A SUNNY PLACE FOR SHADY PEOPLE

STORIES

TRANSLATED BY MEGAN McDOWELL

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ

AUTHOR OF OUR SHARE OF NIGHT

A SUNNY PLACE FOR SHADY PEOPLE

STORIES

TRANSLATED BY MEGAN McDOWELL

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ

AUTHOR OF *OUR SHARE OF NIGHT*

By Mariana Enriquez

THINGS WE LOST IN THE FIRE
THE DANGERS OF SMOKING IN BED
OUR SHARE OF NIGHT
A SUNNY PLACE FOR SHADY PEOPLE

A SUNNY PLACE FOR SHADY PEOPLE

Stories

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ

Translated by Megan McDowell

HOGARTH
LONDON | NEW YORK

A Sunny Place for Shady People is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Translation copyright © 2024 by Megan McDowell

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Hogarth, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

HOGARTH is a trademark of the Random House Group Limited, and the H colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

Originally published in Spain as *Un lugar soleado para gente sombríaby* by Anagrama in Barcelona, Spain, in 2024. Copyright © 2024 by Mariana Enriquez.

Hardback ISBN 9780593733257
Ebook ISBN 9780593733264

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Simon M. Sullivan, adapted for ebook

Cover design and collage: Donna Cheng
Cover images: Getty Images

ep_prh_7.0a_148165253_c0_r0

CONTENTS

Epigraph

My Sad Dead

A Sunny Place for Shady People

Face of Disgrace

Julie

Night Birds

Metamorphosis

Hyena Hymns

Different Colors Made of Tears

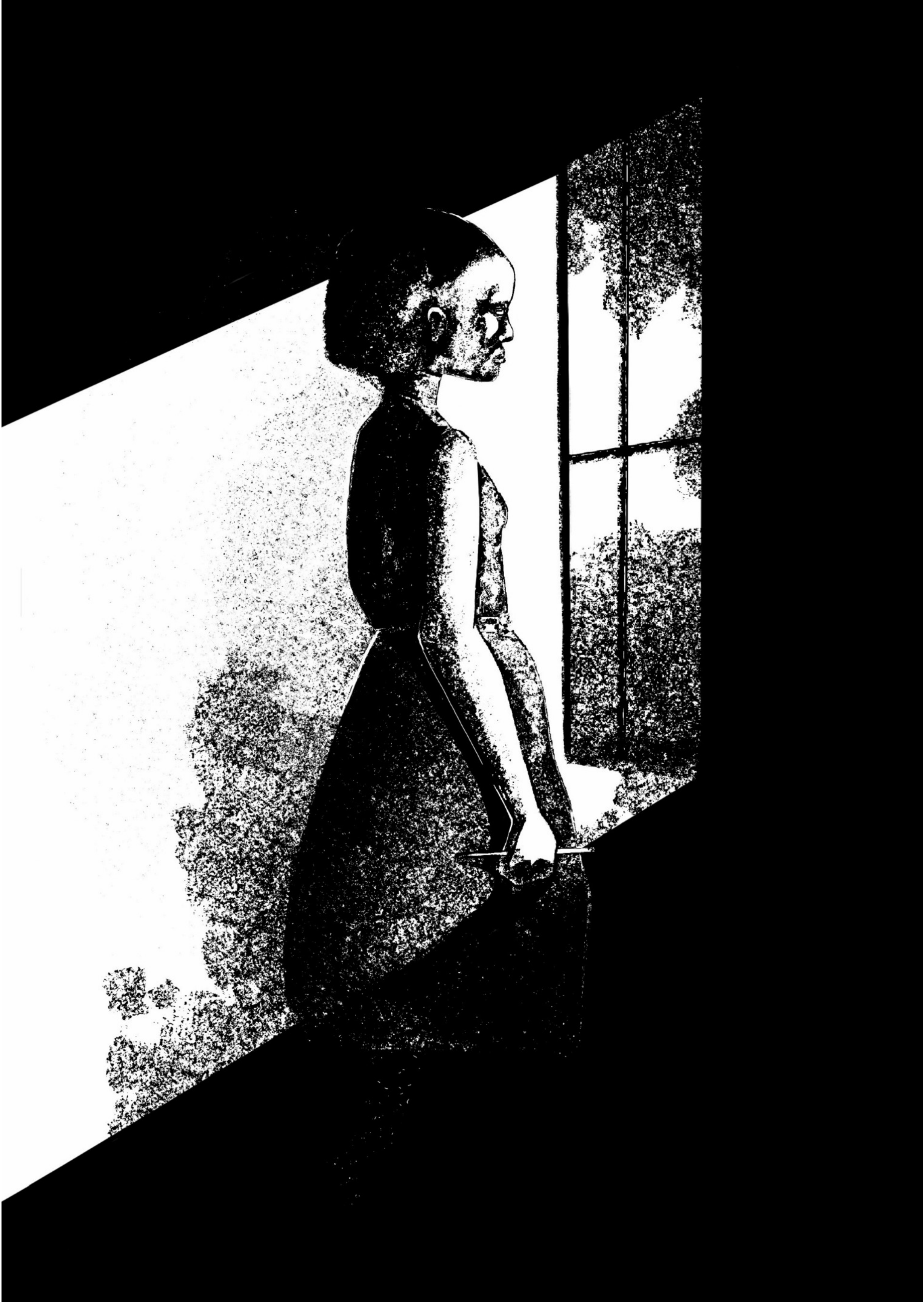
The Suffering Woman

The Refrigerator Cemetery

A Local Artist

Black Eyes

Acknowledgments
About the Author and the Translator



Today I was struck by sadness,
I suffered from three kinds of fear,
added to the irreversible fact:
I am no longer young.

—ADÉLIA PRADO

A wound gives off its own light.

—ANNE CARSON

Doesn't have arms, but it knows how to use them. Doesn't have a face, but it knows where to find one.

—THOMAS LIGOTTI

MY SAD DEAD

But now it’s time for you to come back. You have been away long enough.
—LYDIA DAVIS, *Can’t and Won’t*

First, I think, I should describe the neighborhood. Because the neighborhood is where my house is, and my house is where my mother is. You can’t understand one thing without the other. You can’t understand why I don’t leave. Because I *could* leave. I could leave tomorrow.

The neighborhood has changed since I was little. These houses, originally for workers, were built along these narrow streets back in the ’30s: stone houses with lovely little gardens and tall windows with iron shutters. One could say that it was the residents themselves who gradually ruined the houses with all their innovating: the air-conditioning units, the tiled roofs, a tacked-on upper story made of different materials, exterior facings and paint jobs in ridiculous colors, cheaper knockoffs replacing the original wooden doors. But aside from the residents’ poor taste, the neighborhood suffered because it became an island. On one side we’re bordered by the avenue: it’s like an ugly river we have to ford, and there’s nothing much along its shores. To the south we have the housing projects, which have grown ever more dangerous, with kids selling crack on the stairways and sometimes pulling guns on one another when they fight, or firing into the air if they’re mad after a soccer loss. To the north is a tract of land that was supposed to be developed into some kind of sports field, but that never happened, and now the area is occupied by very poor houses, the best ones made of concrete blocks, the more precarious ones of tin and cardboard. The housing project and this slum merge to the east of our neighborhood.

I understand how things go: if misery is stalking you the way it does everyone in my country and my city and you have to resort to crime in order to survive, then that's what you do. There's more money in crime than in lawful work. In any case, there isn't much lawful work available, not for anyone. And if living a better life entails risk, well, it's a risk many people are willing to take.

Few of my neighbors—the inhabitants of this island of little houses built when the world was different—think the way I do. I want to be clear: I get scared sometimes, too. I don't want a stray bullet to hit me, either, or my daughter when she (rarely) comes to visit. I don't want to be regularly robbed at the bus stop or whenever I'm in a car waiting at a red light on the corner by the projects. I, too, go home crying when a teenager pulls a knife on me and snatches my phone. But I don't want to kill them all. I don't think they're a bunch of freeloaders and immigrants and miscreants and deadbeats, all expendable and unsalvageable. My ex-husband, who works for an oil company and lives in Patagonia, tells me that the neighbors are just afraid. I tell him that fascism generally starts with fear and then turns into hatred. He tells me I should sell the house and move to the south to be closer to him. We're divorced, but we're friends. We've always been friends. His new wife is delightful. I tend to use our daughter, Carolina, as an excuse for staying here, but it's just an excuse. Carolina lives far away from me and from this house, and she works as a fashion editor at a glossy magazine. She doesn't need me.

I stay because my mother lives here. Can I say that about a dead woman? She's *present,* then. Ever since she first appeared to me, I've understood that word better. She was here, she occupied a physical space, and I sensed her presence before I could see her.

My mother was a happy woman until she got cancer and came home to die. Her agony was long, painful, and undignified. It's not always like that. The wise patient with bald head and yellowed skin who sits in bed imparting life lessons is a ridiculous romanticization, but it's true that there are people who suffer less. It has to do with physiology, and also temperament. My mother was allergic to morphine. She couldn't use it, and

we had to resort to other, impotent painkillers. She died screaming. A nurse and I did what we could for her. It wasn't much. I'm a doctor, but I haven't worked with patients in a long time; instead, I do administrative work at a private medical company. At sixty, I don't have the energy, patience, or passion for hospital work anymore. Also, it's true, for a long time I denied (denial is a powerful drug) a fact that I finally had to come to terms with when my mother appeared. Namely, that ghosts exist, and I can see them. Though they seek me out, I'm not the only one who sees them: in the hospital, the nurses used to go running. I tried to reassure them, saying, "Come now, you're imagining things."

It was morning when I first heard my mother scream. Not the wee morning hours under cover of night but the full-on sunlight of day, so ill-suited to haunting. The houses in the area, though very pretty, are built close together in a semidetached style, and noise carries. My next-door neighbor Mari, who hardly ever leaves her house because she's terrified she'll be robbed and murdered and who knows what other phobic fantasies, leaned wide-eyed out her window that looks into my little front yard just as I was going out to see if there was someone in the street. It was a stupid, knee-jerk reaction driven by my own panic: I couldn't believe that I was hearing my dead mother's cries, and I thought maybe it was someone outside. An accident, a fight. Mari remembered my mother's real screams, too, and she was shocked and dumbfounded.

"It's the TV, Mari. It's okay," I told her.

"It's just—you realize what it sounds like, Doctor?"

"It really does. I can't believe it."

And I went back inside.

Since I didn't know what to do, I started looking around the house for the source of the cries, and asking my mother, as if I were praying, to be quieter. I didn't urge her to stop wailing entirely—just a little discretion, that was all I asked for. I'd made the same request of other ghosts, first at the hospital and later on at a clinic. Sometimes that pleading worked. My mother always did have a sense of humor, and my appeal to turn down the volume made her laugh. I didn't find her that day—which I took off from

work—but I did that night, sitting on the floor of the room where she'd died, which is now a storage room for furniture I never take the time to toss or give away. She was thin, but thin like she'd been at the beginning of her cancer, not the brittle and feverish wraith of her final months. I didn't dare approach; leaning in the doorway, my knees shaking, I sang to her. And as I sang I sank down until we were seated face-to-face, me with my legs crossed, her kneeling. I sang the song I used to sing when her pain had been unbearable, the song that used to soothe her, or so I chose to think. That night, she didn't scream.

But ghosts, I've learned, get upset. I don't know what they think, if they think at all, because it's more like they repeat themselves and the repetitions seem like thoughtless reflexes, but some of them do talk and have opinions and bad moods. My mother wanders the house. Sometimes she seems to know I'm there, and other times she doesn't. Sometimes it seems that the fury returns to her, the fury of her degraded body, the colostomy bag, the humiliation; she used to be so elegant, and I remember how she cried, "The smell, the smell!" Sometimes it was worse than the physical suffering. So she screams, and her screams can be pure rage. I have several ways of calming her down, but there's no reason to go into them here.

The interesting thing is what started to happen around the neighborhood. It made me realize I wasn't crazy—I'd considered the possibility, as anyone would after seeing her dead mother climbing the stairs—and also that my mother wasn't the only ghost around.

—

My neighbors have "safety" meetings. They don't accomplish much. There have been break-ins around the neighborhood, some violent muggings, an old lady beaten. It's awful, the stuff that happens here. But the neighbors are even worse. They go to those meetings and yell about how they pay their taxes (which is only partly true: they evade everything they can, like most middle-class Argentines) and how they've bought guns and are taking classes on how to use them. And they describe what they think the police

should do to criminals: always the suggestion of murder, or humiliation, medieval torture, an eye for an eye, that sort of thing. There's one man I don't know, a little older than me, who declares that the police should display the heads of these "illegals" on stakes, like in colonial days. No one opposes him, or even rolls their eyes. All the meetings end with the neighbors invoking their grandparents, such good people, all those European immigrants who arrived with nothing but the shirts on their backs, who came to find honest work, who were poor but dignified, who were white. Just another myth. The immigrants of that era were, in many cases, poor and thieving; others were anarchists running from the police, and most of them became dishonest merchants who prioritized earning money over assuming any kind of ethical responsibility. But I don't argue anymore, if I ever did. I'm resigned to that worldview they all share. It's a lie, but arguing against a credible lie is a task for titans.

