. Plus, I was too pale and too skinny for Vegas. Girls here didn’t understand the artsy type. They only understood the roid monkey at the pool or the baller at the club. The one girl I tried to talk to, who seemed to like me and who laughed at my corny jokes, shied away from me when I tried to put my arm around her shoulder.

“Sorry if that’s too forward,” I said.

“No, it’s not that,” she said. “It’s just that, for some reason I figured you weren’t into girls. No offense.”

“Well I am into you, but I’ll take that as a compliment anyway. That’s more my brother’s style. He likes Asian dudes.”

“And that’s okay with you?” she asked.

I shrugged, why not, and knocked back a shot. She sipped her drink, didn't say anything, and turned her shoulder to her friends.

By the time we left the club it was early morning.

"My name's Kimberlee, just ask to be seated in my section next time," said our server as she cleared the table of empty glasses and pulpy wedges of lime.

"And you come by my table whenever you're ready to get lucky," said Jarrell with a wink that would have looked creepy on anyone else, but on him was suave.

Jarrell said he was fine to drive, even though he didn't seem fine, swerving from lane to lane on Flamingo and blowing through a red light at Koval. When we got to my house he rode his car right up onto the curb, getting me as close to my place as he could. He always waited till I got to my apartment and flashed the outside light at him, the same way you'd wait for a girl to get into her house before you leave when you drop her off.

Jarrell got serious as I was opening the car door.

"You really ought to think about moving to a safer neighborhood, little brother."

"I like it here Jarrell."

"How can you like it here?" he said, waving his hands around. "The hookers are knifing each other on the next block, and the pushers set up shop on the corner down there."

"But this block is okay. I've never had any real trouble here."

"Yeah, well you've been lucky."

On Thursday I rattled around my cramped apartment in my boxers and a natty robe I had bought at the market in Plaza Hidalgo in Coyoacán. I was agitated for some

reason, couldn't concentrate, couldn't meditate, didn't feel like going to the gym or to the yoga studio. I shuffled around like a crazy person, talking to myself and taking a shot of tequila from time to time, hoping to clear my head. I even thumbed through some old sketches that I thought I might turn into paintings someday. I still sketched and painted some when I had time, charcoals or acrylics usually, sometimes oils when I was feeling more ambitious. I worked from photos I had taken when I was living in Mexico, backpacking trips to Monte Albán and Chichen Itza, to the ruins of the Aztecs, the Mayas, the Toltecs and Olmecs. But lately nothing had come to me, and when I did manage a few scribbles and scratches on a canvas, it usually ended up coming out all wrong and I just added it to my growing stack of discarded projects.

I opened my worn copy of The Secret and let it open up to pages at random, thinking hard about finding some direction in my life, as if it were a divining rod leading me to the right advice. The first page I opened to was in the chapter on creating a vision board, which was supposed to be the place where you put up dream scenarios you wanted to see manifest in your life. You weren't supposed to worry about how though, you were just supposed to will it to manifest with all your heart and stand back and be dazzled by the results. I decided it was time to create my own.

First I needed something to use as my board. I flipped through a few of my discarded canvases, projects that had gone awry, half-finished, beyond salvageable. I settled on a sketch of the Pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacán that was going nowhere, all jagged lines and hatch marks. I kept a snapshot taped to the upper left-hand corner as my inspiration. In the photo the stone ziggurat stood stark and resonant against the cerulean sky, taffy white clouds spilling across it like sticky dreams from another planet. But in

the sketch everything was way off. Ominous triangles rained from an ocean of sky, flames burned through chasms in the ground. The perspective was skewed, the mood was absent. The feeling I had when I was standing at the far end of the Avenue of the Dead, snapping photos of the pyramid. It was fading into just an echo of whistling winds, the faint tinge of pollution from Mexico City dissipating into nothing but harmless atoms and molecules. That feeling of air and soul purified. It was distant now. That feeling of reclaimed innocence and hope that had sprung from me at the moment. It was the fuzzy edges of a dream that I was struggling to remember.

I just wanted a place to call home after all my time backpacking and wandering. I went through the stacks of magazines I had let accumulate in the milk crates I used for storage. I spread them out on the floor and started clipping the first things that caught my eye, glossy, full-page spreads of enormous stucco homes in the desert, with perfectly manicured rock landscaping and shiny luxury cars parked in the flagstone driveways. I pasted them up on the canvas, covering the top of the sketch. The edges of the Pyramid of the Sun that were still visible started to blur as I squinted my eyes. They went spectral as a ghost, dissolved into the wind and started to scatter like dust.

Before our shift on Friday night we had our weekly jam, a five-minute meeting that started before we were even on the clock, but which we were still required to attend. The shift boss, a former marine who sported a buzz cut, rattled off the concerts planned for the weekend and told us we were at one hundred percent occupancy again. He walked back and forth between the two lines of dealers on either side of the corridor, like a general inspecting the troops.

“Remember, above all, take care of our guests.” The shift boss kept his eyes down as he paced between us, inspecting the rows of black shoes lined up like dominoes, making sure they were polished.

“These people could go anywhere in the world to party, that’s how loaded and connected they are. Our clientele is recession-proof. But they choose to come here because this is where it all happens. In case you didn’t know it people, right now our property is at the absolute center of the party universe.”

The shift boss stopped in front of Jarrell, looked down at his scuffed shoes, looked up and raised his eyebrows. Jarrell flashed his bright, straight teeth, pulled a handkerchief from his pants pocket, licked it, and squatted down to spit shine his shoes. The shift boss shrugged and looked up in a why me gesture. Jarrell stood and saluted him while the rest of us laughed good-naturedly.

“Our players want a connection with us,” the shift boss went on, shaking his head. “They want to feel like the best time of their lives is right here, right now, every night of the week, every week of the year. And that’s what we are going to show them.”

A few of us cheered, slightly moved by the speech, ready to go out there and have fun with our players, laugh and joke and keep the cards moving and the ball spinning and the dice rolling. Mostly it was the newbies, those of us who had been there less than five years, which made us babies in a house filled with day-one career dealers. The old timers like Jarrell and the others just drifted out, started heading down the hallway that led to the casino. On weekends, the barbacks ran out of room to store the extra booze we needed for the pool parties and had to stack crates of liquor on wheeled dollies and line them up

on both sides of the hallway. We had to squeeze in between them as we walked through the corridor, marching out to the casino floor in single file, like soldiers on a mission.

Las Vegas. The center of the universe. The place where everything happened but nothing mattered. No consequences. No past, no future. Just now. Just here. Every night like the last night on the planet, the last night before the day the world came to an end. If these people had one night left to live, this is where they wanted to spend it. Nowhere else on Earth but here, and now.

I stood at my table getting ready for the nightly onslaught of players that would throng to my table soon after it opened, soon after I finished double checking the rack and spreading the cards, showing their fronts and backs to the cameras above. I shuffled the cards in a state of meditation, sending waves of gratitude to every person who walked through the doors of the casino, thankful for their willingness to wander knowingly into the slaughter, night after night, and still leave smiling.

It didn't take long for the players to start piling in, filling the tables, showering in cash and chips that would be gone by the end of the night. The casino started to hum with people beautiful enough to be in magazines. The boys dressed like young rockers, the girls like wannabe starlets. And some of them were real rockers, real starlets, blending in with the crowd. I never knew who was who until after they left. Our casino was the playground of rock stars and celebrities. When they came to Vegas, they went non-stop, 24/7. There was no last call and there never would be.

The money was falling from the sky. It flashed across my layout all night, numbers that didn't relate to anything in my own life. Throwing away thousands of

dollars on a whim was not even close to something I could do. I usually thought about the amounts of money that passed through my hands as much as a cashier or a bank teller did. My money I put away mostly, saved for a down payment on a house. I figured I could pay one off early if I worked hard enough, own it free and clear and then take some time off and get back on the road, travel to Mexico again, only this time with a home to come back to, without switching apartments and renegotiating leases and subleases and screwing around with hauling things back and forth from a stuffy storage unit that smelled like scorched urine and dying plants.

But that night something woke me up from my usual work routine. I'm not sure what exactly. Something biorhythmic, or astrological maybe. It might have been when I cashed in my tenth thousand-dollar buy in of the night. I counted out the chips and slid them out to the player with a perfunctory 'good luck' and a smile. I lined the bulging stack of twenties up over the slot of the drop box and tried to slide it in, smoothly and unconsciously, as I'd done so many times before. But instead of just whooshing down, out of sight and out of mind, the money got caught in the slot, like gambling indigestion, and resisted being swallowed up. I really had to push, because the bills inside had built up into such a dust bunny of cash that the box was already full, literally full, of money.

The amount of money I stuffed into those drop boxes every night was astronomical. Times all the nights I've worked over the years, times all the other monkeys doing my exact same job, times all the other casinos in all the other years since it all began. Money that could be used to feed orphans, or cure AIDS, or invent a car that runs on water.

The rest of the night I watched people burn through their money like pyromaniacs, like those boys in halfway houses who know how to strike a match to any surface and cause it to burst into flames. The guys that showed up at my table toward the end of my shift were pissed off, even before they started playing. They tossed their hundred dollar bills at me as if they wanted me to get them out of their way, as if I were clearing their dirty plates in a restaurant. They had already steeled their nerves by drinking all night and came to the table wearing their pent up frustration in front of them thick and gummy, a field of energy that sucked all the air from the room.

Earlier, they got dressed up, shaved, gelled their hair and rolled up the sleeves of their button-up shirts into neat cuffs. They headed out to the club determined to have a good time, to do everything they were not supposed to do at home in their regular, nine-to-five lives. By the time they got to my table they had already struck out with all the girls at the club and settled their tab for bottle service for the night.

All that money and time and energy. And still. No. Ass.

Most of the girls, pretty much all of them really, except for the hookers, disappeared before the sun came up, clutched each others' hands and wobbled along on spindly high heels, flashes of fuchsia and silk, leopard spots, bleached Barbie hair, California-girl Asian eyes. They gathered in clusters of twos and three and fours, scattering into taxis while the guys got left behind to pay the tab. That's when these guys showed up at my table with crisp green bills from the ATM. Ready to get on a roll and try to salvage the night and have a kick-ass story to tell their buddies back home. The time I struck out with every girl at the club but then got on an epic roll at the blackjack table.

But they lost it all that night, every one of them. No one knew when to stop. They clung like stubborn kids refusing to go to bed, their eyes painful with sleepiness, their heads pounding, their wallets hemorrhaging cash. The last one there was scowling, but he wasn't angry with me, just pissed off at what he thought was his own shitty luck. He tossed me his ID and asked for a marker, one thousand, which he lost in a few big hands before he slinked away from the table while I was fixing up my rack. Sometimes the high rollers asked for ten thousand, or twenty, or fifty, whatever their credit limit was. Gambling away the last of their money was their warm milk and cookies, their pacifier, their last call before being sent to bed. When the chips were gone, they were almost relieved, because then they could finally call it a night.

Jarrell and I sat in the break room eating breakfast just before the end of our shift.

"I almost got into it with a player again tonight, J.T."

"Dude, you've got to chill out," I said.

"Yeah, well this guy had it coming. When I was on stick he kept tapping me on the shoulder every time I passed the dice, telling me it was his turn to roll when it wasn't."

Jarrell was on dice a lot. I was on the double deck most nights, but we moved to whatever table we were sent to. The superstitious players imagined a master-planned net of intrigue behind which dealers were sent to which tables, but it was nothing more than who dealt the cleanest game on which table and luck of the draw. No scheming involved.

"So why didn't you just tell him to stop?" I said.

“I did. But this motherfucker wasn’t getting it. So I turned to him and said, ‘if you touch me again, I’m going to lay you out, right here, do you understand?’”

I finished the last bite of my scrambled eggs, chewed and talked with my mouth full.

“And what did he do?”

“He shut up,” said Jarrell. “Didn’t cause no problems after that.”

“You’ve been lucky,” I said. “Do that to the wrong person and it could mean your job.”

“They’d be doing me a damn favor if they fired me.”

“Dude, it’s not that bad,” I said. “You just have to speak their language. They’re drunk and out of their minds, they just want someone to pay attention to them. Just try to get along with them, get to know them a little.”

“Getting to know these punks too well,” said Jarrell, “Just makes things awkward when they start popping off at the mouth and you got to have their asses thrown out.”

I nodded at my empty plate to let Jarrell know I was going to get more to eat. I shoveled in as much free casino food as I could during our short breaks, drawing the attention of the chubby ladies I worked with who told me it wasn’t fair that I pigged out more than anyone and was still skinny and lanky.