I go to the meetings because I want to know what they're planning. I want to know in advance if they're going to close off the street, for example. One time, they installed an alarm system unbeknownst to me, and I accidentally set it off when I leaned against a door to check my phone messages. They also mounted a camera at my house without my permission, but I have to admit the thing has been helpful. At least it lets me see if someone tries to pick the lock, which has already happened, in fact, a couple of times. The camera is broken now, and I haven't found the time to fix it. I can just hear my daughter: "Mom, your stubbornness is going to get you killed and I'll be the one to find you lying here dead and I hope you've saved money for my therapy because I'm not spending mine."

The emergency meeting they called in mid-July was a real shitshow.

A horrible thing had happened, and the neighborhood was full of TV cameras, from the regular stations and from cable and every other kind of media. Three teenage girls had been coming back from a party in the early morning. They had to cross our neighborhood to reach the projects, and someone shot them from a car. They didn't even have time to run. They died in the street. They were young, all three of them fifteen years old, and they'd been walking along holding hands and huddled over a phone to look

at messages. And that's how they appear in the photo: huddled together but fallen, one on top of another, with their cropped shirts showing their flat stomachs, their leggings bloodied, and their sneakers brand-new. One girl's face was destroyed by the bullets, and she stared up at the treetops with what remained of her eyes. The others, beneath her, bled to death right there. The identities of the murderers were still unknown when the neighborhood meeting was called, but it was clear enough to us what had happened: one of the girls must have been the daughter or relative of a more or less important criminal—an asphalt pirate, a mini-narco, a pimp. That person had offended someone or owed money: it was revenge. As the days passed, this theory was confirmed. A yellow police cordon blocked off the corner where the girls had been killed, but all around it people left bouquets of flowers, cardboard hearts, and teddy bears, a street-side grave with offerings more appropriate to little girls than teenagers.

I saw them one day at dusk as I was returning home from work. My taxi dropped me off right at the corner with the police cordon and the tributes to the girls. "Lu, we love you always!!!!!!!" "Justice for Natalia." "My little angel, you were gone too soon." They were taking photos as they walked: the three heads squeezed into the frame, pierced tongues sticking out (why do girls like to stick out their tongues so much?); a second round of pictures with duck-bill lips, that premature, phony sensuality. It had seemed especially grotesque in the real photographs of the girls that had appeared in the newspaper articles, pictures that had been posted on Instagram or TikTok, as my daughter explained to me: I didn't understand those images with dog noses or bunny ears, and then I found out they were "filters."

The ghost girls were laughing as they walked. At that hour, almost nighttime, my neighborhood is deserted. "The night is dark and full of terrors," says a priestess in the epic series that my daughter watches with true fanatic zeal, and that I can't get into because it has too many characters (though its violence, which other people find disturbing, doesn't bother me). The ghost girls couldn't get the flash to work, and that made them laugh harder. They were incredibly compact—there's no other way to put it. They seemed like living girls doing the things that fifteen-year-olds do:

oblivious to what's happening around them, wearing clothes a size or two too small for their bodies, their hair dyed and colorful, a jostling whirlwind of blue, green, black streaks. The neighborhood's windows opened timidly, and the silence rang out like a gunshot. Then someone in the house closest to the girls screamed. They were still about fifty meters away from me but I could already see them clearly, and I understood. One of them was bleeding from the neck. The blood flowed slowly down, and she wiped it away distractedly as if it were rainwater, or beer that some clumsy boy had spilled on her at the party. Another girl, the one whose face was destroyed, was taking photos unconcernedly, and the smallest one, skinny to the point of illness, had three red holes in her abdomen. I didn't want to look anymore; they reminded me of my mother and her cancer, her moribund thinness.

Then the girls started to look at the photos they had taken, and what they saw made them cry. "No, no, no," they said, and they shook their heads and looked at one another, looked at the photos, and saw the purplish green of putrefaction, and the blood, dried and fresh, the bullet wounds baring white bone, the blind eyes. The photos broke the spell of friendship and teenage immortality. Then they started to run. The ghost girls ran in desperate circles, and their wailing was truly terrifying. Their confused desperation. Had they only just realized that they were dead? How unfair: usually the dead have the good fortune not to see themselves decompose, even when they return as ghosts. My mother, for example: her image doesn't decay. But ghosts take different forms. I wonder if the shapes they take are determined by the dead people themselves or by those of us who see them —maybe those images are a collective construction.

The neighbors started to scream, too. It was madness. I heard a voice shout that someone had fainted and needed an ambulance, but who was going to call it with the girls right there, rotting in the lovely golden twilight? One of them, the one with blood running down her neck—the bullet had hit an artery—reminded me of Carolina. I don't know why. It wasn't her clothes: this girl wore the kind of cheap shirt and leggings you can buy in the neighborhood, maybe even at the supermarket. But there was something in the way she wore all that cheapness that reminded me of my

daughter's unexpected flair (I say "unexpected" because I certainly don't have the gift of knowing which color goes with which, or what pants can make my legs look longer). Yes, the girl's leggings were cheap, made of black Lycra, but her white shirt draped prettily over her buttocks, just so, and, with some bulky sneakers that were possibly men's, the outfit gave her a style—an "urban chic," as my daughter would say—that was very particular. Her shoes were a brash royal blue, and around her bloody neck hung a little chain with a Victorian pendant that broke the street style with an ironic touch. As I describe her, I believe I'm imitating my daughter, who always adds a brief explanatory note to her fashion layouts. In any case, maybe because that girl made me think of Carolina, she was the one I approached.

Of course I was scared, my heart reverberating in the pit of my stomach as if it had relocated there. And I'm no longer of the age for that kind of fright: I'm already at risk for an arrhythmia, or even angina. Also, the neighbors were watching. But I couldn't just leave the girls like that. Did I know I would be able to calm them? I knew. One just knows these things. In the hospital, when I pacified my first ghosts more than ten years ago now—I knew then, too. But at the hospital they didn't calm down much. There were too many of them, and they fed off each other. Hysteria is contagious among spirits as well as humans. The phenomenon will never be studied, of course, because no one would believe it. I'm embarrassed myself. I think about this thing I do and I'm reminded of those cable series, disgraceful, false productions about Hollywood mediums and ghost hunters. TV programs spawned by the crisis of ideas and the economic crisis, made with bad actors and worse scripts, all identical, all ignorant, not even entertaining. That's not what I am, I tell myself; but I am also that, in a way.

I called the girls by their names, which was enough to get them to look at me, but not enough to stop them from screaming. For that, I had to talk to them. Ask them to delete the photos. They had trouble obeying; that's how it always is. And then I had to ask them to move on. Make them laugh a little. Talk to them about clothes. Ask them about the party they were coming from. Never mention the murder. They wailed a little more at the

sight of the memorial and the police tape, but soon the moans faded to whimpers and hugs, self-pitying tears, until finally the girls, too, disappeared, or, more accurately, they dissolved. Their images vaporized like watercolor paint or alcohol.

I had to sit down by the cordon for a second, and soon my neighbor Julio came out and joined me. Julio is very friendly; he used to have a lovely corner bar in the neighborhood, but he couldn't keep up with the rent on the place. The drinks and food were too expensive and the customers too few, and, in sum, it was the same old story of restaurants and bars that go broke. I find it all deeply sad, and that's why I felt a greater affection for Julio than he perhaps deserved.

"What did you do, Doctor?"

"It's Emma, Julio. Call me Emma, please."

"What did you do, Emma?"

The question was repeated over the following weeks. There were semi-secret meetings among those who had seen what happened. Then the gatherings broadened to include those who hadn't been there. Needless to say, there was a whole lot of distrust and incredulity. They wore me down. I told them about my mother. My neighbor Mari vouched for my story but scolded me for lying to her that time I'd said the screams were coming from the TV.

"Mari, what did you want me to say? I was scared, too. I thought I was crazy."

That's not true, not entirely. A person knows when she's going crazy; it doesn't happen overnight, not even after a trauma. Everything, everything in the body is a process. Including death.

—

The neighbors started to come see me in secret. Ashamed. The ghost epidemic—because that's what it was—coincided with the neighborhood's worst period. Whoever had ordered the hit on the three teenagers had now taken over the business in the housing projects; they were terrorizing

people, with the muggings escalating to kidnappings. A particular kind of kidnapping called “express.” The kidnappers pull their victims into a car and take them around to ATMs until they’ve withdrawn an amount the thieves deem acceptable. Sometimes these express kidnappings end in violence—beatings, rapes, the odd shooting—owing to an incredible misunderstanding. The thieves—who are, for the most part, very young men—don’t have jobs, so they don’t have bank accounts. They don’t know that banks in Argentina let you withdraw only small amounts from ATMs, maybe twenty-five thousand pesos a day, or double that if you’re a customer of the bank. If you have two accounts, you can get more cash by withdrawing from two different banks. But if not, well, you can’t get much. And the thieves, those frightened and agitated boys, want more. And they think they’re being lied to. That their victims are looking down on them and trying to cheat them. “You think I’m some kind of dumbass, huh? I’ll show you.” And then the punch, the gun butt to the face, the panic. They haven’t done it to me yet but it happens a lot, and it happens to people who live in the projects, too. I mention it because I don’t want to be unfair—not everyone in the projects is a criminal, of course. A lot of people have an apartment there the same way I have a house here, and no one can or wants to move, and that’s it.

When the first neighbor came, I was chatting with Mom. Sometimes I talk to her. She’s there, after all, and although she doesn’t talk, she looks at me, and sometimes she nods. If she’s not in a rage, she laughs. It’s a shame she doesn’t talk; we’d have more fun if she did. I don’t invite my girlfriends over anymore because Mom might appear to them. My daughter comes less and less, but that’s not her fault—she has a lot of work. In this country, she has to make the most of it: you never know how long a job will last, whether you’re about to be fired or not—the order to cut back on personnel can come suddenly, and it can take years to find another job. Best to prepare for that wait with a good nest egg. She and I talk on the phone and chat online. She doesn’t know about her grandmother. I could tell her, but why? For now, there’s no need.

Paulo was the first of the neighbors to visit me. He has two little girls, both in grade school. His wife "suffers from nerves"—that is, she has panic attacks. Paulo has a brother in the United States, and at the neighborhood meetings he goes on and on about how well people live there, what a safe country it is. I don't correct him. As I said, I don't like to argue. Paulo beat around the bush a lot before finally telling me his problem. He even asked if he could smoke, and seemed surprised when I said yes. To ease the tension I told him, "You know, most doctors smoke. Too much stress."

Paulo's problem, then: three months ago, a burglar tried to break into his house. From the roof. He knew it was a thief because the guy was carrying a small handgun, a .22. When they saw the intruder, Paulo locked his wife and daughters in a room and got a hammer—he wasn't one of the people who'd bought a weapon—and started to dial the police. Then, through the second-floor window, he saw the thief slip and fall from the roof to the patio below. When he told me that, I remembered the incident. It had been a subject of conversation at one of the neighborhood meetings, the one when they'd decided to request more of a police presence from the Ninth Precinct. The thief had died from the fall. I didn't ask Paulo if he'd let him die, but I think that's what happened. It's possible the man could have survived if the ambulance had arrived in time. I can imagine Paulo, hammer in hand, watching from the window as he died, feeling like a small-time god with the power to decide another man's fate. Would I have done the same thing if my family had been threatened? Maybe. It's easy to have ethics when what you love is not in danger. I like to think I wouldn't have done it, though. I'm an idealist—I prefer naïveté and paternalism to hatred.

However it happened, the thief came back. Paulo's wife heard him walking on the roof, but Paulo didn't believe her. After all, she suffered from nerves, poor thing. Until he heard the footsteps himself. And he saw the burglar fall to the patio again. Soundlessly. That's what his ghost thief does, walks and falls, walks and falls. Paulo told me that once the thief is on the ground, "he laughs his ass off at us."

I agreed to go over there one night. The wife took the opportunity to show me the medication she'd been prescribed. On the whole, it seemed

like too much, but I know doctors nowadays would rather overprescribe than do a more comprehensive treatment. Paulo and his wife invited me to have dinner with them—hot dogs with mashed potatoes ("For the girls," the mother told me, "since they won't eat anything else")—but I'd already eaten at home. I waited. The footsteps came after the kids were in bed, fortunately. I decided that my work would begin after the ghost had fallen—once he'd finished his nightly rounds.