I stood up and walked around the corner to the toaster oven. I fished in a plastic bag for a pre-sliced bagel then pulled it apart with my hands as surely and quickly as I ferreted chips into the rack every time a player lost a hand. It split cleanly down the pre-sliced middle into two halves, which I placed face-down on the industrial toaster oven and watched roll over the glowing orange grill below.

When I got back to the table, Maritza and some of the other bosses we were friendly with were sitting with Jarrell. On the casino floor we played it up for the customers and acted super deferential with the bosses. We answered yes sir and yes ma'am, making sure our drunk-ass players understood that the floor supervisors and pit bosses had authority. That way the players would be afraid to get out of line and talk too much shit to the dealer. What they didn't know was that we all palled around during breaks and sometimes on our days off too. We bitched about high maintenance players and every once in a while said something nice about a big tipper, someone who was a real George, or some MILF who was super hot. Maritza, who made it a point to let everyone know she had never been with a man, especially loved to point out any chick with hot titties in a slingback blouse or a super low-cut dress. The bosses had all been dealers at one time or another. We were all just part of the same subterranean landscape, virtually lateral rungs of a ladder that led nowhere.

Maritza was leaning into Jarrell, tapping his forearm with two fingers every time she listed a feature of the new house she was closing on.

"It's got a three-car garage, a humongous swimming pool, and travertine floors in all four bathrooms."

Jarrell nodded, squirming in his chair and checking his BlackBerry.

"Where'd you say the house is at again?"

"It's near the new Target."

"The one in the Southwest? Near Mountain's Edge?"

"The one where the new Home Depot is. I don't know which direction it is," said Maritza, laughing. "That way." She pointed to one of the walls in the windowless room.

Jarrell sighed, annoyed. He told me once he hated how women could never give you a goddamn street and cross street, didn't know their ass from their elbow enough to tell you which way was north.

“Just tell me the address,” he grumbled, punching the information into his BlackBerry to map it out. “How much you say they was going for again?” he asked.

On the way back down to the casino floor Jarrell and I passed by Jillian and two of the other pole dancers, dragging ass down the hall on their way to the break room after working their last set. They were wearing go-go boots and matching trench coats cinched at their waists. I kept my eyes on the ground, instantly struck shy and stupid whenever Jillian was around. The girls smiled at Jarrell as he greeted each of them by name and turned on his charm. They giggled and one of them opened her jacket and shook her hot, fake boobs at him, blocking my view of Jillian. After they passed by us I turned to try to look at Jillian just as she was craning her neck around. I faced forward again quickly, embarrassed and totally busted.

“I think she likes you, dawg,” said Jarrell.

I blushed. “She barely even says hello to me.”

“Shoot, she just shy like you.”

If only she would stop and talk to me one of these nights, I thought. I could tell her about my backpacking days, show her some of my sketches. It was the only shot a guy like me had with a girl like her. When I first saw Lola on the Metro in the Mexico City, she talked to me because she noticed the charcoal stains on my fingernails, different from the usual accumulation of grit from the *chilango* pollution. We were packed in

close as bundles of flower stems as we slowed to a stop at Coyoacán station. “You’re an artist,” she asked me, but it was more like a statement. We were both getting out. We went to the Casa Azul together, saw the room where Leon Trotsky slept in a single bed, like a monk, and wrote at a desk with a jar bursting with worn pencils and brushes of course hair.

“She’s way out of my league,” I said.

“I heard that,” said Jarrell, as we made our way back out into the crowd, back into the flash of lights and the blare of music, back to our tables to entertain the partiers for one final hour.

Wednesday I kicked it with my boys at the club, got way too drunk and spent the next day hung over as all hell, dicking around at home in my robe chugging Gatorade from the vending machine in the laundry room. I went back to The Secret and let the pages spread open at random. It opened to the section that had an anecdote about a man who wanted to find a nice girl to date. But he was sending the wrong signs to the universe. He had paintings of aloof girls hanging on his walls. He was advised to change them out paintings of slutty girls. Soon his luck changed, and he had more dates than he knew what to do with.

Maybe my 500 square foot, one-bedroom apartment was sending the wrong message to the universe. Maybe my single bed and my tiny closet that was already full and my one small bathroom were putting out the message that I wanted to be alone forever.

Later that night I paged through a copy of Vegas Weekly and found an ad for our casino's Party Pit, where the blackjack dealers wore lingerie and the pole dancers worked the stage above them and kept the crowd entertained. I cut Jillian out of the picture. She was posing on the stage, crossing her slim legs and tilting her bowler hat to the side. She was smiling her one-of-a-kind smile, shy, flirty, and trusting. I put her picture up on my vision board and every time I looked at it my eyes went straight to Jillian and I imagined she was smiling only at me.

When it got late and the only sounds in the neighborhood were distant sirens and the rattling wheels of shopping carts in the alleys, I got in front of my computer with Jillian's smile and her smoking hot body still swimming at the edges of my thoughts. I ended up jacking off watching online porn, nothing pervy, just good old, all-American, barely legal, girl-on-girl action. There was a loud thump on the windowpane. I looked over my shoulder and caught a flash of the faces of a few of the neighbor kids at the window, peeking through a crack in the blinds that maintenance still hadn't come by yet to fix. They pointed at me as if accusing me of a crime, eyes and mouths wide open. Then they turned and ran, scuttling through the dusty gravel outside, slapping the stucco walls with the palms of their hands and cackling like syphilitic crows. I was left staring at my own reflection, t-shirt pulled up over my neck, one hand wrapped around my junk, *in flagrante delicto*. My face was hot and flushed. All I wanted was a place to go where no one would bug me, where things would be silent and no noise would crowd the thoughts from my head.

I combed through the online real estate listings obsessively. Everyone else was buying houses and I could only hold out for so long. I had saved up almost enough to make a down payment and I figured it couldn't hurt just to look.

The prices of houses had doubled in the previous two years, and then, unexpectedly, they started to inch downward. By the time I started looking most of them had reduced their asking prices by twenty percent. And then everything froze and the fire sale was on and everyone I knew was snapping up the bargains left and right, shopping for houses to rent out or to renovate and flip. But me, I just wanted one, a place to call home, and that was it. Everyone said it wouldn't take long for the market to recover, and that the bargain prices wouldn't last. Every time I heard someone in the break room talking about buying a new house, I got knots in my stomach. I felt more and more anxious that I would miss my chance to nab the last affordable house in Vegas and would end up stuck in my crappy little apartment forever. I tried to picture myself at forty, at fifty, sitting in my car outside after coming home from work, waiting for some shoddy vagrant, or some group of raucous, gang-banging kids, to pass by so I could make it to my apartment without getting hassled or hit up for spare change.

I focused on the pictures of houses I had pasted on my vision board, imagined myself living in one, the feel of it, the smell of freshly-painted walls and clean, clear, quiet spaces. The largest one had a row of arches in a colonnade along the front patio, which reminded me of the picturesque, Moorish arches in front of the pastel-colored churches in the colonial capitals of Mexico. I used to go to those churches to burn candles and light incense and pray to a jumble of *santos* and virgins, painted in ochres and beiges and outlined in silver. In the flame-lit glow of their faces, I reached out to a

great, benevolent, giving universe where the good and the true were granted their heart's desire, and felt no trace of arrogance or shame for asking for abundance to materialize in my life, fully prepared to work for it.

I sat cross-legged in front of the vision board, as if it were an altar, ready to offer up the sacrifice I had made of years and years of hard work in the casino, cash it in for a hard-earned place to call home and hopefully someone like Jillian to share it with.

The woman at the sales office had coffee-stained teeth, but her jewelry looked expensive and her hair was well-maintained, with no roots showing. I decided then that if it got to that point, I could probably trust her.

“Just take a look around and let me know if you have any questions,” she said.

I took my time walking through all six model homes, starting at the end of the tour, with the highest priced, most luxe house on the Potemkin village street, and working my way down to the one that I considered somewhat affordable. The first one was big enough for an entire tribe to live in. It had a kitchen like the set of a cooking show on the Food Network, with stainless steel appliances, a walk-in freezer, and a pantry that was almost as big as my apartment. There was a family room bursting with model home fake plants, a maze of bedrooms and bathrooms, and a third floor that was one huge space filled with exercise machines. I could picture it as a massive, minimalist meditation room, or a studio large enough to hold all the canvases and paints I could ever hope to own. It even smelled good, like apples and cinnamon, and it was overloaded with light, filled from every angle with sunshine beaming through the wide, floor-to-ceiling windows. The views were pristine and unobstructed, purple mountains in the distance

and the endless expanse of vast blue sky over the desert. It was a breathtaking home, but I knew it was way more than I could afford.

The next four houses were progressively scaled-down versions of the first. By the time I got to the last one, I had trouble remembering which was which, even though I had taken enough pictures to nearly fill the memory card in my camera. The last house was a three bedroom, two and a half bath that was slightly cramped, but still a serious upgrade from my current place. The closet space was tight, the garage only had enough room for one car, and the driveway was too short. But the place was beautiful, even if it was on the smaller side, compared to the mansions I had just seen. The stucco walls were perfectly even. They didn't have dents and divets like mine. And the ceilings weren't low, depressing cottage cheese that crumbled like asbestos snow when my upstairs neighbors made the bed jump during their rough, noisy sex sessions. The flooring was rich bamboo that made just the right sound as I walked across it.

“Is it always this quiet out here?” I asked the saleswoman, when I returned to the office.

She walked me over to the schematic of the planned community, tapping her pen on the glass over one of the two empty streets.

“This is all we have left to build. After that, construction is done. We've limited the number of houses here so it will stay a nice, quiet neighborhood, even when the last twenty homes are completed.”

She told me she only had two lots available at the list price and they were going fast. I knew she was pressing me to make a decision. The window was open behind her. It was one of those perfect, dry, breezy days in Vegas. I felt like I could almost drink the

clear sunshine with my breath and feel brand new. I did some quick calculations in my head, eyeing the schematic, figuring angles and watching the numbers shuffle and spin in my mind like a roulette wheel. The two lots she had available would have some of the best views in the entire city. The best deal of all the places I had gone to see. I was getting here at exactly the right time. The ball was landing on my number.

“I’ll need to think about it.”

“Of course,” she said, handing me a brochure with a map stapled to the front. She circled the two remaining lots with a quick swoosh of her pen and smiled at me.

“If you make a deposit before the end of the month, I’ll throw in all new appliances for you.”

I shook her hand and said I would be in touch. By Monday I had transferred some of my online savings account into my checking, just in case I needed to come up with a deposit soon.

Friday night I put on my uniform; freshly shined black shoes, pressed dress pants, a starched black shirt with a tie just loose enough to let me lean over the table and shout to be heard over the music. Last, I put on a shiny black nametag. Mine should have said JOSEPH, but I talked my shift boss into letting me have one that said J.T., my nickname, so I didn’t have to listen to the players cursing me out when they lost using the same name my mom used when my brother and I misbehaved as kids. Sometimes I switched with Jarrell, or with Armando, but never with Tommy, because he was strictly by the book, had his eye on going dual-rate or even becoming a floor supervisor. He would have to take a pay cut in order to get promoted to management since we made so much

on tips, but he was so burnt out dealing that he was willing to do it if they ever offered it to him.

I drove through my East side, working class neighborhood, where the houses were separated by cinderblock walls and there were always too many beat up cars jammed into the cracked, concrete driveways. At the first stop light I came to, a toothless man in a hoodie held a sign up and started making his way over to my car. I blew through the red light to get away from him, leaving the bad part of town behind and sailing through the crisp night air with the windows down, on my way to the Strip to start my work week.

The music was blaring and the pole dancers were bumping and grinding above the crowd like luminous, sexy angels in fuzzy, thigh-high leather boots and bustiers. The air was thick with sweat and smoke, Red Bull and vodka, cologne and perfume and something that smelled vaguely like lactating tits. I was running relief. I pushed into each game on my string for twenty minutes to give the dealer a break, then after each round took my own twenty minute break. It was a busy night, full of constant motion, like every other night in the casino.

At my first table I pushed out Fong, a quiet, hard-faced dealer who was called the Widow-Maker because the players thought she was quick and deadly. She didn't bother with chit chat even though that was what management encouraged us to do. She clapped and cleared her hands and rushed off the game without telling the one player there she was going on break or even saying good luck.