It took only a few minutes to dissuade him. It doesn't matter what I said or what I did: there's a moment when it all becomes very mechanical. This was my third encounter with uneasy neighborhood ghosts, but really I'd calmed some of them, my mother and the murdered girls, many times. I don't send the ghosts anywhere, either good or bad. There's no peace or closure. No reconciliation. No passage to the other side. All of that is fiction. I just soothe them and keep them from reoffending so often that they make life unbearable for the living. But they do come back eventually; it's as if they forget, and we have to start all over again. Why is that? I remember how, when my husband and I were newlyweds, we had a beautiful cat, all white with a black nose, who always seemed surprised on weekends when we spoiled her with a special can of tuna. When I wondered if maybe she had some kind of memory problem, my husband said, "No, it's just that she has a tiny brain. Don't you see how small her head is?" But her face was so intelligent! And ghosts are a little like that. They seem human, they seem smart, but they're really just a sliver of a person that is compelled to repeat itself. They don't have brains, but they do have something that thinks, so to speak. It's just that it's as small as that of my cat, whose name was Florencia and who used to purr every night between my husband and me before we went to sleep. I miss my husband, but not as a husband. I miss his friendship, his conversation, his food (he's an excellent cook). But he needs to fall in love and care for someone, and I need to be alone.

—

After the ghost thief, others came. “Why this invasion?” I asked my mother once, and she seemed to be listening attentively. She didn’t reply, she can’t, but I already knew the answer: It wasn’t the neighborhood that was being invaded. It was me. I was attracting them. That’s why it didn’t make sense for me to leave, not unless I learned how to rid myself of that magnetism. In truth, though, it didn’t bother me. The fear very soon became adrenaline. When many days passed without a neighbor knocking at my door, I’d start to get impatient.

—

But this story only matters because of one ghost in particular, one with whom I behaved differently. One I couldn’t or didn’t want to help. Or is it the neighbors I help? The two things are intertwined.

My daughter’s birthday is December 23. That year, maybe because we hadn’t seen each other much, she invited me to her smaller “inner circle” party. (She’d had another, with friends and acquaintances, the weekend before: she isn’t superstitious and doesn’t mind celebrating in advance.) She also invited me to stay and spend Christmas and even New Year’s with her, if I wanted, at her house in Palermo. I knew I would be invited to New Year’s parties, so I said no to that, but I agreed to stay for Christmas and a few days more. I left my house carrying a bag, and I went by taxi, because I’d long since sold my car. I’m not that old, but neither am I young enough to drive as attentively as a city like Buenos Aires requires.

The days I spent with my daughter were very good. We fought very little and laughed a lot. We watched her epic series and I half fell in love with Ned Stark, the kind of man I’ve never had, with a square jaw and an animal back. Plus, the actor wasn’t all that much younger than me—maybe ten years, I figured. One night, I almost told Carolina about the spiritualist talent I’d acquired in old age—we had opened a bottle of champagne and were drinking it very cold, with lemon ice cream, ideal for the city’s humid heat and stifling air. But I was afraid of ruining a visit that was nearly perfect. She’d have every right to think me demented. So I went home the

afternoon of the twenty-ninth, crossing the city by subway this time, because going aboveground would have been an absurd proposition. In addition to the usual end-of-year protests, there were several others: state workers striking for raises; picketers blocking off streets, demanding bags of food; laid-off workers demonstrating in front of the Labor Ministry, demanding to be rehired; and a very large march in front of Congress, calling for stronger public safety measures.

A youth had been murdered: sixteen years old, a kid called Matías with an Italian last name. He'd been kidnapped. An express kidnapping, but the boy was a minor and didn't have an ATM card, so his captors had changed their plan and decided to ask his family for ransom. The family didn't have any ransom money. That night, the kidnappers still had him in the car—they must not have known where to take him—and the boy escaped. He didn't get far. His captors shot him in the slum that borders our neighborhood to the north, the one that had been planned as a sports field, then became a vacant lot, and is now a neighborhood of squatters that the authorities are constantly threatening to evict, but probably never will. Where would they send all those people? Plus, some of the houses are now being built with good bricks and have a second story. Not long ago, on my way to buy food, I saw that a news kiosk and an ice cream shop had opened there. The police arrested a few suspects from the slum, but apparently the kidnappers weren't from there. People on TV were calling for the death penalty, as they always do in my country when a terrible murder is committed.

Strangely, and in spite of the fact that the crime had happened so close by, my neighbors didn't call an emergency meeting. I waited for it for a few days—a phone message, or sometimes a piece of paper stuck to the door with Scotch tape—but there was only silence, eyes lowered in the grocery shop, a certain haste when buying cigarettes at the kiosk. I attributed it to nerves, though this tense reticence was not how my neighbors usually reacted; they tended more toward exaggerated anxiety shouted at the top of their lungs.

The knocks at my door woke me up. It was late, I knew before I looked at the clock: I've gone to bed in the early morning since I was young, a

habit from being on call that I could never shake. It was a gentle knocking: someone was outside. I decided to ignore it. But the sound continued, rhythmic, insistent, growing in urgency, until I realized that now the person was pounding with both fists, as if to break down the door. I was scared. I thought about locking my bedroom door, but, oh right, I didn't have the key. What could I put between me and whoever it was who wanted to get in? Should I call Mari? The police? I sat up in bed, and when I heard the whispering, the sweat on my hands went cold, but at the same time I felt calmer: it wasn't a real person pounding. His low voice, his pleading, wouldn't have reached me from the front door. "Please, open up," he was saying. He spoke politely. "Please, they're after me. I don't want to rob you, I'm not a thief. They kidnapped me! Please let me in or they'll kill me, they'll kill me!"

I went running downstairs and looked out the window. The boy was on the sidewalk. A tall teenager, very visible under the streetlight. He was pale like all dead people, but I couldn't see his wounds, even though he was dressed for summer in a white T-shirt, soccer shorts, running shoes. Where had he been shot? I couldn't remember. During the days I'd spent with my daughter, I'd been happily disconnected from the news and TV. So here was Matías with the Italian last name, murdered just blocks away from my house, and I didn't know exactly how he had died or why he was knocking at my door.

Although I could guess. Was my neighbors' silence related to this apparition? Of course it was, I told myself. And in more ways than one.

Matías stopped beating on the door when he saw me. He approached the window, and his eyes—alive, totally alive, insect-like, with the buzzing shine of beetles—held vengeance and rage. I wasn't afraid of him, because I knew he couldn't take his revenge in the material world, but the frustration of being unable to act added layers to his fury, endless layers. He was going to spend what time he had—and I suspected that Matías with the Italian last name had all the time in the world—running up and down this street. Until the street no longer existed, if necessary. These people had helped kill him, and he was never going to let them sleep. Never.

“You’re not going to open up?” he asked. His voice was clear, not very different from a living person’s. He no longer sounded so polite.

I went to the door, turned the key, and opened it. Matías stayed in the doorway. Then I saw the hole in his temple. It was subtle, like a mole. It wasn’t bleeding. It reminded me of the suicides I used to get at the hospital. Most of them male, most his age, not all so precise with the gunshot; they often destroyed their faces or put the gun barrel in their mouths.

“It’s too late now,” Matías told me. I knew I couldn’t calm him, not this one, and in a very loud voice I said, “I wasn’t home that night! You know that. I would have let you in.”

“Yeah? I don’t believe you,” he said.

A conversation! Not just replying to questions with a shake of the head. Matías with the Italian last name could have conversations. How was he different from the others? I stayed on the threshold with the door open and the light on and I watched him leave. He ran from one house to another, knocking; he knocked on every door. First lightly, then with fists, and finally kicking. He started by politely entreating people to open up, and he ended with insults; he was terrified in his anger, his desperation, but he was also astonished. My neighbors turned on their lights, but no one opened their door. I heard one man moan.

Matías with the Italian last name kept pounding on doors until the sun came up. Only then did I go back inside. He didn’t miss a single house. They all got what they deserved.

I looked up his last name online. Cremonesi. Matías Cremonesi. Sixteen years old, he was in high school, played basketball—of course, with that height—and they’d shot him on a small soccer field in the slum. One of the murderers had been caught. Naturally, he said the other man had wielded the gun and pulled the trigger, and he’d done it only because Matías had seen their faces when he escaped. And he knew them. This confessed murderer was from the housing projects, and Matías was, too. Why kill a neighbor? The kidnapper, who was nineteen, said again that it hadn’t been their intention, that they’d only wanted him to take some money from an

ATM. “But he said he didn’t have a card. He lied to us and we got mad. We weren’t in our right minds.”

—

That day at noon, my neighbor Julio, the one with the failed bar, paid me a visit. The neighbors had sent Julio because they knew I liked him. He didn’t hem and haw like Paulo, the one who’d watched the burglar die. He was direct. He claimed not to feel guilty. Yes, they had all heard the boy that night. Yes, they all thought it was a trick, a lie by a cunning thief who wanted to pass himself off as a victim so he could get into someone’s house. Yes, when they looked out the window and saw a teenager, their suspicion had been confirmed—weren’t thieves always teenage boys? “And don’t give me that shit about how they’re victims, too,” he said. “You may think that. All of them victims of society. Stop fucking around, Emma.” I hadn’t opened my mouth. “You can think that way because they’ve never really gotten you. But they’re not victims of anything.” I still hadn’t said a word. I understood he was trying to deal with his guilt.

“How long did he knock on people’s doors?” I wanted to know. “How long did he ask to be let in?”

Beneath the hatred, Matías’s ghostly eyes had been imbued with fear, the adrenaline of his final night, when he realized that he would die alone. He’d had to comprehend that no one was going to help him, not even by making a phone call, and that he was surrounded by hoodless executioners hiding behind the façade of a middle-class, respectable neighborhood.

Julio didn’t want to answer. He said he didn’t know. “A while. Does it matter?”

“It matters,” I told him. “Because the boy is furious. And what can I tell him to convince him to leave us alone? That we were wrong? It’s not enough.”

“You have to try.”

“No,” I replied. “I don’t know how.”

“You don’t want to. You think you’re better than us. You wouldn’t have let him in, either!”

“That’s what Matías told me last night.”

“Don’t use his name.”

“Why not? He does have a name.”

“And how are we going to sleep? What about the children?”

“Julio, you all should have thought of that sooner. Buy some sleeping pills. I can give you a prescription. It’s a very fine medicine, no side effects.”

Confounded, Julio pounded the table.

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“Not at all. But I’m no one’s servant. I’m willing to deal with this presence until it changes on its own. Though as you know, they aren’t prone to change. And you can stop yelling at me in my own house—it’s not the best way to convince me.”

Julio left, and I felt disappointment. I had thought him a better person. Other people came to plead with me. Several of them. I told them to go and cry in church. They were angry at me, but it would pass. Maybe they’d go crazy. None of them took me up on my offer of a prescription for sleeping pills. It never ceases to amaze me how much suffering a person will put up with because they’re prejudiced against psychiatric drugs. Or maybe they just didn’t want to accept something like that from me, at least for the time being.

Matías came back every night to carry out his routine. Some of the neighbors shouted more than he did. When I woke up—rarely, because I did take sleeping pills—I chatted online with my ex-husband, who, down south, was also awake. “It’s age,” he told me. “I don’t sleep well anymore.”

With the passing days, one of my neighbors—the owner of the car service—broke. He gave a statement to the police saying that Matías Cremonesi had knocked at the door of his business begging for a ride home, pleading to be a passenger. But Matías Cremonesi didn’t have any money on him, and my neighbor had refused to take him. A seven-hundred-meter

drive, at most. Plus, he added, the boy didn't look trustworthy. He seemed high. What if he was lying, what if he was a thief?

What could he steal? I thought. The man had nothing; no one ever used that car service. My neighbor the driver spent all his time drinking maté and listening to soccer games. He had two customers a week, maybe three. He got by because he owned his building—he couldn't have paid rent. He regretted his mistake, he said. "Poor kid, but you just don't know what kind of insecurity we live with in this neighborhood."

I told my husband how on the night the whole neighborhood had left Matías in the street and in danger, the night he died, I had been staying at Carolina's house. "But," I wrote to him in our chat, "what if I had been there? Would I have opened the door? Or would I have acted like all the others?"

"Maybe you wouldn't have opened," he answered. "But you would have at least called the police. They didn't even do that?"

"They didn't even do that," I replied.

I didn't tell him that the boy's ghost came every night to remind us of our meanness and our cowardice. It was a secret among the neighbors. My family was so far away! Except for Mom, of course. My ex-husband asked me, again, to go live with him and his wife down south. "She's pregnant," he told me.

"You're crazy," I said. "Sixty is too old to have a baby."

"Why do you think I can't sleep?" he asked.

"I'll think about moving," I lied.

—

It turns out that my ex-husband's wife has a high-risk pregnancy, and I think he'd like to have me close by to help if there's an emergency or complication. But I'm no longer on the side of the living. I can't leave my mother alone; she spends more and more nights sitting in the kitchen, just as she did when she was sick and couldn't sleep for the pain. Nor can I leave the rotting girls who laugh hand in hand on the street, though they

appear less and less often. Where will they go, if someday they leave for good? Where are they during those long periods when I don't see them? The other day, one of them, the one who reminds me of my daughter, took a picture of me with her ghost Samsung. Where is my image? To whom does she show it? Nor do I want to abandon the drunken thief who died alone on the patio under Paulo's gaze: sometimes I see him perched on the roof, expectant as an owl. Is he planning something? And I can't leave the pitiless Matías, though he hates me: his knocking is my lullaby. I don't know if I could sleep without his visits. All of them, my sad dead, are my responsibility. I asked my mother if Matías would let me soothe him someday, and she did something incredible: she stuck out her tongue at me. My mother wears a very pretty blue dress printed with anchors, and she looks like a seasoned old sailor. I returned her salute by sticking out my tongue, too, and we laughed together, and I wondered if I was going to grow old with her in this house, until the two of us, mother and daughter, were the same age, going up and down the stairs, sitting in the kitchen, anchors on her dress, coffee stains on my white shirt, and, outside, a future of dead boys and a city that just doesn't know what to do anymore.

A SUNNY PLACE FOR SHADY PEOPLE

I could hear everything, together with the hum of my hotel neon. I never felt sadder in my life. LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities.
—JACK KEROUAC, *On the Road*

The girl's voice is nasal and metallic. She repeats a strange mantra that I don't understand, but that I record with my hidden cellphone. There's a slapdash security system you have to submit to before going up to the terrace to join the ritual by the water tank where they found Elisa's drowned body, but it's not very efficient and they don't dare touch my crotch, where I'd hidden the phone—maybe they're afraid of being reported for abuse. That's gringos for you: they'll worship a dead girl in this sinister hotel surrounded by addicts in various states of intoxication, madness, and crisis, but propriety will keep them from patting down a middle-aged Latina between her legs.

From Buenos Aires, I work for a magazine funded by the university and based in New York. I had traveled to NYC because I'd accepted an invitation to give a seminar on liberalism and populism in certain Latin American countries, but also because I wanted to get out of my city and finally return to the United States for the first time since Dizz's death. It had been eight years, and I was still thinking about him. The magazine, where I write articles about international politics that attempt to explain what's happening in Latin America, is going through an "overhaul." They started a section called "America in Weird," with stories about strange cases, odd events related to folklore and the supernatural in the United States. And I wanted to write for it. In my early days as a journalist I'd done a little of that kind of work: touring haunted houses in Buenos Aires, visiting the ruins of the Winter Mansion in Empedrado, or exploring the haunted hotels

in Córdoba (I'd had an awful scare at the Gran Hotel Viena, not from any ghosts, but because I turned down the guided tour and the place is huge: I ended up on the shore of a lake that was flooded from all the rain, at night, totally disoriented). Those entertaining years ended with a delirious and drunken tour of Cinco Saltos, around Neuquén, an area that is rife with legends.

Then I went respectable and turned to the international politics I'd studied in college, and I traveled, living for a while in Los Angeles. When Dizz died I was shattered, and I left that city I love and hate in equal measure. Now the magazine was giving me the chance to return to L.A. after the seminar in New York.

I met my editor at his office because he hates the city's cafés, which he says are all too noisy. We talked about trivial things: he noted my change of address for payments, and I told him about the seminar; we decided I could turn it into a paper. Then I pitched an article on Elisa Lam.

He refused at first. He wanted a piece on P-22, also known as Brad Pitt, a wild, solitary mountain lion who lives in L.A. He'd fled his natural habitat and now stays in the city, roaming alone around Griffith Park and its environs, though sightings of him are rare. He epitomizes the ravages of the fires, a sort of symbol of the end of the world as we know it. Or I think my editor said something along those lines.

"No," I answered. "There are thousands of articles on that animal—I won't be able to add anything, unless I can manage to see him, and that's almost impossible."

I had other, more personal reasons to refuse, but I wasn't going to tell him about those. Plus, the only reason he didn't want to cover Elisa was that, incredibly, he hadn't heard a thing about her. I had to tell him about the case. Elisa was a young tourist who in January 2013 had stayed at the Cecil Hotel in downtown L.A., perhaps unaware of the place's sordid past. The Cecil is famous not just for being a regular site of tragedies, suicides, murders, and the like, but also because the serial killer Richard Ramirez had lived there for a while. The place is cheap because it's near Skid Row, the *villa miseria* or tent city that in the United States they don't call by its

name. The hotel has some rooms that are for tourists, usually young backpackers or travelers without much money, and others that are used by residents, generally vulnerable people from the neighborhood, addicts or recovering addicts, or itinerant homeless.

Elisa disappeared on January 31: that day, she never returned to her room and she stopped communicating with her family. Twenty days later she was found floating in the hotel's water tank, naked and drowned, with her clothes and belongings in the water with her. One of the hotel guests caught on because the water coming from the faucet and shower was black and, of course, pretty foul-smelling. Elisa floated in the tank and rotted away, and the guests drank her.

At this point, my editor wrinkled his nose.

"I can't believe you've never heard about this case," I murmured with some annoyance. "What rock do you live under, and how can you edit this section? You'll get pitched any old thing and say yes."

"This magazine is for people like me, not for freaks."

"Well, thanks a lot. Anyway, the cops had been chasing other leads, but after the thing with the hotel water they found her in there, drowned. No trauma of any kind. The question is, how did she get into the tank? It was closed. No one saw her go up the fire escape, though she could have easily done it; but what isn't so easy is to climb up to the tank, open the huge, heavy metal lid, and jump in. Maybe someone threw her in, and she got desperate and took off her clothes because they were weighing her down. I guess you're going to tell me you didn't see the security camera footage from the elevator, either, huh? The police found it after her death. It's legendary, an internet classic. That video is the last time Elisa was seen alive. Want me to find it?"

"Please."

I rolled my eyes and opened YouTube, then made the video full screen. "It's short," I told him, because like all bosses he is anxious and his attention wanders.

He looked with some curiosity, though, at Elisa on the elevator. The thing about the rotten water had really gotten to him: my editor is one of

those hyper-clean men who shave (or whatever it is they do) their heads every day; he has a delicate beard and Estée Lauder skin. “Oh,” I went on, “I forgot to mention that she was bipolar and apparently wasn’t taking her medication.” I said it in a quiet voice, because the word “bipolar” still makes me start to shake or, worse, makes my throat close off.

The video shows Elisa in a red hoodie. She presses a lot of buttons in the elevator, as if putting in a code, and maybe because of that the door stays open for a long time, about three minutes. Then she gets out to check if someone is following her down the hallway. She is clearly scared, because when she gets back in she stands motionless in one corner of the elevator, waiting for it to move. She does this several times, the getting out and then back in: the elevator doors don’t close, and nor does anyone else appear; she’s alone. This goes on for seven minutes. The penultimate time is chilling; she goes out into the hallway and talks to whatever it is that she sees, invisible to us, and her hands look enormous, her fingers extended, her movements something between a dance and maybe—because we know how this ends—a swim stroke. But it’s the stroke of a web-toed creature. It’s unclear whether she wants to explain something to the apparition or if those are her normal gestures, or if something graceful but contorted has taken over her body. Then she walks off to the left and doesn’t come back to the elevator. She looks exhausted, dragging her feet. The camera keeps recording the empty elevator, its open door. Finally it closes and opens again, still on the same floor. And the video ends.

“It’s horrible,” says my boss. “And that’s the last image of her? The family can’t have it scrubbed from the internet?”

“Clearly not.”

“And you want to cover this.”

“No, Elisa’s case has been more closely investigated than JFK’s assassination. But one of my best friends, who lives in L.A., is obsessed with paranormal events in the city, and she told me that these days, people gather around the tank where Elisa died, waiting for a sign. My friend doesn’t know exactly what they’re hoping for, but she thinks they want to hear her, that they believe Elisa’s spirit is trapped in the water and can tell

them what really happened. Her fans don't believe it was suicide. Many of them believe she was thrown in by Richard Ramirez's ghost. I want to visit my friend, and while I'm there I'll go see the ritual."

"Is your friend reliable?"

"I can't think of anyone more reliable when it comes to this stuff."

He said yes. He thought it seemed very "America in Weird," and we agreed on a deadline and payment. The direct flight to L.A. was awful, with fights over mask usage and a lot of soldiers I kept forgetting to thank for their service. My boss had asked me if I wanted to stay at my friend's house, but she lives in Laurel Canyon, too far from downtown, so he booked me a room at the Biltmore. I was about to say no, not there, out of all the hotels I would rather stay at the Cecil (or Stay on Main as it's called now, and was when Elisa was there). I was about to say, Not the Biltmore, things happened to me there that I can't forget or exorcise, but I then thought: It's time to return to the places that hurt.

—

We knelt down in front of the tank with the girl repeating her mantra. I didn't know what to expect: my friend Isabella, the amateur scholar of all things weird and macabre in L.A. who was my source for information, had told me that these people were very guarded about what they did, and respectful. She told me to wait for the sign in silence, and if I didn't hear anything, to just follow their lead. Isabella had warned me only about one hyper-obsessed fan who made regular trips to Elisa's grave, and who, in his tiny Hollywood apartment, held séances that always ended badly, because he was in love to a serious, necrophiliac extent, and always lost his cool. She'd even sent me a photo so I would know who to avoid (or interview, depending on my level of dedication). But I didn't see him on the hotel roof. Maybe he'd been banned. I was afraid he would show up with a gun, take revenge for the forced separation from his beloved by killing us all, but nothing happened.

There were two tanks. We knelt in front of the left one, where Elisa had drowned. The mantra girl gave the order to stay there on our knees. We had come up the fire escape, the same one, it was said, that Ramirez had used after throwing away his bloody clothes in the street: he came up naked, covered in muck and semen, because he was also a rapist. It wasn't clear whether Elisa had used those stairs. There was another, internal stairwell that led to the roof, which supposedly had an alarm. I went into the Cecil the first day I spent in L.A., after booking a double room with bunk beds that I didn't use. It was such a dicey place that it was hard to believe in a working alarm, then or now. More mysterious was the thought of how a girl as thin and young as Elisa, who wasn't strong or athletic, had managed to open the tank lid by herself (because getting up there was easy; the tank had exterior stairs so it could be cleaned). Maybe she only needed a crack. Maybe somebody had left it open after cleaning. Everything at the Cecil seemed sketchy, so anything was possible: after all, she had floated in the tank water for almost a month, rotten and swollen, and no one had noticed.

We waited on our knees until the mantra girl clapped twice: the signal to break up the gathering. There would be another one the next night. Progress was being made, you could feel it, she said. I don't know what she meant. I went downstairs quickly, spurred more by hunger than a desire to pass unnoticed. At that hour there wouldn't be much open, but according to my phone, about five blocks down Main there was a Japanese restaurant that closed at nine-thirty. I could make it if I ran a little; certainly, no one would be surprised to see a woman running in that area at night. The downtown was worse than ever—I had never seen so many homeless people, so many people muttering to themselves, so much neglect and desolation. The Biltmore, though a luxury hotel in theory (and in appearance: it was incredibly beautiful, especially the entrance hall, the second floor, the bar—an interwar fantasy of art nouveau and Theda Bara), didn't have room service or a restaurant at night because it was undergoing "renovations." For a hotel like that not to have room service was a sign of decline, but I already knew about that because I'd stayed at the Biltmore before, with Dizz. I was a little surprised that after all these years, nothing had changed.

I got a message from Isabella while I was at the Japanese restaurant. I told her it had all gone fine and nothing strange had happened and the necrophiliac fan hadn't even shown his face. She told me she had more information and to come visit them soon. Isabella lives with Jenny: the three of us had been inseparable best friends eight years before, and we still kept in touch through messages and video chat. My distance couldn't break up the trio. Jenny, who was born in Puerto Rico, can live in the United States, of course. Isabella can too, because of her dad, a rich gringo producer who'd married an Argentine. I had gone back to Argentina because I was depressed and couldn't work and didn't want to be in the United States anymore, despite my university contacts and the certainty that I could have made a life there. I miss them every day, our trinity of tears and music, of parties and expensive perfume, of designer clothes on clearance and the perpetual smell of summer from the sunscreen on our faces.