The player was a douchey-looking guy with slicked hair and a skinny suit jacket. He lost the first three hands I dealt to him, then slammed the table with the palm of his

hand, before reaching into his jacket and pulling out a thick wad of cash, which he tossed at me, disgusted. I spread it out, bill by bill, across the layout in a neat, diagonal pattern so the camera could see it before I converted it into chips. I scooped it up and stuffed it into the slot with the plastic paddle. There was a whoosh sound like a guillotine dropping and the bills fell like murder victims into the drop box. Once the money was out of sight, the player was supposed to feel like he was gambling with chips that looked more like toys than money, something other than cash, which he could use to buy groceries or gas or to pay his rent or his mortgage.

The guy went on a run and built his stacks up into a miniature fortress. But he didn't know when to walk away. None of them ever do, so they all end up broke. He lost seven hands in a row, pressing each bet higher until he was wiped out. Then he tossed another wad of cash onto the table and I locked that up and pushed another stack of chips out to him. I dealt a quick game and the odds which are always in favor of the house caught up with him and he ended up losing it all.

“Do you feel bad about taking all my money?” He sneered at me and lit a cigarette.

“Not especially, no.”

“You're fucking hysterical you know that?”

I never felt bad for being a cog in the Vegas machine. I knew I wasn't responsible for any of it, just because it was my hand that scooped up the chips and dropped them in the rack, my hand that turned the cards and spun the ball. I got blamed all the time. Blamed for being bad luck, for not being a good dealer, for dealing myself too many tens, for not shuffling the cards right, for looking at someone the wrong way,

for not smiling on command. Some people really had no idea it had nothing to do with me. Most of the time I believed I was completely blameless, that I wasn't contributing to people's misery just by working in the casino, but some days I wondered. Maybe that's what meth dealers told themselves too, or child pornographers, or professional killers.

I kept quiet, fixed the chips in my rack, riffled the deck once and spread the cards across the layout, anything to avoid having to look at him. His eyes were digging into me and I felt my breath getting shallow but I refused to give him the satisfaction of looking up so I kept my head down and waited for him to go away. He stayed there, glowering, until Fong came back.

The next game on my string was roulette, where I tapped out Jarrell, who wasn't happy about not being on his favorite game, craps. I stood behind him with my hands clasped behind my back. I could already feel the bad vibes coming my way from the one player at the table, a grouchy-looking Mediterranean guy. The ball fell and Jarrell placed the marker on an empty number and swept the losing bets.

"I'm glad to see you go on break, Jarrell. You're bad luck, you know that Jarrell? You couldn't hit my number if you stopped the wheel and just stuck the ball in there yourself."

I pushed into the game, clapped and cleared my hands for the cameras and let Jarrell know that he could go on break. He didn't move. His body was tense as a tiger's ready to pounce on its prey.

"You *suck* Jarrell. You know that?"

Jarrell leaned over the layout and got as close to the man's face as he could and said, "Keep my fucking name out your mouth, you understand me?" smiling for the

camera the whole time, the thumping music drowning out his words to everyone but the three of us. Then he clapped and cleared his hands and walked sideways off the game, a big, phony smile shellacked on his face.

I avoided making eye contact with the guy. I didn't want to play the good cop to Jarrell's bad cop anymore, couldn't stomach the idea of one more person telling me how much money "that black sonuvabitch" stole from him. I spun the ball and the guy scrambled to place all his bets in time, before gravity, not fate or luck or any of that bullshit, pulled the ball down to a clattering halt on double zero. The guy said, "Shit, I *always* bet double zero. You didn't even give me time to bet."

I pretended I couldn't hear him over the music, swept the layout, and spun the ball again so fast it was nothing but a white blur making laps around the inside of the wheel. I wished I had Jarrell's balls, wished I could say something like, "Keep my fucking name out your mouth," but I figured I could never pull it off.

The man kept playing and I kept dealing in tense silence. Three barely-legal frat boys sat down and got miffed when I carded them, mumbling that they were already twenty two and couldn't believe they were still getting carded. By the time Jarrell came back I had just spun the ball one last time. When it landed on seventeen and finally hit one of the Mediterranean guy's numbers he lifted his hands in the air and cheered as if he were at a soccer match. I made a polite smile at him as I pushed out his winnings and he threw me a few chips and said, "Thanks J.T., you're not so bad after all." Then when he saw Jarrell pushing back into the game he got upset again and said, "Oh no, not this guy."

I made my way quickly to the next game, where I pushed out Val, an overworked single mom who worked double shifts on weekends and always had deep purple shadows under her eyes.

“Good luck, ladies,” she said as she left the game.

The group of girls at the blackjack table shrieked whenever I busted. They were reeking of perfume and adjusting their low-cut dresses over their sweaty cleavage. I tried to keep focused on the cards, kept my head down, kept working. I felt the weight of the night start to press on me and squeeze the air from my lungs, constrict my organs; my pancreas, my liver, my gall bladder. The music bleated and throbbed in my ears. The girls were screaming at me, come on J.T., come *on* J.T. The noise from the casino began to fill every empty, private space within my body. The girls wanted to know where I was from, how long I'd been in Vegas, whether or not you should always hit or always stay on sixteen. I didn't want to give too much of myself to them. I wanted to keep a quiet sanctuary of myself somewhere, away from the casino where the walls closed in until I couldn't breathe and the sound swallowed every thought and the smoke made everything important disappear.

When I got home I showered to get the bad vibes off of me and then sat cross-legged in front of my vision board. I tried to calm my mind and feel the love of the universe pulsate through me, tried to recognize that the people whom I was in conflict with were not really antagonizing me, they were teaching me. I was gaining experience and wisdom from the reactions they provoked in me. I couldn't change them. I had to accept them as they were. The only thing I could control was my reaction. Om shanti shanti.

The neighbor's Reggaetón music thumped furiously through the wall from the house next door. Dogs barked and wailed incessantly, and sirens and helicopters punctuated the pre-dawn darkness, shrill and growing more urgent as the sky grew lighter in the East. I visualized moving to a brand new house on the West side of the city as one way to win the race, to retreat from the sun and gain on it just enough to get to sleep before it rose.

"Fuck this," I said, standing up and wandering into the kitchen. I cracked the cap on a new bottle of tequila I had stored in the cabinet, poured myself a shot in a regular-sized glass, and knocked it back. I leaned against the counter, stood in the harsh, fluorescent light, and poured myself another. Before long I had killed enough of the bottle to empty the long neck at the top. I stood in the kitchen and balanced the bottle tenderly in one hand, as if it were a piece of a lover's body, rocking my weight back and forth from one bare foot to the other.

I hesitated before I handed the woman at the sales office my deposit check. I calculated how many nights and weeks and months I had to work to make that money, how much shit I had to put up with at the casino.

"It might take a week or so to transfer the rest of the money from my savings to put twenty percent down," I said.

The saleswoman laughed. "Oh honey, don't worry about that. No one puts that much down anymore. Just the deposit is enough to move you in."

"Still I'd like to put the money down so there won't be so much to pay on the mortgage. I'd like to own this house outright someday."

She looked slightly amused, cocked her head to one side, not sure what to make of me. Her cell phone rang and she said, “Sorry I have to take this,” excusing herself to the other side of the room and leaning against the display case of the schematic. She held the phone to one ear with her shoulder, twisting her rings in agitated orbits around her fingers while she spoke. Then she hung up without saying goodbye.

“Well, it’s official,” she said, lifting the glass and putting a red SOLD button over one of the two remaining lots, “You’re getting the last lot on the street.”

I rushed over to her and pushed my check into her hand as if it were a live grenade.

“Let’s get this over with before I change my mind.”

She gave me that charming, coffee-stained, smile again and slipped the check into a manila folder she was carrying.

“You’re getting a great deal,” she said. My bullshit detector told me she was telling me the truth, or at least she believed she was. “It’ll be a perfect starter home for you. And it’s a great investment. At these prices I’m tempted to pick one up myself, but I have enough trouble already keeping track of my rental properties.”

“Maybe you should try Excel.”

“You mean just use a spreadsheet like the rest of the world?” She put one hand to her sternum.

I nodded.

“Why would I want to make things that simple for myself? Besides, me, I march to the beat of my own drum.”

I was on the double deck again, on the quarter game, no mid-deck entry. It kept away the riff raff, but tended to attract the intermediates, a term we coined for players who were neither low ballers nor high rollers but who fell somewhere in between. They got comped a portion of their room rather than getting a suite for free. They were willing to wager thousands of dollars, rather than tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands like the whales. They demanded high roller attention and fawning and made as many ridiculous demands as their high limit counterparts. Deal faster, deal slower, give the double down card face down, face up, call the boss over, make the boss go away because she's bad luck.

I had a chunky, middle-aged woman at my table, a classic compulsive gambler trying to disguise herself as a genial, sweet tea Southern lady. She started the night full of praise, calling me sugar and honey and lavishing me with tips, along with her home-cooked expressions of affection when she won almost every hand out of the deck, round after round. When she started losing it became my fault and she turned on me. Can't say I didn't see it coming.

"You need to be thinking about something else, J.T.," she said, blowing smoke out the side of her mouth.

I smiled at her, tried to play along since she had been tipping well all night.

"I'm thinking about dealing you some winning hands."

"No," she said, "That won't work. You have to think about something else when you're dealing. You have to think about sex or something, and that will trick the cards into giving me a good hand."

Her eyes narrowed and she frowned with her whole face as she flipped over bust hand after bust hand. She lit another cigarette, didn't bother keeping the smoke away from me anymore.

"Come on, J.T. Come *on*, J.T.!"

When it was time for my break I caught up with Jarrell in the hallway.

"What's wrong with you, dawg?" Jarrell put his arm around my shoulder as we walked.

"This lady on my game is killing me. She says that if I think about sex she'll start winning again."

"What's the problem with that? That's all I think about when I'm on the game."

"That's all you think about anywhere."

"True that," said Jarrell. "But you know it's already bad enough these motherfuckers want to boss us around and tell us what to do all the time."

Jarrell squeezed my shoulder as we reached the break room. We stopped for a minute in the hall and he leaned in close to me.

"We nothing but slaves here as it is, J.T. The only freedom we have is in our thoughts. You can't let this lady tell you what to think too."

"Good advice, Jarrell."

"I'm serious, dawg. You are not a free man as long as you work in the casino. It don't matter you're not black, you a slave too."

On the way back down to the casino floor I stopped by the uniform room to ask for an extra nametag, so I wouldn't have to wear my own for the rest of the night. The homely girl who worked there looked both ways down the hall, then motioned me to

come through the side door. Whenever I stopped by to trade in my worn-out work shirts for new ones, she asked me to friend her on Facebook, said maybe we could get together sometime. But I hardly noticed her. I was completely strung out on Jillian, who was nothing more than a flash of smooth, serpentine beauty dancing on a pole above my head, a quick, shy smile in the hallway after her shift. And even if I weren't so far gone, I don't think I would have been interested in the uniform room girl anyway. But I was always nice to her. I used to think it was important to be nice to everyone, even when they weren't nice to you.

The uniform room girl opened a drawer that was hidden behind a mismatched pile of starched shirts. There were hundreds of lost nametags, lying in a haphazard stack like tiny markers tossed onto a mass grave. She let me have my pick. From then on I was never the same person twice in one week. And I rarely chose to be myself again, except on holiday weekends, when the pit boss prowled the casino floor with an overeager smile. Someone else's name always felt more comfortable on my chest, so close to my heart.

She said she would order more nametags for me when her supervisor went on vacation the next week. I made a list, got more than a little goofy with it, testing her to see if she'd go through with ordering every name I requested. She did.

The Design Center was built in an empty strip of desert with zoning signs all around that announced plans for a new Stations casino, a retail complex, even an indoor skating rink. It was a warehouse filled with a super-stylized showcase of flooring samples, swatches of carpet and draperies, and rows and rows of fixtures. The kitchen cabinets section alone was large enough to get lost in. My design consultant walked me

through every step, but never seemed to warm up to me. She frowned when I steered toward the lowest-priced options for the house. She barely hid her disagreement when I told her I was trying to be super conscious of the price because I was putting so much money down and didn't have any left to go over budget.

I took a seat in front of her desk after I had made all my selections. She pulled my file and scribbled notes in by hand.

“I like to have a hard copy of what we discussed in case the computer goes wonky,” she said.

I nodded, fidgeting with my phone as she took her time making detailed inscriptions on page after page. One of the pages she skipped over caught my interest.

“Can I see that?”

“This?” she said, wrinkling her face as if I had asked to see the gum on the bottom of her high-heeled shoe. “Knock yourself out.” She handed me the paper, keeping her nose buried in her notes, barely registering me.

There was an illustration of my future house on the paper, reproduced six times, in six different color schemes. They were labeled: Cardamom, Cinnamon, Sage, Burnt Umber, Desert Spice, Brushed Sand.