When I finished eating I decided to walk back to the Biltmore. I'm not afraid of these streets. I had to go up Fifth as far as the Last Bookstore, and then things could get a little rough around Pershing Square; I just had to be sure and stick to the sidewalk opposite the square, and that's what I did. I stopped for a bit outside the Last Bookstore, one of the places where Elisa had bought books during her visit to the city. They had closed at eight, as always, but I could still see lights on inside: the artists on the second floor were closing up their workshops. It's a bookstore, but it also has art and clothes and weird objects for sale, all by local artists. Isabella used to have a stall where she sold gothic and Victorian clothes and accessories, but then she decided to close it and retreat almost entirely from contact with other people, except for her friends and, of course, Jenny. When I was turning to go on my way again, I saw something that made my heart skip a beat. Almost right at my feet, a boy with long, dirty red hair was trying and failing to find a vein in his arm. He looked up in frustration, and in spite of a quick, disturbing moment, I immediately knew it wasn't Dizz. It couldn't be Dizz, of course, since Dizz was dead. But the similarity was brutal. The boy's eyes were dark, though, and not from the drugs. "We are an

endangered species," Dizz used to tell me, "redheads with blue eyes." Dizz's blue eyes. I never found out whether it was true that they were going extinct or if it was just something he made up to amuse me.

The boy—because he couldn't have been more than twenty years old—started to look for a place to shoot up in his foot, struggling to shine a phone flashlight onto it. Against all my instincts, carried along by the unbridled horse of painful nostalgia, I knelt down so we were at eye level and told him I could help. I don't know what he saw or heard in my offer, but he gave me a hesitant yes, looking like a wary cat. He showed me his arm: it was a mess of blood and infected wounds. He wasn't going to last long on the street. "Let's try your foot," I said, and he extended it toward me. It was bare and coated in months' worth of dirt. I asked him to hold the phone light, and with the alcohol gel I had on me—a talisman, because I no longer used it as a pandemic disinfectant—I cleaned an area above his ankle. The skin was healthy: if he'd tried to shoot up there, he had failed. I squeezed with my thumb until the vein emerged; I didn't need to press hard. And then I injected whatever was in the syringe. I hadn't forgotten how to do it. Gently with the needle into the vein, a little blood in the barrel, then push the substance in, as slowly as possible but not too slow, to avoid air bubbles. I don't know what drug he was shooting up. He fell over onto the sidewalk after a murmured "thanks." It must have been something strong if injecting it into his foot had knocked him out that fast. The boy's smell was strong too, a mixture of goat and toilet bowl. His face was clean, who knows how, and his nails were eaten away as if he had termites under his cuticles. He wore a jacket that was too big for him, no doubt stolen. I slipped the syringe into his pocket so he wouldn't lose it, and my fingers brushed the handle of a knife. Maybe he knew how to defend himself better than his angelic looks would suggest. I might have killed him, I thought, though he was breathing when I left. If anyone saw me, they would just think we were two more addicts among so many. Skid Row took up sixty-two blocks by then, the concierge at the hotel had told me when I'd asked him to call me a taxi. He'd also explained that it wasn't so easy to get a taxi

at night: it was better to use an app. Now, that was new, unlike the lack of room service. A luxury hotel that didn't guarantee taxis.

When I got back to the hotel I barely noticed the fabulous entrance hall, its fountain, its ceiling like a pagan Sistine Chapel, the cherubs and old glory, the closed ballrooms where once upon a time the Oscars had been awarded. I went straight to the elevator and up to the tenth floor to cry in bed. A chocolate had been left on the pillow for me—the place still had a few traces of its lost elegance, like the valet, a Mexican guy who had already established a Latino complicity with me. I thought I saw a long, copper-colored hair on the pillow and I shouted into the void, "Leave me alone!" Who was torturing me by leaving a hair the color of Dizz's on the pillow? I looked closer and realized it was a thread coming loose from the bedspread. I remembered how I had once bathed Dizz in a smaller room of this very hotel, how he'd cried with his eyes closed and I'd washed him with a sponge I'd bought myself because they don't have them in hotels. I had locked him in so he couldn't escape and then I'd brought him to the water like a dead weight, though by then he didn't weigh very much, and I took off his clothes, which clung to him, sticky from grime and his obsession with sweets. He always told me he liked Hispanic women because they seemed strong and maternal and I'd get mad, that awful gringo stereotype, and he laughed and I never again saw a laugh like that, with those beautiful teeth that the street and the madness couldn't ruin, all the joy that lit up every one of his features and made his eyes shine, he who was always so somber and blue, except when he turned manic and life seemed beautiful to him, but that was just as heartbreaking because it was only a chemical reaction, he had no idea what he was feeling or saying. It was impossible to keep him medicated, especially when he started to run around downtown and get obsessed with the bodies of the homeless. He would describe their wounds, the scabs and infections, the holes where there had once been teeth, the discolored skin of dead bodies no one came to collect, and I told him there was no reason to go so crazy, that he couldn't help them and it wasn't good for him, and anyway it wasn't genuine, it was the illness and he needed to take his pills, and he never answered but

sometimes he lay unmoving on the bed with his eyes half-open and I begged him to come back, I didn't understand where he went, it was like a catatonic state a few hours long from which he emerged exhausted and mute and tomorrow is another day. I was in love, so ardently that my friends judged it toxic and romantic and they insisted I put myself first and leave him, but now, after all these years, after that awful funeral and the ashes we scattered at Bass Rock Beach, right now I remember him with hair like an angel's halo and broad fingers that touched me with a gentleness that doesn't exist anymore, that went away with him, with his look of concentration, tongue peeking out between his lips, as he listened to music through his headphones, and how he bought me the red lipstick I liked, and that night when he'd let me wash him even in the most intimate places, and then he asked me to get into the bathtub with him and he whispered, *We need a miracle,* and we cried together, the water salty with tears and dirty from who knows what, and we went to bed and slept in an embrace and the next morning he woke up angry as a bull and once again I looked for the huge vein in his arm, an invincible vein under the freckled skin, and I injected him with what was left and he went out to search for more pain and more death and I never saw him again, he got lost out there and turned up weeks later, dead in the street.

That was his last time with me at the Biltmore, but I brought him there many times, whenever I rescued him from the street. Sometimes I got him to stay there with me for several days. The Biltmore is expensive, but Isabella lent us the money because she loved Dizz, in spite of how much, in her opinion, he hurt me. I thought: There must have been a security camera in the elevator, like with Elisa Lam. Dizz's last recorded moments. It didn't occur to me to ask for a video back then, but now, if it was possible to see him, I would watch it every day. I picture him hitting his forehead against the mirror, the nervous tic on the right side of his lips, his blinking eyes, his black pants.

I wrote a message to Isabella: *I can't spend another night at this hotel.*

Of course not. I told you. You never listen to me. Come over. I'll send a car and share the route with you.

I waited downstairs, smoking on the sidewalk and talking to the Mexican valet about late-night fights, whether I'd been to the modern art museum, whether things in Argentina were as bad as people said. I had my bag with me in case I couldn't even bring myself to come back to the Biltmore to check out.

—

Isabella's house was all wood and red tile, trees and earth, two floors and vintage furniture and a pool, and it overlooked a wild area with no neighbors around. Her father was a successful sound engineer and his studio was nearby, but he almost never went in, just left things to the team he employed. They recorded film soundtracks almost exclusively. The house, which seemed stopped in time, had been entrusted to the girls. It was impossible to reach it unless you knew the way: Laurel Canyon is one of those Californian ecosystems up in the night-silent hills that are so full of birds and animals and desert wind. Jenny opened the door: white pants, gold necklace with an evil eye bead, nose ring. She hugged me even as she took my backpack and cellphone and led me to the pool: it was a little hot, and the two of them were out there drinking cold white wine. Seeing Jenny brought me straight back to Dizz: "This dumb ginger," she'd say, "he calls you 'Hispanic' and you're Argentine, full-blooded Italian, phhh."

"Not full-blooded," I countered. "I have a little French."

"Only proves my point," she said. Still, she loved Dizz, too. It was easy to get mad at him, but then he'd buy you that ring you'd only mentioned once, but he remembered and gave it to you in a beautiful box. He was easy to hate, and also to love.

Isabella kissed my cheek and peered at me closely. She was wearing one of her long black dresses that she insisted on wearing, even in this sunny city's most awful heat, and a beautiful bracelet with a nocturnal butterfly. As always, her eyes were made up—a midnight-blue shade tonight—and her black hair was back in a bun. A mix of Victorian schoolmarm and cult-band front woman. She'd been the one to investigate Elisa's sect, and she'd

thought it was a terrible idea for me to stay at the Biltmore after so many nights there with Dizz.

"I couldn't take it, sis," I told her.

"Of course not, *pues*." Some of Jenny's mannerisms had rubbed off on her. They'd been together for a long time. She poured me a little wine. I almost told her how I'd helped a boy shoot up in the street, but I kept that to myself.

Jenny wanted to hear more about why I had gone to New York, and I explained: a conference on populism and liberalism in Latin America, and I'd stayed in the city a few days and then wanted to go back to L.A.

"Is New York different now, like people say?" Jenny wanted to know. She missed her old neighborhood, no doubt. She would have gone back if it hadn't been for Isabella, and also for the fact that she didn't miss her addict friends one bit.

"I don't know. There are a lot of people living on the street, and the subway stinks. But I think people exaggerate a little."

"The pandemic was worse there," she told me as she massaged my tight shoulders and trapezius muscles. "Here, we have the desert, the hills, it's open. Anyway, I've got a really nice bed all set up for you."

I told them I had seen a red hair on my pillow that turned out to be a thread, and it had made me lose my mind. Because I'd been fine my first night at the Biltmore. Memories never come at predictable moments. They're like cats that sleep peacefully in the sun, but when you dare to rub their bellies, they scratch you right in the eyes.

"Dizz isn't here, sis," Isabella murmured. "Even my dad remembers him sometimes. Says Dizz was the best young sound engineer he had. But he's not out there. He has his clones, it's true. Lots of them. Sometimes I see his hair too when I go down to the city."

I was more surprised to hear that she went out at all than that she mistook strangers in the street for my ex-boyfriend.

"Yep, I've gotten conservative in my old age, and I'm working with some historic preservation folks to try and stop those dumb weddings from being held at Houdini's house, which is close to here, and to keep them

from building who knows what beside the Stahl House. I've turned into a lady who wants to preserve the historic monuments in her city, or at least in her neighborhood."

"Can you believe it, *mami*?" Jenny laughed. "A foreigner getting so hung up on this stuff?"

"I'm not a foreigner, my love, it's just that I'm not a gringa either. My dad is Californian, not gringo, and in my house we don't speak English if it can be avoided."

"My sweet black spider," Jenny said in English, and blew her a kiss.

"Shut up."

The three of us were already back to being as before, as always. Laughing, touching, showing each other our clothes. I had bought a pendant in the San Telmo market as a gift for Isabella. For Jenny I'd brought a white leather belt, very broad, like a girdle, which she would know how to wear and look just as grotesquely beautiful as always.

"Why don't you stay with us, *mami*? I'll introduce you to a girl who will put you off guys for good. Snap you right out of that savior obsession of yours."

I laughed.

"I don't think it works that way."

"I'll get more wine."

When Jenny left, Isa came to sit next to me. The silence around the house scared me, as always in the canyon. I was afraid of Los Angeles. The neon, the highways, the color of the sunset, the nearness of the desert, the sun so high. I remembered a party after a silent film screening in the cemetery where Rudolph Valentino is buried. I left with Dizz and Jenny and Isabella plus two other girls, and there wasn't enough room in the car, so one of them got into the trunk. We kept shouting to her the whole ride, "Are you okay?" Dizz drove, and he was wearing a T-shirt printed with the poet Mayakovsky's face. We swam in the pool until dawn—all except Isabella, who never got in the water.

Jenny came back and lit a cigarette beside the pool. She opened another bottle of cold wine and drank straight from the neck.

“What’s the news about Elisa?” I asked Isabella.

“False alarm.”

“But tell her anyway, love, it’ll be useful for her article,” said Jenny.

“I already checked and it’s not true, but there’s an urban legend that a rich guy in the Palisades has Elisa’s bones, and he gets them out to swim with them and his friends in the pool.”

“See what I mean? You just don’t hear about those things in New York.”

“That’s why I live here, in spite of the fires. Because this is a city of witches.”

“And that’s coming from you.”

“Later on I’ll write the story out or email it to you. But it’s not true. No one has dug her up yet.”

Jenny handed me a glass of wine. It was delicious.

“You should do a podcast.”

“Nah. When I die, you’ll find all my notebooks. I don’t want to do anything, sis. I already had the blog, my time is past. Maybe I’m depressed. I’m really scared of the fires, too, but we’ll get to that later. They didn’t even come close to the house this last time, but I can’t forget the sound, or that red sky. Maybe I’ll move.”

Jenny shook her head and smiled at me. Then she sat up straighter, alert, and put a finger over her lips to shush us.

“Something’s there,” she whispered.

Isa got up. She knew as well as I did that Jenny was the least fearful person in existence. If she thought the sound coming from the small pine forest behind the house was suspicious, then it was.

“Is it fire?”

Jenny shook her head again and frowned. If I remembered correctly, the house was equipped with an alarm, and of course with guns. Jenny loved them and was a very good shot. Isa, who collected crime scene photos, would never have forbidden guns in her house, though she didn’t know how to use them very well.

We went closer: it was an animal sound. Its movement over twigs, the way they snapped, and the smell of its hot breath, warmer than the night.

"It can't be," said Jenny. All three of us crept closer and saw the yellow eyes. Isa used a remote control to turn off the alarm that was about to sound, and then she didn't move, just stood still. One of the house lights illuminated the animal's beauty as it watched us, curious and without a hint of malice.

"It can't be P," Jenny whispered, taking care not to make noise.

I couldn't believe we were that close to the puma, either. When I'd left L.A., he had just been discovered. Dizz was obsessed with him, and he took me out for walks through Griffith Park to see if we could find him. He said the puma was the city's soul, if such a thing still existed. A silent film fantasy. A reminder of how people had destroyed his habitat, but he still held on in that urban park, beautiful and tired and sad. It was said that he'd once spent a whole night crying out for a mate, but of course there was no response.

"What are you doing so far from home?" I asked him.

P-22 opened his mouth as if he were capable of answering me, but he only yawned and stuck out his soft pink tongue. Then he looked closely at each of us. Isa held out her hand to him, but he ignored her and walked away in a silent retreat, majestic under the lights until he disappeared into the darkness. We waited wordlessly for several minutes, but he didn't come back. Jenny teared up. "I never thought I would see him," she said. "It's you, sis, you brought him here."

"Remember when you and Dizz used to go looking for him?" Isa asked, and then I cried too, and the three of us, drunk, joined hands, aware that we had caught a glimpse of magic and mystery and it had yellow eyes.

—

I woke up alone in the house still dressed and a little drunk. I had dreamed about the observatory and swimming cats. I showered, and under the water I felt a horrible hangover headache. On the kitchen table, Isa had left me the phone number for a reliable car service, instructions about where to leave dirty laundry, pages on which she had typed the legend of Elisa's bones

(old-school as always). Jenny had gone out—she'd worked for years in editing for various producers—and Isa had a meeting: I pictured her leaving the house in her long dress with her usual black veil covering her face, bun held in place by a fake emerald hairpin. I had enough time to eat some fruit and go for a naked swim. Before I left, I circled the property in search of the puma, but saw no sign. Isa's note had a postscript:

It was a visit from Dizz. He came to say hi in feline form. I'm sure of it, I believe it. But don't go crazy. The puma just brought him here for a little while, but it's not him. OK?

Okay, I thought.

—

I arrived on time to go back up to the Cecil's roof and think once again about Richard Ramirez covered in blood, a demonic night predator with a demigod's cheekbones. There were fewer people this time—impossible to keep up the turnout every night, I thought. I needed to talk to the hotel manager and ask why they allowed these meetings: any answer was admissible, even that it was good publicity. And what were Dizz's final moments like, I wondered, before he was found dead on Venice Boulevard? There was a hospital nearby, but they always denied having thrown him out, as we knew they did with homeless people. Isa's dad made a fuss, but I think the hospital personnel were telling the truth. Maybe Dizz didn't know there was a hospital so close, or he couldn't make it to the emergency room, or didn't want to. Maybe the proximity was just a coincidence. Maybe they wouldn't have been able to save him. There'd been a time when I knew his autopsy results by heart. Not anymore, or else I don't want to remember them in detail.

We knelt down. I was beside the same girl as the night before: I remembered her green hair in two messy pigtails and her pretty smile. One boy wore cowboy boots like the ones Dizz used to wear to the beach even though they filled up with sand. I wanted to call him, to hear his voice over the phone. I had never fully understood his death, and now that I'd come

back to L.A. after so long it felt ridiculous that he wasn't there, that he couldn't dance all night to the Rolling Stones in the studio. He'd had a pretty big apartment in Hollywood from where it was almost a straight shot to Isabella's house in Laurel Canyon, and then he'd go up a little farther to the studio. But nothing could last, he wasn't made for that; Dizz was copper, and copper's golden tone fades over time and stains the skin green. That's what our time together was, only the stains wouldn't leave my skin like the ones from copper rings do. I couldn't get rid of them.

The mantra girl stopped chanting. I was distracted and didn't notice. And I almost missed the moment when she got up with a shout, a bellow, and set off a stampede that almost left me trampled on the ground. I struggled to get up—someone had really stomped on my leg—and I did what the others were doing because I hadn't heard the mantra girl's revelation (later I would talk to her and learn her name). Everyone knelt and pressed their heads, an ear, against the tank, and also both their hands. I did the same. They were listening.

Something was moving inside, banging against the metal walls: it sounded like the pounding of fists and feet. It went in circles; it wasn't erratic. When it was near me, when I heard it approaching, I stopped thinking of it as a thing and started thinking of it as Elisa. I heard her fists. The pounding in my ears was unmistakable: it was hands in the echoing emptiness of something filled with water. Everyone was crying except me.

The mantra girl asked in a loud voice, "How are you, Elisa?"

And the voice of a dead and wounded creature reached my ears, a broken mermaid girl without a tail who said, *So lonely lonely lonely.*

And then she stopped pounding.

The city shone, damp neon and skidding tires and the echo of ghostly hands under the water while we waited on our knees for the return of that delicate voice that traveled in waves as though riding an artificial tide, closer to the sky than the ocean. We stayed there kneeling for more than half an hour. No one wanted to accept that Elisa was gone again.

FACE OF DISGRACE

For Carmen Burguess

Her hands made the sound of crabs. Her nails, hard like bone and shiny red. She moved them over the table as if the wood were an invisible piano, nails speeding from end to end. She wasn't a coquettish woman, not even a tidy one. She was practical when she went to work: hair very short, concealer to hide the circles under her eyes, dressed in slacks and a white shirt, a blazer if it was cold, and sunglasses. Correct, but by no means sleek. An accountant, a person who worked with numbers, should not look disheveled, and she abided by that rule. That's why her nails were always impeccable. And that was pretty much it. At home she went around in underwear that was too big for her, nightgowns that hung open and never a bra underneath, shuffling around in dirty knee-high stockings. My sister soon refused to accept her drunken affect and would lock herself in her room, her headphones on in front of the screen. That was when she was home, because she was more likely to be outside, walking or reading in the park, or taking any kind of class she could, swimming, boxing, running, English. And when she went out at night, she wouldn't be back until noon the next day. So I was the one who listened to our mother. There was no one else. My dad owned an event hall and a party store, businesses quite unsuited to our constant misery. Every visit to another house, any house, seemed like a foray into the world of other people's joy.

—

My mother would fall down and crawl on all fours, the glass of white wine —always white so as not to stain her teeth—balanced on a table, a chair, sometimes even a pillow. I helped her keep from banging into things and, eventually, to throw up and get to sleep. I listened to her, too. How she was never going to get better. How she did so much for us, and never received any thanks, only contempt. And incomprehension, from everyone, about… that horror that forced her to drink and cry. She always told me about her rape, me and anyone who would listen, and she was right about one thing: no one wanted to hear it. People often reacted by recoiling from her, physically moving a few inches away, and also with a certain incredulity or, more likely, a desire not to know or listen. My contagious mother. The order and details of the rape story were always the same, as if she were no longer capable of remembering it for real and were repeating an old story, a legend.

She lived in Paraná, with her father. She was in high school. Fourteen years old. Her mom had already left—my grandmother, the absent mother. Family legend was that after spending weeks locked in her room, my grandmother must have escaped out the window, because they found it open. She had been "off in the head," as they called it, for years before that. Mom's brothers and my grandfather went out to look for her, but they didn't find anything. No one talked about her. Paraná was still a small city in the early '70s, very safe and calm. My mom walked home from school along an unlit road because the house was in a rural area, but no one was afraid, or at least not of real things, just ghosts and goblins. It was toward the end of the year, and the damp from the river made her sweat. My mom dreamed of the coast and the islands, of taking a boat out on the brown river and seeing the men's backs in the sun. She had only a few finals left. If she did well, she was going to ask for a visit to El Palmar as a reward; the park had been inaugurated a few years before, but she still hadn't been. She'd seen photos of the palm trees with the sun low, the orange sky, the treetops like crazy wigs.

The dirt road was a little damp that day and she didn't want to ruin her shoes, so she sped up, then slipped and fell. A hand helped her up. She

always said “a hand”: she hadn’t seen whose it was, whether a man’s, a woman’s, or another teenager’s. Her notebooks and textbooks were in a backpack and didn’t get muddy, but her legs and uniform did. After she said thank you, she saw that it was a man, a very tall one with dark hair. She heard a whistle, but she didn’t know then and doesn’t know now whether it was the man who whistled or someone else. The whistle made her feel the danger. It was a call, a warning. She tried to run but slipped again, and the man was very strong. He didn’t rape her there on the road. He leaned her against a tree. He didn’t tell her not to scream, didn’t cover her mouth, and she cried the whole time from fear and pain.

The next day, she went to a witch doctor to keep from getting pregnant. The woman assured her there was no pregnancy, and she was right. But she didn’t keep the secret. When my grandfather found out, he didn’t beat my mother, as she’d feared. He spoke without looking at her. He told her he didn’t know how to take care of a girl, that he was a single man and didn’t know how to raise daughters, that it was all her whore mother’s fault. He sent her to Buenos Aires to finish high school, and at a dance she met the boy who would be her only boyfriend, because she was afraid of men. “Your father is a good man,” she’d repeat. “I ruined his life.” And she’d spit wine and slobber onto the pillow she didn’t share with him because they didn’t sleep together. My sister had heard the story many times, too. “Doesn’t it make you feel sorry for her?” I asked once, over breakfast.

“It makes me mad,” Alex replied.

Mom wasn’t in that condition every day. Usually she came home, watched a little TV, and went to bed. If she ever asked us about school or work, it was in a casual or uninterested way. She never hung pictures or bought curtains. She never got excited about flowers or plants. I never saw her delight in rings or necklaces. She didn’t know how to embroider or knit, or how to paint or dance. She did like animals, but without any real enthusiasm. She got bored at our birthdays, and it was lucky for us that my dad’s party store took care of everything, so we always had a mirror ball, a piñata, magicians, cake, all the trappings of a happy childhood. My father never tried to convince her to go to a psychiatrist, as if he knew that behind

her depression there lurked an incurable, ravenous night. He simply disconnected from her in the house and in daily life. He left her alone. I loved her, but I didn't like her. I didn't like to spend time with my mother. She felt like an abandoned ruin, just waiting for demolition.

One day she was so drunk that I barely kept her from splattering her hair when she vomited. I wouldn't have washed it. I brought her to bed and laid her face-up. And instead of disgust, what came out was a reprimand: "You have to get treatment," I told her. "You have to go to a shrink or a support group, some kind of therapy—we shouldn't have to put up with this anymore."

"I can't. No one can help me. They won't believe me. I can't tell them. Men don't believe me."

I was surprised, because she hardly ever responded when she was that drunk or that depressed.

"What do you mean they're not going to believe you, Mom? You tell the story all the time, and we always believe you."

I assumed she was talking about the rape, and it made me mad. Of course they would believe her. Not all men were the enemy. We are taught from preschool on that the absolute worst thing is to rape a woman. Worse than murder. I could just hear my sister's voice arguing with me about this, ranting about the justice system and how men always protected one another. Sometimes I felt like she and I lived in different worlds.

"He didn't have a face," my mother said.

"Who?"

"The man who raped me. He didn't have a face. It was erased."

I thought it was the alcohol talking, but suddenly she sat up in bed, lucid and bright-eyed and tousle-haired like she was a kid again, and she was capable of speaking in full sentences without slurring her words; she seemed almost happy. It was terrifying.

She told me every detail, and promised she would also write it all down for me when she felt up to it. "Do it at work," I suggested. And she fell asleep agreeing it was a good idea. I didn't sleep at all that night, and then I went to spend a few days at a friend's weekend house in the country: soccer,

beer, music at dusk. When I came back, determined to rent a place of my own and move out, I found my mother locked in her room. Just like the grandmother I never knew. She wasn't letting anyone in, but she opened for me. She let me see her. She asked me to take her picture. And, before she left, she gave me a long letter. "For you and for Alex. I hope she believes it," she said.

Her body was found on the sidewalk of Calle Gallo in the Once neighborhood. She'd jumped from a hotel window. From a top-floor room. Her death would have been a relief in a different world, a different reality. A huge relief. But I understood it for what it was. A weight, a condemnation, and the duty to be a messenger—a burden I hadn't asked for and didn't want to carry.