“These are my choices for the color of the exterior?”

“The color schemes have been pre-selected by the builder. Yours is...” she looked up, pointed to the check mark in the fifth box. “Desert Spice,” she said, before hunching back over her notes.

I tapped out a quick text to Jarrell, asking him if this was the way all new houses were in Vegas.

“I guess that’s okay with me,” I said, still texting. “They all sort of look like beige anyway.”

I got a new text from Armando, call me now its important.

“I just have to make a call,” I said, excusing myself to the hallway.

Armando picked up right away.

“J.T. man I need a huge favor. Can you swing by and get me on your way to work tonight?”

“No problem,” I said.

“Knew I could count on you,” said Armando. Then instead of hanging up, like a regular person, he went on like he always did. Jarrell said that Armando didn’t get paid enough attention as a kid since he was the last of eleven. And he was probably right, because the brother did not know when to shut up. He kept on about his baby mama always stirring up trouble, not paying the car note on time, getting his truck repossessed. Armando didn’t even need to hear a ‘yeah’ or an ‘uh huh’ to keep talking. He just went on and assumed you were listening. I zoned out and wandered back to the door of the Design Center office. I could hear my consultant complaining to one of the other girls. She didn’t know I was right outside the door.

“I saw his financials, he can definitely afford it,” she was whispering loudly enough for me to hear. “What kind of cheap ass spends all that money on a house and then doesn’t even bother to upgrade the fixtures? I mean, it’s only going to add a few hundred more dollars a month to the mortgage.”

I walked quietly away and then took extra heavy steps down the hall so she'd know I was coming but she still looked up and blushed when I entered the room. I signed the papers as quickly as I could and left.

Wednesday instead of going out to the club with Jarrell and the boys, I crashed early and woke up the next day and drove to Red Rock Canyon. I walked through the desert stalagmites and dry bones pathways wanting just one thing; an open plain, a place where everything was unplugged and depowered. The hum and buzz and blast of electric guitars and drum beats that moved the pole dancers back and forth across the stage all night; it all disappeared, almost. The echo was still there. The ringing in my ears was still there.

I spent the rest of the day at the library, browsing through heavy art books with thick, glossy pages. I drank in the glow of white from calla lilies in Rivera's work and the melancholy poetry of Frida Kahlo's twisting lines. As I wandered among the stacks of books in the library, then sat reading and browsing through the bright patterns of pages, I felt myself start to uncoil, barely. I still felt wound up too tightly, like I might spring out of my body at any moment, drop to the floor like a fish suffocating on air and start convulsing like an epileptic.

And soon enough, the buzz of some lady's phone, the lazy searching through her purse and pockets to find the source of the noise, set me off. As soon as she took her call and started gabbing away too loud, right under the sign that said, 'NO CELL PHONE USE' in English and Spanish, I tensed like a predator and had to stop myself from pouncing on her, from lashing out somehow.

Quiet had become my obsession, my drug of choice, the one thing in life I wanted more than anything else.

I threw a housewarming party the day after I moved in, months after the original move-in date, since the builders could barely keep up with demand since prices had come down so much. It was already getting chilly at night and the wind that blew in to Mountain's Edge from the desert felt cool and clean. I left the door unlocked and all night long my guests rang the bell and then just let themselves in.

Jarrell was the first to arrive. He brought Leilani, one of the cocktail waitresses on our shift, as his date. Jarrell handed me a card with my name on it and asked where the booze was. He made his way to the kitchen while I gave Leilani a tour.

"I'm closing on a place just down the street next month," said Leilani, excited, as I led her around the second floor, showing her the ceramic tile in the master bathroom. She was awed at everything I showed her, as if I were giving her a tour of a Russian czar's palace, not walking her around a somewhat affordable house with standard features and minimal upgrades.

"Baby, what you want to drink?" Jarrell called up the stairs.

"A shot of tequila," I said.

Leilani laughed and slapped my arm. "You're so crazy, J.T. One for me too," she called down the stairs to Jarrell.

"Baby, huh? So is this a date for you two?" I asked Leilani as she ran her hands along the door handles and leaned down to stroke the new carpet, inhaling its scent the way some women do with newborns.

“You might say that.” She smiled.

“Here I thought Jarrell was my best friend. He didn’t even tell me.”

“I told him to keep it quiet until it’s official,” said Leilani.

“And when will that be?” I asked, turning off the lights and leading her back down the stairs.

“Very soon if he plays his cards right.”

Later that night Armando showed up with his baby mama, who threw a tantrum whenever he said more than two words to another female. Tommy arrived with an armful of booze to add to the already overstocked bar I had set up on the brand new granite countertops in the kitchen. Maritza brought an expensive set of kitchen ware, grabbed a drink right away, and spent most of the night outside on the small balcony off the master bedroom, smoking and wrapping her arms around her bare shoulders to keep warm.

There was barely any furniture in the living room, just a flat screen TV set on top of some milk crates and a folding table and chairs I borrowed from Tommy for the night where an intense poker game was going strong. But no one seemed to care. We all drank like champs and sang along to the loud music and clanked our glasses together until we were good and buzzed. More and more people showed up; lots of dealers, some of the bosses, and a few cocktail waitresses and bartenders. Then, when the party was going strong and I was running around making sure everything was going smoothly, the doorbell rang. Whoever it was didn’t come right in so I ran to the door, annoyed.

When I opened the door I saw Jillian wearing a slinky black dress and barely registered two of the other pole dancers standing behind her on my doorstep in a cloud of body spray and mascara and sexy dresses.

I stood with my mouth open. Jillian smiled and waited nervously for me to invite them in. The other girls were shivering. One of them, the loud, full-figured one said, “We’re here. This party has officially begun. You can invite us in anytime, J.T.”

I stepped back, motioned the girls inside and showed them around, fumbling for words. I fixed their drinks and stood with my head down while they greeted the rest of the crowd. Leilani snaked her arm through Jillian’s and kissed her on the cheek. I had dirty thoughts about the two of them for a minute and blushed. Luckily Jarrell pulled me away, roughly, by the arm.

“This is not the time to go with that zero-game having routine, dawg,” said Jarrell, as soon as we were out of earshot of the girls.

“I wasn’t expecting them.”

“I invited them. And you’re welcome by the way.”

I so wanted to be like Jarrell. He turned on his bright smile and I stood in awe of him once again.

“Dude,” I said, “good looking out.”

I had a night of near misses with Jillian. The first time I got close enough to talk to her Armando knocked his girl’s drink onto the floor, which I didn’t mind because I could clean it up easily enough, but then I had to break up the fight afterward when she attacked him and called him a *puto* over and over for ruining her night. By the time I looked up Jillian had been spirited away by one of the female bartenders to gossip in the

corner, clearly not to be interrupted. The second time I had an opening I was intercepted by Leilani, who was sloppy drunk by then and needed rescuing. Jillian helped me walk her out to the patio where Jarrell and Tommy were smoking cigars. She was pulled away by the curvy, mouthy pole dancer who couldn't go to the bathroom by herself. Jarrell pulled me down and said, "Sit with us a minute, dawg, you ain't even getting to enjoy your own party." The third chance I had to talk to Jillian, the coast was pretty clear, but I hadn't had a chance to use the bathroom all night and I realized this in a frantic, urgent instant, squeezing my knees together and dancing around like a little kid, panicking when I noticed that the downstairs bathrooms both had lines outside their doors. She tossed her head back and laughed at me, bold and fearless, and completely unexpected. I sprinted upstairs to use the bathroom off the master bedroom, seconds away from not making it in time.

When I came out I noticed Maritza still out on the balcony by herself. Something didn't look right so I grabbed one of my jackets from a box I hadn't unpacked yet and brought it out to her.

"You must be freezing," I said, closing the French doors to the balcony behind me.

Maritza sat very still with an unlit cigarette resting on her moist lower lip. The wind gusted and the cigarette flew from her mouth and up into the air where it sailed across the glowing moon that was setting below the Western horizon. In the expanse of desert foothills in the distance, the creosote and chaparral were just starting to become visible as dawn began to lighten the night sky.

“It’s a gorgeous view, J.T. You done good,” she said, her voice cracking as she pulled another cigarette from her purse and set it on the full curve of her lip. I knew she was upset because she always spoke to me in Spanish when she was. I still spoke decent enough from my time in Mexico.

“Do you want to come back inside?”

Maritza shook her head no. Her eyes were tearing up. Mine were too but it was just from the wind.

“At least put this on then,” I said, spreading my jacket over her bony shoulders. I sat down next to her and she put her head on my chest and sobbed.

“I’m sorry I’m such a mess,” she said. “My life is just a little, complicated.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

I put my arm around her and we sat there watching the sunrise for a long time. Maritza cried quietly and kept replacing her unlit cigarettes whenever they blew away, sailing like hollow bones on the currents of the wind into the scrub brush. I heard voices down below leaving out the front door. When they crossed the street I saw it was Jillian and her friends. Jillian looked up at the balcony, shielding her eyes from the rising sun, squinting at us. Maritza still had her head on my shoulder and I almost pushed her away and jumped up and shouted, hey Jillian, it’s not what it looks like. But the way Jillian smiled at me from the street below, the way she nodded and blew me a kiss before she got into the car to leave, I knew she understood.

The next day I cleaned up and went through all my housewarming gifts. Jarrell had gotten me a gift card from Home Depot and I decided to drive down to the new store

in Mountain's Edge and see how much I had to play with. I was expecting a hundred dollars or so, maybe two since Jarrell was my best friend and the most generous person I knew. I was as shocked as the cashier when he told me it was for a cool thousand.

I wandered around the aisles, feeling flush enough to be able to afford whatever I wanted. By the time I picked up enough paint to cover the whole interior of my house though, I calculated that I had already eaten through half of Jarrell's housewarming gift. I prowled around and made a mental list of all the things I would need now that I had a new house, things that never even crossed my mind when I was backpacking around and flopping from one crash pad to another; a garden hose, a water softener, a steam cleaner. It would cost more than I had left on the card to get everything I needed so I just put it off and rattled around the aisles and waited for the checkout lines to thin out.

The store smelled like fertilizer and was starting to bum me out with its flood lights casting ghoulish shadows along the rows and rows of merchandise stacked higher than a two-story building. The other guys who shuffled through the stores like zombies at least had a chick with them, a wife or a baby mama or even just a live-in girlfriend. One guy who I think might have been a UFC fighter was rolling his shopping cart to the self check-out line with his hot girlfriend trailing behind him like a lazy child. She had blond hair extensions twisted up into a newsboy cap, low-rise pink sweats and flip flops on, totally scrubbed out, but she was still smoking hot and her ass caught my attention as I calculated my growing shopping list. I felt a pang of something like hurt when I thought about how much I longed for Jillian and how little I actually knew about her.

When I got back to my new house it felt emptier than it did even before I had moved anything into it. I found my vision board in one of the unpacked boxes and nailed

it to the back of the bedroom door. I pulled down the pictures of luxury houses I had pasted there and threw them away. Mission accomplished. The aborted sketch of the Pyramid of the Sun peeked through the pictures that were left on the board, the same photo of Jillian I had cut out of different magazines, repeated over and over, her lean legs crossed flirtatiously, her coppery brown eyes looking at me from every angle like a sexy Mona Lisa.

That night I headed into work on what was usually one of my days off. I picked up extra shifts and worked my eight hours and never signed the early out list. I wasn't so young anymore and I was tired as hell but I tried to keep my hopes up and remember I was doing it all for a reason, that I was being smart and thinking about the future instead of bumming around south of the border and refusing to grow up. Besides, I would have a chance to see Jillian at work if I timed it right.

I drove along the 215 until I hit the detour sign that rerouted traffic to South Las Vegas Boulevard, narrowing to one lane which was littered with overturned orange cones. The Strip grew on the nearby horizon as I headed north. The sun was just setting as I passed by Mandalay Bay, its golden towers lit up by the brilliant sunset. When I got to the Luxor the traffic came to a dead stop. The sky got dimmer and the lights along the edges of the shiny black pyramid flickered to life. The spotlight that could be seen from space beamed up into the cloudy sky, burning like a laser, like a focused sunbeam that could cut through moons and asteroids.

I was in Maritza's section that night. I switched with Fong so I could take the 3AM break and hopefully run into Jillian on her way out. Maritza was standing at the

podium and nursing a Styrofoam cup of black coffee. She had dark circles under her eyes that even her caramel complexion and too much eye makeup couldn't hide.

"Hi sweetheart," she said as I took my place at the lidded blackjack table. "Sorry about the cockblock last night."