•••

After Alex washed her face that morning, she noticed that something seemed wrong with her face. She was just about to dab a little concealer on her undereye circles when she saw that her right eyelid was drooping slightly, as was her mouth on that side. There was a silver lining: the paralysis had caused her nasolabial fold—as her cosmetologist called it—to disappear. When she tried to speak in front of the mirror, her mouth couldn't form the *u* or the *o* correctly, and she decided that she couldn't teach class—English, at the School of Communications, where it was a required class—in that condition. She crossed the street to her brother's store to ask him to take her daughter, Magnolia, to school while she went to the emergency room to get checked out. Her head didn't hurt, but she feared a stroke: her father had died of one a few years before.

Her brother Diego ran the family store: New Year's Eve decorations, Halloween and masquerade costumes, paraphernalia for birthdays, first communions, baby showers. It was all they had left after they'd had to sell off the event hall where all the neighborhood girls had celebrated their fifteenth birthdays.

“It could be a virus or something nerve-related—there’s no reason to think it’s a stroke,” her brother told her, but he seemed worried. Too worried—this same brother would blithely risk sepsis or tetanus by not treating his cuts, and had once spent a month without realizing his bones were broken when a motorcycle ran over his foot.

When Alex got to the hospital, she stopped by the bathroom first. What she saw in the mirror surprised her, but she attributed it to her half-closed eye: the edge of her lip looked ghostly, as if her face were a painting and someone had smudged the contour of her mouth. Since her eyelid was almost closed, she tried to forget about the blurred feeling—“I’m going up in smoke,” she murmured—that came with her skewed vision, and went to wait her turn with the doctor. There weren’t too many people: a minor miracle, because, she knew, mornings tended to be chaos, lots of patients and too few doctors and nurses.

She was called in after only half an hour. The clinician, handsome and inefficient, did what Alex expected: Open your eye, smile, try to move your eyebrow. Nothing. He asked if she had some sort of chronic viral infection, Lyme disease or HIV. He ordered blood work and an emergency MRI, in order to rule out “anything vascular.”

“But I don’t think that’s it,” he said. “It looks like Bell’s palsy, and that can be caused by any virus. It should pass in a few weeks—it doesn’t usually last any longer than that.”

Alex agreed to the MRI, though she intuited that the cause wasn’t cerebral: she had no other symptoms. She endured half a thunderous hour in the scanner and left feeling reassured that maybe they didn’t know what was causing the paralysis, but it wasn’t her brain and she wasn’t about to die. The test results would arrive by email within a few days. She asked for a doctor’s note to excuse her from work, and in the taxi home she took a photo of the paper and sent it to her boss, who immediately replied, “Get well soon.”

She got out of the taxi at the party store to pick up Magnolia, who was playing on her iPad behind the counter.

When her brother saw her come in, he took a mask of Michael Myers, the murderer in the *Halloween* movies, from a hook on the wall. He came up behind Alex and carefully put it on her before Magnolia could see her. "Hey, what are you doing?" Alex protested as she tried to take it off, because she had a particular hatred for that all-white, nearly featureless mask (so of the '80s), and for the woman-killing character who wore it, but then Magnolia looked up and started to laugh. She had no idea her mom was wearing the mask of a movie serial killer: she thought she wanted to play or was pranking her. So as not to scare her daughter with either the mask or her face, Alex snatched the iPad away and started chasing her around the store, which wasn't big but had a shelf unit in the middle that they could run circles around; she followed Magnolia out to the sidewalk when the shop got too small. It was a beautiful fall day: a little wind, clouds like spiderwebs in the sky, girls walking by wearing long pants but still in sandals.

Then Alex was surprised to see that one of the women walking toward them was Tina, her ex-wife and Magnolia's other mom. It wasn't her day to visit—or was it? They didn't get along, except when it came to their daughter: the custody split was respected without issue. Her ex-wife, slender, sporty, with long hair and eyes the color of wet sand, always in leggings and running shoes, so healthy and firm. She looked ten years younger than she was. But when she smiled, that luminous first impression changed. Alex had once been fascinated by what she'd thought was a sad smile. Now, after all these years, she knew it was just forced.

"Your brother called and told me you'd gone to the hospital. If you want, I can take Magnolia until you're better."

"It's nothing," said Alex. She raised the mask so that only Tina could see her, while Magnolia's attention turned to chasing a neighbor's dog. "It's Bell's palsy, apparently. It could be a virus, but it's not contagious."

"Okay, then until you get the results and you know for sure what it is, I'll take her. Why are you wearing the mask?"

"Diego put it on me so Magnolia wouldn't see my weird face and get scared. She doesn't know it's from a horror movie."

Some people, especially those passing in cars, stared at them. After all, she was wearing a Halloween mask in the middle of March. It was odd.

“Tina, she’s not going to catch anything from me, they told me that very clearly.”

Tina smiled with her usual condescension—the same disdain that had caused their separation. *What do you know,* that hard smile said. *Who knows what kind of bug you’ve picked up from those young girls you fuck,* it said. *You always did live in the dirt. Just like your father, an evil man who drove your mother to suicide.*

She had actually said that once, about the suicide, and Alex had slapped her, so hard it had split Tina’s lip and her moral superiority—for a little while—and although she had apologized to keep Tina from reporting her for domestic violence and taking Magnolia away, she never regretted having hit her. If Alex had primary custody of Magnolia, it was because she owned her own house and Tina rented, and also because that slap had been relegated to a place of silence and shame. Tina’s pride would never let her admit she’d been hit, but Alex still tiptoed around her ex-wife. Those words had hurt: they brought back the memory of her depressive, drunk mother and her confused affection for her father, who had never been abusive, but neither had he tried to help. He had, in fact, been a little filthy, because he was one of those men who don’t know how to do anything for themselves around the house, and her mother didn’t clean, or she did it erratically, same as cooking. Alex was angry at them both, but she had never been able to stand anyone else expressing an opinion about her family.

“Fine, keep her until my tests come back. I’ll let you know as soon as I hear something, and I’ll call you tonight.” Tina had brought her own keys, so Alex added, “Go on in and pack up her school things. I need to work something out with my brother.” There wasn’t much to pack: Magnolia was five years old, and the preschool didn’t give the kids anything like homework, except for the occasional drawing and the first letters of the alphabet. Alex watched them walk away and felt nauseous. She didn’t connect it to the paralysis—she hadn’t eaten anything, and she knew it was a need to get something in her stomach.

She went back into the store, grabbed an alfajor from the counter, and could finally say to her brother:

“Who put you in charge of my life? You call the shrew on me, you cover my face—how dare you?”

She yanked off the mask, and Diego immediately led her into the little bathroom behind the counter.

“Look at yourself,” he told her. “Magnolia can’t see you like this.”

The paralysis was spreading, and it was having a strange effect. One of her nostrils looked smaller. Not pulled taught by a tense muscle and not slack, the orifice was actually smaller, like it was slowly closing up. Alex raised her eyelid: her eye also seemed to be going, same as a large percentage of her lip. The doctor hadn’t realized, or maybe this blurring hadn’t been so advanced. It was like someone had used an eraser in Photoshop. She tried to brush it off.

“When I go home I’ll google this damned paralysis. That must be what it is.”

“Here’s hoping,” Diego said.

—

Alex was always thinking about moving out of the house, even though she knew it was her only advantage: the trump card that meant Magnolia lived with her. She used her mother’s old room to store mattresses and boxes of now-forgotten objects, and never went in there. Alex still used the same bedroom as always, which was large and looked onto the street; she liked it because she preferred the nocturnal air through the window on nights when she had trouble sleeping. Magnolia had the room that had once belonged to Diego. There was also a small guest room that had been her father’s refuge in later years, which she had set up as a playroom and office, where she translated and graded tests. Alex was fine in the house, but, ultimately, it would always belong to *her,* to Alex’s impossible mother. Alex had never taken care of her mom during her lengthy crisis. Diego had. Because he was the son? It was a sense of filial responsibility that Alex had never felt. Even

when Diego moved out, he only went across the street to the apartment above the store, though by then their mother was dead. He wanted to take care of what was left of the family, maybe. Alex didn't get into her brother's neurosis.

After a reheated lunch, she decided to take the rest of the day off to lie in bed, chat, have video calls with a few girls who, for now, she was avoiding meeting in person (she always watched out for her relationship with Tina: she didn't want some social worker accusing her of promiscuity, and anyway, there was a lot you could do online), read a little, and sleep. If the problem was stress, as the young doctor had suggested, then she would rest. She liked to lie under the warm covers, though the day wasn't cold and she could see the sun out the window. She sent a voice message to Magnolia before taking a restless, damp nap, from which she awoke sweaty and with the sense that her dreams had been intense, or maybe they were nightmares, which in any case were frequent.

She carried a plate of cold pizza to bed—it was dark by the time she woke up and she was hungry again. The night air was cool and a breeze was blowing, and when she went to close the window, she heard a whistling sound. Very near, as though from the sidewalk right in front of her house: she raised the blinds and opened the window more instead of closing it, but when the whistle came again, very clear and close by, so loud it seemed to come from an instrument and not a mouth—though it was surely a mouth, she could hear the air at the end and it was the vibration of lips, not an instrument—she felt fear, an irrational terror, and she practically saw an image of the whistler yanking her out the window, even though it had bars, and dragging her through the empty street. She slammed the window shut as fast as she could, and still a third whistle came, farther away now, but followed by a weird little laugh. Could it be a thief signaling to his accomplices, letting them know there was a woman alone? Alex wasn't as physically fit as Tina but she steeled herself to face them, though not if they were armed. She ran to the door and found it unlocked. She locked it but then thought: What if someone came in while I was asleep? With a moan, she forced herself to check the house, walking on tiptoe with her whole

body trembling. She moved the shower curtain to look in the bathtub. Checked the office. Magnolia's room and all the closets. But when she opened the junk room, as she called her mother's old bedroom, she heard a faint but distinct movement over the wood floor. A piece of furniture sliding. Maybe a body pushing it. She ran out of the house just as she was, barefoot, in a T-shirt and underwear and clutching her phone, and she had time in her flight to call her brother. She was always grateful that he lived right across from her, not just because they got along well, but because, quite often, Diego provided the calm that she needed.

"How could you leave the door unlocked, dummy? Put on some pants, it's cold," Diego said after listening to her explain her cries of "Someone got in the house!" He went over to inspect the place without taking a weapon, and she waited for him in his living room; she put on a clean pair of his jeans, which weren't easy to find. Diego had returned to his usual masculine squalor after his last breakup. His girlfriends didn't tend to last long.

She heard him coming back: though it was early, the street was empty and there weren't many cars going by. He was serene as he entered, and she knew he hadn't found a thing.

"Did you check the junk room?"

"Nothing there, I looked behind everything."

Alex tried to bite her lip—a habit of hers—and realized she couldn't do it.

When she touched her mouth, it was flaccid and slack and something else: too slight.

"Shouldn't we call the cops?"

"Stay and sleep here if you want."

"Am I blowing this out of proportion?"

"I think so."

Alex got up.

"I'll go home. It's fine. I got spooked by that whistle. You're sure?"

"I checked all over. If someone's in there, they don't plan to steal anything."

“Is that supposed to reassure me?”

“What I mean is, a thief would be done with the job already. If someone went inside and is hiding in wait for you…it seems like too complicated a scenario.”

Still, Diego looked worried. Or sad. He was peering closely at her face.

“What? I’m getting worse.”

“A little.”

She took a selfie. The change was subtle but unmistakable. Half of her face was droopy like the jowls of certain dogs, but for some reason, which she thought must be the light, the creases that should have been along her cheeks and her slack lips were not very deep. They looked made up. Or erased. Her eye, however, was the same.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be up all night working,” said Diego, who in addition to the store had a company selling digital security systems for small businesses like his. “Just call me if you need anything.”

Alex took a sleeping pill, checked the front door’s lock several times, and, for the first time ever when she was alone, also locked her bedroom door. She used that lock only to keep Magnolia out when she had a lover over, and sometimes to have sex with Tina, when they were feeling creative. She kept her phone under her pillow for easy access.

—

Eyes open in the darkness waiting for the man in the house. Then sleep and rolling over and pulling up the covers and then the doorbell rings, it rings but don’t open up because it’s a little boy without a face who’s going to come running inside, who’s going to run between her legs and hide in the junk room, junk mother, ashtray mother, party masks, wonder woman and freddy krueger and michael myers and barbie, moonbaths on the terrace, fingers inside of Tina, Tina who sleeps and lies down on top of Magnolia, and she denies and denies it and strangles her to shut her up, the ashtray full of gum and joints, the doorbell that rings and then the phone, on the phone the sound of highway and rain, an old motor, and the smile before saying

her name or maybe the doorbell is a whistle, all night the whistle on the street and the autumn.