"No worries. How you feeling?" I asked.

"Honey, don't worry about me. I'm a pro. You're the one who doesn't look so hot, sorry to say that, but it's true."

She was right. I was still sweating out the booze from the night before.

"I think I'm still just a little hung over," I said.

"You and me both, *querido*," said Maritza. "I didn't realize you knew how to put it away like that."

"Do you think I have a problem?" I asked.

"J.T. you are so precious," she said, rubbing my shoulder and patting my back as she counted my rack and ordered a fill for my game. "Half the dealers in here are popping Oxycontin and Lortab before their shifts every day. How else are we supposed to put up with these asshole players?" Maritza smiled at an older couple dressed for dinner as they strolled by the pit, just out of earshot.

"I'm not doing it before work," I said, "Just after. Well, sometimes on my days off too."

"Honey," said Maritza, "Don't sweat it. Even I enjoy a cocktail or two before work sometimes. Totally takes the edge off."

"Seriously, it's not before work Maritza, just on my days off, and sometimes after I get home."

“So precious,” she said, tapping the screen with her long fingernail and calculating how much money I would need for the night.

Toward the end of my shift, as planned, I ran into Jillian and the other pole dancers in the hallway as they were leaving the casino after their last set.

“What time did you finally wrap things up last night, J.T.?” Jillian asked as she slowed to a stop, waving the other two girls ahead of her. I still couldn’t believe she knew my name, was talking to me, had been to my house the night before.

“Let’s just say I had to put my shades on to see the last guests off.”

Jillian smiled. There was a long, awkward pause. We were two shy people trying to pretend we knew how to talk to other humans. A go-go dancer without her pole and a dealer without his deck of cards, and we were fumbling.

“I heard you and Maritza talking on the balcony,” she said, finally, breaking the silence.

“She’s just a really good friend,” I said.

“J.T., it’s fine. I don’t think you’re exactly her type anyway.” A strained bit of shared laughter. Another awkward pause. “I heard you speaking Spanish.”

“I picked some up in Mexico,” I said.

“Sounded like more than some to me. Can you say something to me now?”

I told her in Spanish: You are the center of my thoughts. Everything comes back to you. What I want more than anything is for you to notice me, to like me, to love me.

“I don’t know what you said, but it sounded beautiful,” she said.

“Listen,” I said, back to English now, trying like hell to channel Jarrell’s swagger, “I have zero free time since I’m getting settled into my new place and all, but I can make some if I have a good enough excuse.”

Jillian smiled again, this time summoning courage from somewhere else, from the place that let her put on a different persona, an alter ego that stripped down and got on stage and danced on a pole every night as if she were playing a role in a film. She was staring me down, fearless, the matador about to pierce the bull’s heart. “And what would be a good enough excuse?”

“Going out with you,” I said.

From another guy, a player like Jarrell or Armando, the line would have been dead in the water.

“Well, that sounds like your best shot, so I’ll make this easy for you and give you my number now, J.T. Text me sometime.”

I drove home that night giddy and lightheaded. As I sped along the 215, I passed by exit signs whose names evoked the Wild West in my mind. I rolled them over my tongue. Cimarron. Durango. Hualapai. When I reached my exit at Ft. Apache, I banked left along the gravel stacked neatly by the side of the freeway and drove south along the base of the mountain, watching it ignite and go up in flames as the sun rose and the neon lights of the city in my rearview mirror faded in the distance.

My buddies from work had offered to help me paint the inside of my house, but when the time came to actually get it done they all flaked. Armando texted, said he had to deal with baby mama drama. Tommy texted and said he was beat from working

overtime. The one I thought I could count on was Jarrell. But even he balked when the time came. He did call to see how it was going though.

“You know I don’t like to get my hands dirty, J.T. Shoot, I’ll pay someone to come over there and do it for you as a housewarming gift.”

“You already spent too much on the first one dude, seriously.”

“You know we like family. Ain’t no need to worry about all that,” he said. “Why don’t you let me just take care of this for you?”

I was cradling the phone between my ear and my shoulder as I held a tray of fresh green paint in one hand and the handle of a roller in the other.

“It’s okay Jarrell. I don’t mind doing it myself.”

“I still think you ought to just hire a Mexican. Should be able to cut yourself a pretty sweet deal since you speak Mexican and all.”

I hung up and got back to work, painting as smoothly and quickly as I could. Soon it would get dark and I would have to get showered and head in to start my shift. The smell of the paint and the shiny wet trails of green the first strokes left on the stark, white walls made me almost happy, reminded me that I used to love to paint, and sketch. It was like meditation. Time disappeared and hours later when it was just me and the canvas and the feel of my mind wrapping itself around something that was in the process of being created, it was the closest to God I knew how to feel. In Mexico City, I taught a few English classes and Lola taught painting and ceramics and we made whatever cash we needed to survive. Then we spent our time off trekking through jungle ruins and fishing villages and city streets together, pulled by the smells of street food stalls and the cries of vendors and our appetites and our whims and what fate had in store for us. Lola

believed in something she called cosmic synchronicity. From her I learned how to say it in Spanish.

It wasn't until later that I understood what she meant. I was lugging my heavy, 35mm Nikon around on a worn-out shoulder strap, slung over my chest, close to my heart, like a baby. I was traveling insatiably by then, obsessively trying to get that shot that would inspire something brilliant. It had to fall into place at the right time, with the perfect lighting, and that serendipitous composition found only in nature and the rhythm of human activity that made you believe in something bigger than yourself, bigger than this planet spinning around a ball of fire in space. I came close more than once. The woman who read my palm at Teotihuacán, staring down a feral dog, just as the light set her face on fire with the burning rays of the sun at dusk. The peasant man who fell asleep in a forgotten corner of the Zócalo, his blanket spread out in a heartbreaking burst of color and zigzag pattern, letting a mangy pigeon curl up in the crook of his bent knees. A close-up of a mango from the market at Jardín Centenario, sliced open like a fresh wound, the pulpy flesh opening into the green skin around it, green as the fresh paint on my walls as I rolled it on, coat after coat, until dusk.

The reality star at my table couldn't figure out the rules on the double deck, no matter how many times I explained them to her. She kept bending the cards, couldn't remember the signs to make for hit and stay even though there were only two of them. Then she got angry when she lost, angry at me.

I tried to laugh it off because she'd been on TV a lot. She was already on her third spin-off on VH1, mad popular because she played the Crazy Bitch of the house.

She had a big personality and was drawing attention to herself. People wanted to take their picture with her. I would end up in the background shots of a lot of people's profile pages and I wanted to at least look like I was friendly, put on the face of someone having a good time with the Crazy Bitch.

“You're really not being very nice to me, J.T.”

“I'm trying but these cards sure have a mind of their own tonight.” Smile for the cameras. Flash. Click.

“You're evil. The devil sent you here to torture me. Where's your pitchfork?”

“I left it at home tonight.” Smile. Laughter. Flash. Click. I had to keep the game moving. Had to get through the shift.

“I swear J.T., if you pull another twenty one I'm gonna shove my foot so far up your ass you'll be choking on my heel.”

The other players leaned in, listening. She'd cast me in the role of heartless asshole, the bastard card shark who was cheating her out of her money. Life as the villain got old, fast. Deflection became a well-honed, automatic defense mechanism, necessary for survival.

“What are you blaming me for? You're the one who cut this shitty deck.”

She growled at me, a real, animal-like growl, and slammed her next bet down, splashing her chips all over the layout.

When Fong tapped me out so I could go on break, I kept smiling all the way out of the pit, sending the Crazy Bitch into a tailspin. I heard her call Fong a fucking chink bitch when she lost her last hand. Fong locked up her chips, quick and cool as a kingfisher, and slid them quietly into the rack. I dodged security as they ran to intercept

her, barely stifling a laugh when she threw a drink in the guard's face. Nothing sweeter than watching a pain-in-the-ass customer cross that definitive line that would get them thrown out.

I walked by the Party Pit on my way to the break room. Jillian was on center stage. She had watched the whole incident go down from underneath exaggerated false eyelashes, her body naturally keeping time with the music. She winked at me and gave me the thumbs up. Then she wiggled both thumbs at me and mouthed, 'Text me'.

Right after work I sent Jillian a quick text from the parking garage before I started my car. The message light was already blinking by the time I got home. She had a busy week ahead, same as me, but still wanted to get together. It was enough to keep me giddy and zinging with adrenaline, even after an exhausting shift. I peeled off my uniform, along with the layer of second-hand smoke and bad vibes that hung around it, and stepped out of it as if emerging from a crusty cocoon.

I threw on sweats, a wife-beater and a pair of old running sneakers and headed out into the pre-dawn streets. The nights had gotten cooler as winter started to approach, unseasonably early. The winds in Mountain's Edge blew steadily in from the desert to the southwest, and the air, always a few degrees cooler than on the Strip, tasted fresher and cleaner. I couldn't go running in my old neighborhood. I could barely make it to the corner after dark without some kind of trouble. But here, where the wide, smooth-edged streets met at angles so precise you had to pivot like a wind-up doll when you turned a corner, I could jog for miles and never see another living soul. From time to time a gas-guzzling Hummer or an Escalade with blinged-out vanity plates and custom rims sailed

by, but the driver was hidden from view by a tinted windshield, smooth and dark as obsidian.

I ran down a paved street that stopped abruptly where the subdivision ended and turned into a rough dirt road. I picked up speed, sprinting east, toward the spotlight that beamed up from the south end of the Strip. The howl of a coyote froze me in my tracks. It was sitting on top of a house-sized pile of dirt, braying at the full moon. I tried to approach it, but when it saw me coming, it ran away. It was scraggly and underfed, but it was still too quick for me. The coyote darted through forlorn piles of dirt and stone, through stretches of desert that cut like jagged wounds through the perfectly manicured, sparkling new neighborhoods. Way off in the distance, I saw it turn a corner, and disappear.

I ran fast all the way home. The spotlight from the Luxor seared the edges of the low-hanging clouds in the moonlit sky. The air burning in my lungs, I tried to feel myself rising up with that beam of light, lifting like a winged serpent on a warm current of air, all the way to heaven, or as close as I could get to it from Las Vegas.

Early the next morning, I woke to the sound of jackhammers and power saws on the next street over. They were noisy, but still quieter than church compared to my old neighborhood. The construction workers whistled and shouted at each other in sing-song Spanish. I dozed restlessly all afternoon and dreamed I was in Teotihuacán, somewhere along the Avenue of the Dead, underneath the earth, buried in cold clay, where the tapping of water on stone kept me awake. I opened the blinds and saw that the new houses had crept like moss overnight, closer to mine, threatening to overtake it, as if one

day I might open the door and find that a new stucco wall had materialized in front of it, just a hand's span away, trapping me inside.

Maritza's sporty blue car passed mine on Ft. Apache on the way into work. The floor supervisors had to be there twenty minutes before the dealers, but she was always running late. Her car was weaving back and forth across the median, her gears grinding, making me wince. Her vanity plate said WHYBBLU?

First break she wobbled in and sat next to Jarrell and me in the break room, slipping out of her heels and massaging her feet. She pulled a compact from the inside pocket of her jacket and opened it, checking her pupils in the mirror and fumbling for a breath mint.

"I was behind you on the way in to work tonight," I said. "Did you see me?"

"Honey," she said, "I don't even see me right now."

"How many fingers am I holding up?" asked Jarrell, waving his hands in Maritza's face, trying to make her laugh.

"I don't give a fuck how many," she said, slapping his hands away and jamming her feet back into her heels before standing up to leave.

Jarrell and I sat by ourselves for a while, tapping messages into our phones and glancing up at the TVs. Jillian and the other pole dancers were just finishing their break, reapplying lip gloss and checking themselves in the full-length mirror on their way out. When Jillian walked by our table she rubbed the side of my cheek with the palm of her hand and let it linger there for a smoldering second. Jarrell and I both turned to watch her walk out, all fishnets and lotioned skin and body glitter.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me about that?” said Jarrell, smacking my chest with the back of his hand.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Don’t give me that, dawg. It’s written all over your face.”

“Seriously, Jillian and I haven’t even gone out yet.”

“Well you better hurry your ass up J.T., else someone is likely to jump on that train. Me personally, I’d tear that shit up given the chance.”

Jarrell looked dreamily to the side and let a smile spread across his face like a stain on a motel room sheet.

“I’d rather just keep her to myself, Jarrell.”

“You know I’m just playing. Anyway I got my own to worry about.”

“You and Leilani?”

“Cohabiting. Moving in next week. Won’t be too far from you now too.”

“Awesome, man.” I said. “She’s good for you.”

“That she is,” said Jarrell. “And Jillian man, any fool can see she’s into you.”

“I still can’t figure that one out, but I’m not complaining.”

“Oh I got that one figured out,” said Jarrell, smiling. “The minute a brother gets himself a nice crib, all these bitches come out the woodwork.”

Leilani was the cocktail waitress in my section for the night. It was busy and I was pumping cards as fast as I could and Leilani was busting her ass to keep the drinks coming. We worked together often and made a good team. She made sure not to interrupt a big hand when she came around and I paused for just a second before sending

out the next hand so the players could place their drink orders. She asked if anyone wanted drinks three times before moving on to the next table. When she had just disappeared from sight the one high roller at my table said, “Hey wait, I wanted a Red Bull and vodka. That girl is too quick.”

After Armando tapped me out I ran into Leilani in the hall on the way to the break room.

“Can you do me a favor and take your time with the guy on third base?” I tried to sound extra nice so she wouldn’t think I was telling her how to do her job.

“Oh sweetie, of course I will,” she said, with a smile, as always. She was the most upbeat person I knew in the entire casino. Nothing ever seemed to get her down.

Leilani took her time on the next round, even though she had her hands full with the rest of the section. She batted her sweet, island-girl eyes at the high roller, offering him an empty ashtray, just in case he needed a place to put his gum. She put one hand on the man’s shoulder and left it there long enough for him to think it might be flirtation when really, it never was. She was there just long enough for him to place his order, then change his mind not once, but twice. Long enough to give him the chance to tip, even though he hadn’t yet, even though he had stacks of thousand dollar chips lined up in front of him and still would probably stiff her.

“Do you want me to drink it for you too?” she teased him. High rollers loved a little expert ball busting, especially from someone like Leilani. They got tired of everyone kissing their ass.

Before Leilani was even halfway to the next table the player leaned in and cupped one hand around the side of his mouth. “That girl is so slow, bro. Where’d you find

her?” Leilani was still close enough to hear, even over the loud music. She waited till the player wasn’t looking, rolled her eyes at me, then turned to the next table and lit them up with her smile. Some people were never happy. No matter what you did for them.

Wednesday Jarrell texted to tell me which club everyone was meeting up at that night. I texted him back, said I was too tired. I had just finished the last of the trim and put a second coat on the baseboards and crown molding. The touch ups hadn’t even dried yet. To celebrate a job well done, I splashed out for a super nice, pimped out Barcalounger, the only piece of furniture I owned besides the bed, the flat screen TV and the milk crates I had moved in with. Not only was I worn out, but after making my down payment and taking on a mortgage that was way more of a stretch than renting a little apartment on the East side, I had nothing much left to spare. And what I did have left I’d sunk into blinds, ceiling fans and paint supplies. The Barcalounger had just about maxed out the last of my credit cards.

Jarrell texted me back bullshit! and said he was coming by. Twenty minutes later he was banging on the door. He kept banging even after I opened it.

“You know, you could use the doorbell.”

“I forgot you was moving on up, J.T. Got a fancy place now with a doorbell and all. You ready?” Jarrell rushed in. He looked down at my paint-spattered, cut-off sweats, my dirty bare feet.

“I’m not really up for it tonight, dude.”

“Jillian’s going to be there,” said Jarrell

“I’ve still got lots to do here.”

Jarrell walked through the house, running his fingertips along the baseboards, peeling the last stray bits of blue tape from the edges of the walls.

“What’s left to do, dawg? Everything’s painted. Everything’s put away. When’d you get this?” Jarrell sat in the Barcalounger and leaned back, snapping it into the reclining position with a sharp cracking sound. “And what was wrong with having white walls anyway? Not enough flavor for you?”

“Just had it delivered today. Really man, I can’t tonight.”

Jarrell stopped fidgeting and looked up at me. When he got serious even the air around him seemed to slow down. “What’s going on with you for real?”

I leaned against the doorframe of the kitchen, inhaled the soothing fumes of the freshly dried paint.

“Truth is I’m broke.”

“You know I got you tonight, J.T.”

“No, I mean it. Seriously broke.”

“You not broke. You just house poor. Happens to everyone when they buy their starter home.”

The saleswoman kept calling my place a starter home too while I was signing the paperwork, even though I insisted it was more than enough space for me and told her I planned to own it outright someday. She said I might feel differently when the wife and kids came along.

“I’m just not up for it.”

“Well, suit yourself. Can’t say I didn’t at least try and get you some ass. But do me a favor and at least text your girl Jillian. She’s been asking about you.”

Jarrell jumped up to check his BlackBerry, then shoved it back in his pocket.

“My pain-in-the-balls tenant,” said Jarrell. “Lost his damn keys again.”

After he moved in with Leilani, Jarrell rented his old place out to one of the barbacks who worked at the pool. He planned to rent it for a year or two until the housing market recovered.

“Doesn’t that stress you out? Being a landlord?”

“Ain’t no stress about it,” he said. “Every week he loses his keys and I make up a new set. I pay five dollars for it and charge him fifty. Ain’t no way to go wrong with that equation now, is there?”

After Jarrell left, I collapsed into the Barcalounger with a book I had picked up at Sanborn’s in the Zona Rosa, right after Lola left me. It was a history of the Aztecs. As the sun set over the expanse of desert and mountains in the distance, I soaked in the wide blue skies outside the window, the vibrant green paint on the walls inside like something alive, the feel of the pages between my fingers. I read for a while, stared out the window, read some more. I texted Jillian. having fun? She texted back. yes. lol join us. I texted. sorry, can’t. Got a frowning face in return, went back to my book. I felt relieved that I would never have to pack anything into a cardboard box again, never have to stretch thick, noisy tape over the lid and label the contents with a black Sharpie. Not for as long as I lived in this house. Every time I moved it had felt like going back to square one, packing it all up, having to reevaluate, what’s important, what gets tossed, always shedding, stripping down more and more until there was hardly anything left and I barely remembered where I came from anymore.

I tried to focus on the lines in front of me. The words melted into a molten river, jumbled and agitated: Quetzalcóatl, Tláloc, pyramid, step, platform, serpent, temple, cave, stone, sculpture, altar, sacrifice, resurrection, sun, moon, stars, blood, sacrifice, violence, warrior, violence, blood, dagger, violence.

Something lifted me out of my chair, pulled me to the door. I drove to Lee's Discount Liquor, held my breath and didn't exhale until the reassuring beep at the register signaled that my transaction was approved. I walked out with a bottle of cheap tequila.

Back home I sat and pounded shots and worked out some ideas for a mural that would cover an entire wall of the master bedroom. No more sublets and apartments with depressing, washed out, off-white walls that you could hardly stick a thumb tack in without worrying if you would get your security deposit back. I owned this house. Here, I could do whatever I wanted. I sketched out the preliminary ziggurat shapes on the back of the receipt of the Barcalounger. Then I etched long, straight lines with charcoal directly onto the newly-painted walls. I needed to have an idea where the sun would hit when it rose in the morning and started streaming through the windows. I paced back and forth, from the French doors, to the far wall, and back the rest of the night, sketching, counting, calculating angles and equations in my head. By the time the sky started to get light I was frustrated and had a blinding headache. There was still a lot of work to do and nothing was adding up the way I envisioned. The pyramids I intended to look sleek and majestic were coming off busy and claustrophobic. I puzzled over how to fix it, even as my body gave in to frazzled exhaustion. I got into bed and lay on my back, stiff and straight, my arms close to my sides, as if I were lying in a sarcophagus. I stared at

Jillian's face on my vision board, still nailed to the back of my bedroom door. I looked into her dark, lonely eyes with longing, but also maybe, looking for some kind of inspiration. I wanted Jillian with me when I fell asleep, but when I closed my eyes I saw only Lola, dark circles under her eyes, bruised and angry, storming out on me. "You're an asshole, Joseph," she said. "*Un obsesivo.*"

New businesses sprang up like mushrooms in the middle of the night. First pizza delivery. Then a dentist's office. Then a Dunkin' Donuts and a Fresh & Easy. The roads leading from Mountain's Edge to the 215 were lined with orange cones and paving trucks that worked round the clock. But then the construction crews began to work half days and everything slowed down. Each new house built in my neighborhood was sold for a lower price than the one before it. When the new neighbors moved in I could see them peering out their windows sometimes. I knew what they were thinking. Thank God I didn't pay as much as they did. Thank God I waited. But then the next house popped up next to them, the next neighbor, the next bargain hunter thinking this was it, this was as low as we could go.

Then the building stopped, the sales office was only open every other day, and the last remaining houses sprouted signs in their front yards that said CLEARANCE, in bright red letters, like something in the bargain bin at Target. I wandered into the sales office before my shift to see what the same model house I had bought would go for now. It was three quarters the price, but no, that wasn't right, it had just been reduced again, to almost half the price I had paid.

An angry older couple stood in front of the saleswoman's desk, screaming. I was almost relieved to see that other people had jobs where they got yelled at, that I wasn't the only one in this town with a shitty job. The saleswoman stood up and pointed her finger at them. "What are you telling this to me for? I'm just the salesperson. It's not my fault the market is the way it is. All my properties are upside down now too."

The guy at my table was an over-the-hill biker with sagging tattoos and outdated facial hair. He smoked stinky cigars and had an old, trashy wife standing behind him. He called me brother after everything he said. "J.T., let's win this hand, brother. Come on J.T., come on J.T." Every time he bet more than a quarter for himself he put up a nickel for me and said, "This one's for you and I, brother." I wanted to correct his grammar but I didn't because he was tipping and besides I didn't feel much like saying any more than I had to.

Three somewhat hot girls passed by us and then doubled back and approached the table, their perfume mixing with the reek of the old guy's cigar smoke. They each bought in for a hundred. I gave them each a stack of four twenty five dollar chips. One of the girls said she wanted five dollar chips. The old guy cleared his throat and said, "It's a quarter game." The girl looked confused, like maybe she didn't know a quarter was a twenty five dollar chip and a nickel was a five dollar chip, but she just nodded politely, noticed the table limit sign and caught on, more bright, or maybe just less drunk than the other two. The girls finally managed to set up their bets and the old biker said, "There's one thing nickels are good for on this game, tipping the dealer. Right brother?" The guy set up a nickel in front of each of the girls' bets. They looked up at me with question

marks on their foreheads, close to casino virgins probably, but I couldn't spend any more time on them. Their bets were set up and I'd already stopped the game long enough to deal with their buy-ins. The biker and the floor supervisor behind me were holding their breath, tapping their feet. I sent out the cards. They sailed from my hands in smooth trajectories over the bets, landing one on top of the other in front of the players' hands. The girls, as I'd expected, were dumbfounded. They'd only played a shoe game before, never double deck, so they all grabbed their cards with two hands.

"Ladies, just so you know, one hand on the cards please, and don't bend them. I'll show you the signs for hit and stay when I get to you, okay?" I deliberately kept my voice as calm and soothing as possible, like an art therapist, or a guidance counselor.

One girl nodded as if she understood, then bent her cards upwards with two hands to peek at them anyway, copying what she'd seen on World Series of Poker broadcasts on C-SPAN. I leaned in closer and said, "Just remember, one hand on the cards please." She dropped her cards on the table and lifted her hands, as if she were dropping a live snake. "Oh my God, she said to her friends, "I'm totally getting yelled at."

"Who's yelling?" I asked, but she wasn't paying attention to me. Her friends tried to help her. One of them grabbed her cards to show her what to do, but I had to tell her that only the person playing the hand could touch the cards. I was being as nice as I could but the girls weren't listening. They were conferring, back and forth, in panic mode, picking up their cards, dropping them, making the wrong signals for hit and stay. The old biker was getting impatient. The floor supervisor was giving me a look like what's the problem, why's the game being held up for so long?

We finally got their hands squared away. The guy tucked his cards and stayed on twenty. I drew a fifteen, then drew a ten and busted. The girls cheered. I shoed their hands away as they tried to turn their cards over, telling them “I’ll take care of that for you,” which was a polite way of saying that the dealer had to do it, not the player. I paid the bets in a lightning fast blur of speed, overcompensating for having to wait so long just to get through one hand while I was teaching the girls how to play. I paid the nickel bets the old guy put up for me and locked them up right away, before the girls had a chance to grab them and take them for themselves, since I was almost sure they didn’t know that they were toke bets. Nothing worse than winning a bet for the dealers and then watching the player take it away, not realizing what they were doing, or pretending they didn’t anyway. There was no nice way to ask for it back really.

I busted almost every hand and the three girls and the old biker were cheering and hollering and chanting my name. By the time I got tapped out by Fong everyone at the table had tall stacks of quarters in front of them. The girls had caught on to the importance of tipping, following the old guy’s example, and I’d dropped over a thousand in the box. They groaned when I clapped off the game. I said a genuine thank you to them before I rushed out of the pit, hoping to catch Jillian on her way back from break. I just missed her. She strutted back onto the stage, stopping to wrap one of her sinewy legs around a pole and pose for a picture. She saw me, winked, blew me a kiss, then got back to work, shining for the cameras and entertaining the party people below.

When I got back to my game, twenty minutes later, the same group of girls and the old biker were still there, but the mood was grim, and the stacks I left them with were seriously depleted. The girls cheered when they saw me and the old guy put me up for a

nickel. The girls had picked up on how to play the game and I moved through the first hand quickly, drew out five cards, and ended up with twenty one. That's when they gave me that look. The one that said, you betrayed us, we were counting on you to get us on a winning streak when you came back, and now you've gone and fucked it all up.

I smiled apologetically; playing along that it was somehow my fault only because everyone was tipping so well, then I sent out the next hand. The first girl took a minute to decide whether or not to double down. As I helped her set up her bet, the old guy on third base curled his cards up to look at them, one at a time, bending them and letting them snap back onto the table with a sound that made me bite my gums until I tasted blood in my mouth, bitter and metallic. Everyone tucked their cards and I drew out a twenty one again. The girls were in shock, looking up at me perplexed, unable to fathom how the dealer could draw out to twenty one twice in a row.

The next few hands didn't go much better. Only a few wins for the players here and there, a couple of pushes, but mostly just crushing, unexpected losses. The biker guy bent each card up to look at it, maybe because he was distracted, calculating how much he had lost, or how much he had left in credit. I let him get away with it a few times because he was tipping so much, or he had been when he was winning anyway, and I didn't want to ruffle his feathers. The next few hands I was hoping he would catch on as I made a show of smoothing out his cards in front of him before setting them in the discard rack, but he never caught on. Finally, when the floor supervisor gave me that exhausted look that said, when you going to take care of this, J.T.? I leaned into the old guy's hostile energy and said, "Just remember, don't bend the cards please."

I finished the hand and sent the next one out. He was glaring at me, angry. “You think I’m bending the cards?” he asked. I wanted to say, no, I don’t think, I know. I’m two feet away from you, and we have it on film. But I kept quiet and tried to just keep the game moving.

“I’ve never been accused of bending the cards before in my life,” the old guy muttered to his wife. But he kept doing it every hand, not even realizing it. Every time I heard the snap of his cards against the layout I sucked my breath through my teeth until they ached. The floor supervisor behind me was whispering something into the phone on the podium. I leaned in again, avoided making eye contact, and said, “Sir, please, *please* don’t bend the cards.”

“I’m not,” he screamed. Spit winged out of his mouth and splashed across the table. “Quit yelling at me. Why you gotta be such a hard ass, J.T.?”

“Look, I don’t know how to ask any nicer than that.”

The old guy pushed the rest of his chips forward and said, “Color me up.”

I converted his remaining quarters to black and handed them out and said, “Thanks for playing,” looking just over his shoulder, so I wouldn’t have to see the murderous look in his eyes.

“Fuck you, little bitch,” he said, and left.

The girls looked up at me, wide-eyed and frozen in place. None of them had placed their bets yet. I pointed to their betting spots one at a time and said, more harshly than I meant to, “Alright, who’s in?”

The girl with the most chips said, almost whispering, "I'm going to color up too." I converted her chips and the other girls pocketed the few quarters they had left and slinked away.

When everyone was gone I breathed a sigh of relief. But then a group of drunks came stumbling out of the club and landed at my table. They had Jersey accents, shaved arms, and testosterone dripping off their skin and evaporating into a cloud around them. I was almost certain they were used to gambling in Atlantic City and wouldn't know their ass from their elbow on the double deck. I'd have to go through the rules all over again. One hand on the cards. Don't bend the cards. Swipe your cards to hit. Tuck your cards to stay. Don't touch the money. Don't bend the cards. Are you listening? I said, don't bend the fucking cards. Hey, shut up and pay attention.

The Jersey guys bought in five hundred each and started complaining from the get go. They said they came to Vegas for a getaway, so why did they have to listen to all these sob stories about the economy? Everyone they talked to, from the valet to the bellhop to the caddy on the golf course, had stopped paying their mortgage. Some Vegas landlords weren't giving their tenants any notice that their properties were going into foreclosure, and now there were whole villages of renters living like gypsies, ready to pack up and leave at a moment's notice in the middle of the night. Even the taxi drivers, even the bartenders, even the strippers were bumming them out. They just wanted to sit and play some cards and not hear any more depressing stories.

"So basically, just shut up and deal?" I asked.

One of the Jersey guys, the leader, shrugged, and nodded. There was always a leader in a group of guys and I always figured out which one it was within the first sixty seconds.

“Suits me just fine, man. The guy who just left talked way too much anyway.”

“I like your style, J.T.” The leader and I pounded knuckles and I sent out the first hand. It took them a few hands to learn the rules, but the leader paid attention and soon enough the rest of them caught on.

I texted Jillian after work from the parking garage. By the time I pulled into my driveway the message light was blinking. I hesitated before checking it. Every night was the same, drag ass through the casino, text Jillian after my shift, get a blow off text back, sketch, paint, crash, revive, do it all over again.

The text was from Jarrell. Leilani was diagnosed with lung cancer and she don't even smoke...wtf!

I changed into a warm tracksuit and covered my head with a wool cap. The streets outside were deathly quiet and the air was icy cold. I inhaled deeply, visualized the frigid air cleansing my entire body, purifying my soul. Lola taught me how to focus my prana, how to use my breath as life force and picture it as a glowing, golden light inside my body. As I ran along the edge of the mountain the sun began to peek over its summit, lighting up the endless rows of stucco houses. The muted hues of the desert reflected off every surface. Cardamom, Cinnamon, Sage, Burnt Umber, Desert Spice, Brushed Sand. Every variation of beige. I could only picture the energy inside me as an earth tone.

I started to cough violently and had to stop for a minute. I rested my hands on my knees and hunched over, trying to catch my breath. I hacked up a gnarly ball of phlegm. It splattered onto the pristine sidewalk, streaked with brown and black. I was coughing up nicotine and tar. My prana was stained with second-hand smoke.

In the break room, before my shift, I fished a bagel from a plastic bag and tried to pull it apart. It tore into a jagged, uneven mess, scattering crumbs all over the counter. One of the pieces was too big to fit into the toaster oven and got stuck in the back of the conveyor belt grill. It caught fire and started to fill the break room with smoke. Jarrell saw me standing there, choking and watching the fire lick the edges of the metal grill. He rushed over to put out the flames.

Jarrell led me down to the casino floor by the elbow when our shift began, as if I were a frail, elderly uncle.

“Leilani and I are going to be moving, she’s letting the house go,” said Jarrell.

“She has a good reason,” I said, “She’s been sick. Can’t keep a big house like that on just one income.”

“We all got a good reason,” he said, “It’s what I be doing with my properties too.”

Jillian and the other pole dancers hurried past us in the hallway in a rush of clomping high-heeled boots, cowboy hats and exposed flesh, on their way out to their first set. Jillian raked her fingers through my hair as she passed us.

“You hittin’ that yet?” asked Jarrell.

When I was on my game dealing, I was lit by spotlights from above, like a display in a museum, guitars pinned to the walls around me like the wings of captured butterflies.

Watched and filmed and recorded every minute of every hour of every shift, night after night. I never knew who was watching. The cameras were rolling 24/7. Reality shows filmed footage in the casino, E News broadcast live, and VH1 cameras captured celebrities getting into trouble in Sin City. Surveillance cameras lined the ceiling above me, a perpetual audience of players scrutinized me from the front, and floor supervisors watched from behind. The eyes watching from every angle collapsed the space around me, brought everything in so close it was unbearable. The music blared and my ears bled. The swelling tsunami of noise was so loud I couldn't hear the cracks forming in my skull, couldn't hear myself breaking.

At the end of the night, after losing it all, the players looked up at me and waited. They were always expecting something from me, a reaction, anything. Their currency was service. How far down we were willing to kowtow. They wanted comps, they wanted exceptions made for them, they wanted recognition. When they lost they wanted someone to say, well that sucks, but hey man, that's gambling. They wanted validation and attention. Someone to notice them. Someone to love them. Sometimes they just wanted someone to put them in their place. Money meant nothing to them. They swam in it. What they came for was excitement, suspense, and the confirmation at the end of the night that they were a loser, just as they'd always suspected. When they lost, they were almost relieved, as if they were glad to get some of that money out of the way. If they had too much of it, they just gambled higher limits, raised the stakes, let themselves lose so much that they could feel again what it was to lack, to hunger, to know what motivation and wanting more and making a little go a long way meant.

I smiled and shrugged. They high-fived me, or knuckle-punched my fist. Sometimes they shook my hand.

Thanks Jarrell, I had a great time.

Thanks Armando. Roberto. Marlon. Luis. Jesse. Humphrey. Rascal. Joseph.

Thanks Fat Albert.

Thanks Black Ice.

Leilani started wearing a Russian spy wig when she came back to work, right after her last round of chemo. She smiled when she dropped off her drinks at my table, but I could tell it was an effort. Knowing she had to come back to the casino to inhale the same poison every night, I fumed. I glared at anyone with a pack of cigarettes. A cigar got a scowl. When a player asked for a pack of matches, I sighed before handing it over. He asked if the smoke bothered me. Saying so could have cost me my job. I shrugged, resigned to my slavery here.

I calculated the potential level of threat for each person who walked by my table, scanning them for clues. Holding a pack of cigarettes, half-hidden in their cupped hand – a smoker. Too old, or foreign-looking – probably a stiff. Too fat, or ugly – a bore, or the opposite, too talkative. A chatty Cathy. A temper. Moody. Someone who was likely to blow up, a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, someone who would ask too many personal questions, talk to you so much you couldn't hear yourself think, couldn't concentrate on your job. A sore loser. An asshole. A loud mouth. A bitch.

My pain-in-the-ass player gave us a hard time for the entire shift. He wanted a comp for cigarettes, but when Maritza logged in to check his card, he didn't have enough

points left. Maritza overrode the computer and got him the comp anyway. When Leilani brought his smokes he complained they weren't the right brand. He said he wanted American Spirit.

"I'm pretty sure you asked for Marlboro because no one else in the pit ordered cigarettes," Leilani told him, smiling. Her wig was starting to slide down the side of her head. The player frowned and Maritza rewrote the comp and sent Leilani to get another pack, softly rubbing her back and adjusting her wig before sending her on her way. When Leilani came back with American Spirit the player said they weren't the right kind. He wanted filtered and they were unfiltered. Or maybe he wanted menthol and they were just regular. Whatever it was, he wanted something else. Whatever we did for him, he wanted more. People like him would never be happy. As long as I was here, I'd never be happy either.

There was never a single second that my table didn't have a player propped up at one of its seats. There was no last call, no closing time, no one slept and no one ever had enough. One player lost, another stepped in to take their place. They became one, hydra-like mass. Kill one head and another popped into their spot, wriggled their way into their ash-covered seat.

After work I texted Jillian. Hey cocktease flake. Meet me at fatburger on ft apache ur treat.

I drove there and waited for her. The winter was the coldest on record in Las Vegas since before I was born. Jillian's white Pathfinder pulled into the parking lot just as the first snow flurries started to fall in front of my headlights.

“So when the fuck did you grow a pair of balls?” Jillian waved her phone at me as if it were evidence and slammed the car door behind her.

“I needed to get your attention somehow. Only so many times you can blow a guy off before he changes tactics. It got you here, didn’t it?”

“I’m either furious or intrigued. I haven’t decided yet.”

I held the door open for her and we walked in. I asked her what she wanted, ordered, and then smiled at her when it was time to pay.

“You can’t be serious,” she said.

“Didn’t you read my text? Your treat. I’m tired of you gold-digging bitches sticking us hard-working dudes with all the bills.”

The pimply-faced cashier nodded at me and said, “Wow man, I got to give you props on that one.” He held his fist up and I pounded knuckles with him. Jillian shook her head and rummaged in her purse for her credit card.

“How do you like our fancy first date?” I asked her when we sat down.

“Is that what this is? You’re even more pathetic than I thought you were. How many times were you going to text me before you gave up?”

“And I guess you’re just another cocktease whore. I thought you might be the one Vegas girl who was different.”

“I am different, J.T.”

“How do you figure?”

Jillian’s eyes got wide and serious and I saw the whole world reflected back at me, deep, brown, loving.

“Well, I’m pretty low-maintenance. I grew up in a cabin in Alaska. Underneath all this glam is a pretty down to earth girl.”

Jillian was wearing fake eyelashes, hair extensions, and sparkly high heels. I laughed at her and she looked down, self-conscious.

“What’s funny?” she asked, “The part about the cabin? I know it is a little Jewel.”

“God, no,” I said. “I just don’t buy you as low maintenance, not anymore anyway. Vegas has a way of chewing people up and spitting them out”

She scarfed down her burger twice as fast as I did. Then she licked the grease from her fries, savoring it. She leaned over, wiped the corner of my mouth with her napkin and said, “So when do I get to come see this new house, Mr. Torres?”

“It’s not so new anymore,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter.”

She followed me down Ft. Apache. We drove slowly because the light dusting of snow on the newly paved roads made it difficult to tell where they ended and the desert began. When we got to my house I had my hands down her pants before I even got the door closed. I carried her across the room and threw her onto the Barcalounger. She tried to cry out but I pressed her mouth into my shoulder until she was struggling to breathe. When I let go she gasped for air and then tried to push me away and squirm out of the chair. I pinned her wrists to the arms of the chair, my fingers clutching her as tightly as the talons of an eagle.

“J.T., no, that hurts.”

“Shut up. You know you love it, *puta*.”

I gripped her wrists tighter, pressed my weight down on top of her.

She whimpered. “No. No.” She started to sob. Then she kissed me.

We slumbered peacefully all morning and all afternoon in the Barcalounger, wrapped in each others’ arms. Jillian woke before I did and raised the blinds, flooding the living room with the last rays of the late afternoon sun, still speckled with rare desert snowflakes. She jumped up and down and clapped her hands, naked, giving the neighbors a show.

“Let’s go outside and make a snowman.”

Jillian would want me to take pictures of her in the front yard, frolicking in the snow, bouncy as a little kid. She would smile sweetly. She wouldn’t strike a sexy pose like she did when she was on stage at work and someone wanted to take her picture. It would be just me looking through the lens, and Jillian with her teeth like white pebbles and her brown eyes like the desert after it rains, looking up at the camera, as open and loving as an angel.

“Maybe I should go get you something to put on first,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“Always been such a buzzkill, J.T.?” She folded her arms over her chest.

I ran to my walk-in closet and came back with some paint-splattered sweats and a wife beater that Lola used to wear. Jillian was sprawled across the Barcalounger, her legs spread-eagle, as if she were offering herself to me. I froze. She looked up at me and pulled out the other persona. She was the matador again. She stood up and walked across the room, one sure step at a time, never taking her eyes off of mine.

Jillian pushed me onto the bed and crawled on top of me. Her lips were on my mouth, my cheek, the arteries in my neck. I pushed my tongue into her ear. It was warm and wet like the inside of a cave. She whispered in my ear. What was she saying? She sat up straight.

“What the hell?”

She scanned the walls of the bedroom, seeing them for the first time in the dying light of the late afternoon. They were covered in layers of charcoal and paint, schematics of a place only I had ever seen until then. They were nearly filled in with overlapping straight lines and angles, pyramids and triangles repeated over and over, wrapping around all four walls.

“This is a little, intense. I mean, what about the resale value? Or were you just planning to walk away?”

Jillian was still sitting on top of me naked. But all the fire had drained out of her. I grabbed her hand and ran my fingers over her palm, feeling the lines, trying to make sense of how they twisted together. I thought of the woman in Teotihuacán who predicted the future.

“A year from now you will be talking shit about J.T. as he and Jarrell walk by you in the break room,” I said. “You will lean in and whisper to the other pole dancers that J.T. is a creep who has nothing to his name but foreclosures and liens and a shitty FICO score. You’ll tell them that his idea of a date was splitting an order of fries because he was so cheap. Then you’ll tell them how you found a guy with a good head on his shoulders, a house that he’s not walking away from, and a bigger dick.”

Jillian rolled off of me, pulled her hand away and said, “This is getting a little weird.”

“All he’ll hear is his name, J.T., or maybe you’ll start calling him Joseph by then. He’ll stop walking, look you in the eye and say, ‘Keep my name out your fucking mouth.’ You’ll call him an asshole, then he’ll go downstairs to the casino and get called an asshole by the players too when they lose. Unless you let him go, then he’s free, then everything can burn and he can throw himself into the flames and be reborn.”

Jillian knocked her knuckles against my forehead, hard.

“What’s that fortune cookie going to say if we crack it open?”

“Find me a hot girl, and I’ll find you a guy who’s tired of fucking her.”

“I’m so outta here,” said Jillian. She tried to get up out off the bed but I pulled her back down, playfully at first, but then more forcefully. She slapped my face.

“You really are an asshole,” she said.

I smacked her hard across the jaw with the back of my hand. She blinked back tears and took a minute to focus her vision.

“You liked it like that last night,” I said, getting up and shutting the bedroom door. There on the back of it was Jillian’s face, repeated over and over, like an echo.

“This looks worse than it is,” I said.

“I’m leaving, don’t try to stop me.”

I stepped aside, hanging my head. Jillian opened the door and ran out, quick as a jaguar, snatching her clothes off the floor on the way. I heard her car door slam in the street outside. The engine revved to a start and her tires screeched as she sped away through the snowy streets.

I pulled her pictures down from my vision board and threw them onto the floor. There was nothing left but the original sketch now, the rough draft of the Pyramid of the Sun, still beyond salvageable. I ran outside into the street, barefoot. I sprinted along the road until the subdivision ended and the houses disappeared. The snow-covered desert looked like the landscape of one of the moons of Saturn. In the expanse of white, Jillian would miss the turn, keep driving into the featureless horizon until the snow melted into the ground and took the rest of the houses with it, swallowed them up like quicksand until nothing was left but scrub brush and sage and scraggly coyotes braying at the moon. I would run until my feet bore into the tarred-over desert, until they broke through the Earth's crust and lava boiled up and shot forth in a fiery plume, like the breath of an angry god, and there was nothing left but a scorched crater, the whole city burned to the ground, the ashes scattered in the wind over the desert.

Dawn of the Fifth Sun

The gods

voices in darkness

created a new sun and moon

Tecuciztécatl offered quetzal feathers stones

coral incense Nanahuatzin laid out simple reeds cactus

thorns his own blood and scabs the pyre in Teotihuacán burned

orange on holy ground they rushed into flames an eagle and jaguar followed

Final Phase: A New Age

Meztli – Teotihuacán, Mexico

Meztli was more otherworldly creature than human, more cobwebbed prowler on the shadow side of the stone ziggurats than resident of Earth. She hobbled up and down the steps of the pyramids, reaching her clawed hands into the abandoned recesses and cavities of the ruins, plucking out shiny trinkets; stray buttons and coins which fell from the pockets of tourists who scaled the monuments. Meztli hoarded them, stuffed them into the ever-expanding folds of her shawls, which wrapped around her like the layers of clouds enveloping the surface of one of the large outer planets of the Solar System.

The sun set and the moon slipped into the wide expanse of sky. The stars shone brightly, and dimly. Meztli saw the sky as both clear, and hazy with pollution at the same time, as if time were happening not as a sequence of events, but as a continuous circle, and she was somewhere in the center of it, able to see it all at once. At night she found

her way back to the Citadel, back to the Temple of the Feathered Serpent. She sought dampness, darkness, and warmth. These were the conditions that could sustain the fragility of a heart which beat so slowly it had almost stopped entirely. She found her way through cracks in the walls barely big enough for a tiny person to fit through. Then she moved through fissures in the stone floor smaller than that, unseen. She melted into the undiscovered passageways below the temple, retreated to the sacred space at the heart of the ancient center of spiritual power. It was a small cave that pulsated with the vibrations of the cosmos. She curled into a fetal ball and placed her fists into her mouth. That's when the visions came. Sometimes, Meztli thought of this time as simply her life, and the time she was awake and scampering around above ground in the heat and the dust as her purgatory, her waking nightmare. The sun an angry god glaring in her eyes, boring into her thoughts and burning out any shred of happiness and tranquility she may have ever felt. She wanted to stay in the cave below the temple forever, but she had to go out into the world above, to forage for food, to pick up coins and trade them for bags of peanuts and husks of corn with chili and lime. She had plenty of water. It dripped onto the rocks of the cave from an unknown source, its sound an incessant lullaby from the belly of the earth itself.

The visions came to her from other lives. Places she had never been and couldn't comprehend. She dreamt in languages she didn't understand when she woke. She saw boats sailing from a land of snow-covered birch forests, a family separated by boys dressed as soldiers, tears the color of amber falling into the ocean. She saw the boats running aground in another land of snow-covered birch forests, she saw them coming to shore in a place of dusty, rolling plains and horses.

One night, Meztli received a powerful visitor, someone who thrived in dampness and darkness. Mictlantecuhtli, the lord of the underworld, drifted through her cave, skeletal and otherworldly. He was adorned in robes of bark and his hands were enormous claws and his hair was glittering with stars. The first time he passed through Meztli's cave, she was both terrified and oddly aroused. Had he come to see her? Had the coziness of her cave piqued his interest? But her hopes of an otherworldly ravaging were dashed when his consort, Mictecacihuatl drifted in after him, her face a gruesome skull, her skirt a writhing, hissing mass of fork-tongued serpents. The couple left a chill in the air in their wake which left her shivering. Their dog paced behind them in measured steps. Meztli took an instant disliking to the scraggly little beast. He glared at her with malicious, spectral eyes, and she glared back, not willing to give an inch of ground in her own territory, in the cave that until then had the warm, rhythmic sensation of a cosmic womb, protective and inviolate.

The dog, affronted by the incident, sought vengeance on Meztli. He found a way to materialize during the day in the physical realm, or perhaps, like her, this was his natural state of existence. She was at the base of the Pyramid of the Sun, her head wrapped to protect her from the harmful rays. She was reading the palm of a tourist. His face was one she had seen before, in a vision. First in the cave below the temple, and then, above ground, standing in front of her, placing his hand in hers, his eyes open and trusting, placing his whole heart in her hands. And Meztli knowing, he would lose everything. But then he could begin again.

The dog came back just as the tourist left. He snarled at her, but she stared him down. No, you will not drive me from this place, dog of death. No, I will not let your

masters take me before I am ready. They stood there at a frozen impasse while the universe ground to a standstill around them. Then, slowly, the planets resumed their orbits. The sun set. The moon began to shine. Their faces went up in flames as if someone had struck a match to them. The tourist snapped a picture, looked down, embarrassed, and rushed away. The dog followed him. The tourist didn't notice. Meztli knew the dog would not catch up to him. He would be back, this tourist, he knew how to travel lightly, how to keep moving, even if it meant leaving something behind, or everything. At least he would be free. He would make his own choice. If he knew what their great grandfather told her in dreams, he might return, he might take her place.

Meztli returned to the Citadel, to the Temple of the Feathered Serpent, the place to which they had found themselves drawn, all the faces she had seen in her visions over the years, or perhaps they were minutes or days or lifetimes. The first had come with another young man. He looked like he was in love. Meztli told him he was going to suffer in a cold land without borders, and he accepted it. The next came with a pair of twins with hair the color of common copal. He got lost. He found his way. He got lost again. The rest she didn't know. The next understood her but could not answer. Love eluded him. The stars guided him. The last was the most important, and the one who suffered the most. He had the strength of the warriors of antiquity, but his heart was afraid to use it. They all returned to the womb of the cosmos. They had all come from the same place, the same energy, the same DNA. Go back far enough and the gene pool is one, the branches of the tree shrink back into a single root, divisions and tribes and languages disappear, borderlines sink into the ground, nations wither, but somehow there is always war, always a dagger in the heart, a sacrifice, an angry god demanding

vengeance and justice and masses of devotees to adore him, to love him, and somewhere, a goddess, beyond all, with her arms spread wide to embrace us and her legs spread wider to welcome us back to the place we began.

Creation of the Sun and Moon

The
sacrifice
complete the gods
waited Tecuciztécatl rose
first the moon shining brilliantly
Nanahuatzin the new sun at the zenith
they hung motionless in the sky Nanahuatzin
demanded hearts and lifeblood sacrifice of the gods
as he had offered his earthly body they cut their hearts
from their chests and offered them to the sun the life-energy
of the cosmos grew the moon sank beneath the horizon of the Earth

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- “Anger Management,” *Red Rock Review*, Spring 2011
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