—

Morning found her too early, and feeling hungover. Her brother hadn't even opened the store yet. In the bathroom mirror she saw that not only was the paralysis worse, but also her half-closed eye increased the blurry effect, that smudging of her features. Since she was incapable of blinking, she couldn't clear her vision. She lifted her eyelid, and nausea flooded her throat when she realized that her eye itself was fogged, that she had a cataract. When she went to google it to see if it was a symptom of the paralysis, she found the lab results in her email: a quick glance told her that they were all normal. Still, she had to go to the doctor. She forwarded the results to Tina to put her mind at ease and crossed the street to ask her brother to take her back to the hospital: she couldn't see well enough to drive, and for some reason she didn't want to take a taxi, she didn't want to be seen. How dumb, she thought, but she couldn't help it. In the hallway mirror she saw that the smudging of her features had gotten worse, and she pulled her phone from her pocket to look up the address of a private clinic where she'd been operated on for appendicitis—a high-quality place that would take her schoolteacher's insurance. When Diego opened the door, he took her phone out of her hand.

"What are you doing? Are you an idiot, can't you see what's happening to me?"

"It's because I see what's happening to you that I know there's no point going to the clinic."

"Give me my phone or I'll beat your ass, I swear."

Diego turned around and asked her to come up to his apartment, because he had something to tell her. Alex pounded her fists against his back and Diego let her, though she was strong and it hurt. When he heard her crying, he said:

"You know that's no paralysis, and so you are going to come with me."

Tell the story, thought Diego. He had it in the letter if necessary, but it would be best to put it into words himself. His sister couldn't stand to talk about their mother. She got furious just remembering her. He'd have to bear Alex's shouts stoically, her cries of "Why are you telling me this?," her "Don't talk to me about Mom now, Mom is your trauma, I'm just asking you to take me to the hospital, or at least let me get into a taxi." What was the best approach? Show her the photos first. Give her the pictures so she could see for herself. Some had been taken by their mother, her reflection in a mirror in that pre-selfie world. He had taken the last ones himself, there in the junk room, when she'd gone into seclusion before committing suicide. Those hours with his model-mother now seemed like a vivid, horrible dream.

The face in the photos followed the same process. First the hemiplegia. The drooping eyelid, the slack lip that left the teeth in view, the absence of wrinkles and expression lines. Then the white eye, the cataracts. Alex threw that photo down when she saw it but Diego kept going, kept handing her the images in silence. The eye that disappeared. Like an oil painting handled by bare fingers. Like after using a stain remover. Then the nose. One nostril closed. The other. The absent nose: a feline face. The mouth that shrank down to look like a silent film actress's pout. Their mother was crying in many of the pictures. In others, she was drinking whiskey through a straw. Alex screamed, "What is this?" and threw all the photos down, shook Diego by the shoulders. "What is this, why are you showing me this crazy woman in makeup, that's not what's happening to me, it's not happening to me!"

"She's not wearing makeup, Alex. I saw her, I took those photos."

"She put on makeup for you and then she killed herself—you always were her servant."

"No. You know that's not it. I was her servant, maybe, but I'm no idiot."

"You're a jackass!"

"Sis, that isn't makeup."

Alex went running down the stairs and fumbled for the mask that was still on the counter. Though she could hardly see through her tears and she didn't want to do it, she ordered a car, which, luckily, arrived right away.

The hospital was close by: she would rather go to the emergency room than the clinic because she thought wearing the mask into the clinic would be too much. The driver looked alarmed when she got in. She ran inside the emergency room and took off the mask so people could see what was happening to her and would admit her quickly. The receptionist picked up the phone immediately. Relieved, Alex dried an eye; the other had no tears. But then she realized that some of the people in the emergency room were shouting at her. Many were asking what was wrong with her, but others were insulting her: “We’re just regular, hardworking people, why would you want to scare us with that mask?,” and “Asshole, take it off, you’re scaring the old ladies,” and “My mom has high blood pressure, and if something happens to her I’ll break that monster face of yours.” One man tried to help her, but since she couldn’t see him coming, she elbowed him. The receptionist had been calling not a doctor but security.

“I already took off the mask!” Alex shouted, throwing the plastic to the floor and stomping on it. “This is my face, my FACE, that’s why I need a doctor!”

There was something strange in the air. Alex had sensed it before fights in the soccer stands, breathing it in along with the gunpowder smell of the flares, and the sweat, the breath that reeked of alcohol. That density of senseless violence, set off by just a spark. And she was causing it. She lied in self-defense:

“It’s a burn! My face is burned!”

That calmed the shouting a bit, but then she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror behind the receptionist. She felt choked, short of breath, and when she brought a hand to her nose she noticed that her nostrils were tiny, almost nonexistent. She touched her face. Only one eye left. On the other side there was nothing, just hard skin over the socket. She could fit a finger into her mouth, and that was all. Her skin was smooth as a mannequin’s.

She went running out before security could get there, sure that it was more than just her appearance that was scaring people. It was something else, something inexorable. She could feel it. The photos of her mother were like intense slides passing before her one remaining eye. As she ran

she tripped on the steps and fought back when someone tried to help her up—she was afraid of a lynch mob. But it was her brother, it was Diego, pale and trembling, uncertain, terrified just like her.

—

"Mom got a good look at the man," Diego said. "She insisted it was still daytime, that she was worried about getting home before dark, but there was enough light; the sun still hadn't sunk into the river. The man who helped her up when she fell didn't have a face. And his feet were on backward. She told me they were like that so that when he walked no one could find him—his footprints would throw you off, send you in the wrong direction. He grabbed her hard and whistled like he was calling someone, but no one else came. She didn't give me too many details except that she tried to find his face, she touched his hair to see if his face was turned around too, like his feet, but no, there was nothing on the other side, just smooth scalp. He didn't kiss her, of course, but he whistled, him or someone else, she couldn't tell. Somewhere, there was a mouth.

"He hurt her a lot, and when he left, the whistle turned into a clicking sound; she interpreted it as an instruction not to tell anyone, but really, who could she talk to? Her father and brothers would have gone out to hunt the criminal down, and she didn't want to make them go crazy or end up in jail. Plus, her dad was already drinking a lot, ever since her mom disappeared.

"That night at the dinner table she played dumb and said that kids at school had been talking about a goblin with his feet on backward. She didn't mention the face, just in case. Her dad got upset. He was usually a calm, melancholic drunk, but he pounded the table and made the plates of pasta rattle. 'Those are old wives' tales from the jungle!' he shouted. 'Who did you hear that from? Are you going to get all nutso like your mother and spout shit about some faceless guy?'

"And here Mom told me, and it's also in her letter, that when she went to the witch doctor in case she was pregnant, the woman told her about her mother, our grandmother, the one who left. She said our grandma had come

to her, too, and also because she'd been raped. She was raped by a strange man, the witch doctor said, and she made the sign of the cross. Mom felt like she understood her mother better then, understood why she'd taken off. In any case, though, she'd never been mad at her mother for leaving, because putting up with her father was a chore she wouldn't wish on anyone.

"Mom told me she didn't push it with the goblin story, but even so Grandpa didn't eat that night and ended up drunk in the street. She thought maybe the faceless guy was a leper, and the next day she started investigating. She asked at the library and they told her that the closest leper colony was in Santa Fe, really far away. Still, for a while she believed that there was a leper who lived out by their house, a sick man who had raped her and her mother, though leprosy looked different in the library book photos. The faceless man's face was smooth like a frying pan."

"Diego, no one raped me."

Alex was sitting on the sofa, trying to keep her one remaining eye open.

"I thought about that. Never?"

"No, and especially not a guy. And least of all a faceless guy. Please."

"I don't know. I always hated this secret, and I always hoped I wouldn't have to tell you."

"Don't start feeling sorry for yourself."

"I'm not. I feel more sorry for you—you're still so angry."

"My mother was chickenshit, and now I find out she hid this from me, and you want me not to be angry."

"And what would she have told you?"

Alex touched her mouth.

"It's like it's glued with something really strong. I can still get a finger inside. Give me some water."

"Mom asked me to keep quiet, in case it didn't happen to you."

"What about food?"

"I don't know. Mom didn't eat."

"I remember her face being normal in the coffin at her funeral."

“You don’t remember anything because you were wasted and rabid as a dog. The coffin was closed because she was smashed on the sidewalk.”

“And no one realized she was missing a face? Suicides are investigated.”

“Her head was broken apart on the sidewalk, Alex. It was all mush.”

Just when she heard the word sidewalk, everything went dark for Alex and she started to scream. She’d lost her other eye.

—

There was no calming her down, and Diego understood. The whole story, told like that, and happening in just two days—it seemed like madness, like ravings. He agreed to take her to the clinic. The car was filthy and smelled like dog, but surely Alex couldn’t smell anymore. How could this be stopped? What was different? He had asked around about his grandmother and had pieced together an outline of her story. Some people in town had seen her with a scarf covering her face, but they thought she was in disguise to run off and rendezvous with another man. Maybe the same one who had supposedly raped her. Because the witch doctor hadn’t been discreet, hadn’t kept her secret, either. But what if he was wrong? The first day, he thought he was imagining things when he saw Alex’s face. But he had also seen people’s reactions at the hospital. Those people had not only seen her erased face, they had also realized that this was no disease or injury. Just as he had known when it had happened to his mother. He’d dreamed of her so many nights. She appeared to him with a stocking on her head. His girlfriend had left him because it was impossible to sleep beside him; he woke up screaming when he smelled the alcohol close to his face and saw the stocking she wore like a bandage. In the dream she took it off, and underneath she had no features but she whistled. Sometimes he also dreamed that she got up from the sidewalk with her legs broken and face bloody, calling his name.

“I’m thirsty,” Alex said in the car, and he could hardly understand her. She groaned because she didn’t have eyes to cry. Alex spilled half the soda he handed her on her pants. When she touched her mouth, she realized it

was almost all skin. She tried to wail, and Diego handed her a straw he had brought with him from the party store so she could put it in the corner of her lips, where there was still an open slit.

They stopped at a red light and Alex asked her brother to pull over. “Take a picture of me,” she told him. He could hardly understand her words now. “And send it to Pato.”

Her best friend. The answer came right away:

What are you trying to show me? You’re all blurry. Did you meet some hottie and you’re trying to sneak a photo? You’re in selfie mode, dumbass.

Then Alex started to pound her legs with her fists. She was furious.

She had always been angry with her mother, for killing herself, and because she’d been a horrible and distant and traumatized and negating person. And now she’d passed this on to her daughter? She felt like the years-long anger that had made her tear sheets and punch brick and bang her head against the wall was sliding through her fingers like sand because she had, finally, gotten to the heart of the damage. She believed her brother, because he had spoken to her from the deep sadness of the secret. She asked Diego what she looked like now, and he told her she looked as though someone had painted a portrait and wiped the fresh paint with an open hand, in circles, so the features blurred together.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Diego.

“Tell me everything else, all about Grandma, everything. Then take me to Tina’s house. I want to be with my daughter.”

It was nighttime when they got back. They had talked in the car for hours. The autumn wind had driven people inside their houses. They went to Diego’s because Alex wanted to wear a mask and the Michael Myers one had been broken at the hospital. “I’ll bring you one,” he said, but she refused. She didn’t want to be alone, blind, in the car.

Inside, the landline rang. It was an outlandish thing, but Diego still had one; no one knew why. A lot of people kept their house phones for parents and grandparents who didn’t know how to use cellphones, or in case of power outages, but they didn’t have parents, and in their neighborhood, for

now, outages were sporadic and happened only in summer. In that, at least, they were lucky.

Alex answered. She heard a sort of static or the sound of a car on the highway, wind entering through the window of a car going very fast. And then, unmistakable, the whistle. Not a harmonica or music or a bird. A whistle, a summons.

The front door swung open on its own and Diego, startled, ran to it reflexively. There was no one there.

“Let’s go,” Alex struggled to say.

“Where?” Diego asked.

“Tina’s.”

She had an idea, and she was turning it over like the replacement Myers mask in her hands. She planned to use it awhile after Magnolia calmed down, because it would help. She couldn’t save herself now, she intuited. Even if she wasn’t dying from this—because she was breathing somehow—she would eventually starve to death; she wasn’t going to submit to being fed through a tube or anything like that. This was not reversible. But if Magnolia knew the story of the faceless women of her family, the girl would have a chance. The only common thread was the not knowing. She needed Tina as a witness and caretaker so she could tell Magnolia if she ever forgot in the future (because she was going to forget about that faceless face), the story had to stay fresh in her mind even if she thought it was the raving of a crazy woman descended from a line of crazy women. Tina had to get Magnolia to remember and believe. Diego could help, and there were the photos. The ones of her mother and the ones he was taking now, in the car. One, two, hundreds of images. Would Tina have an analog camera? That would be more trustworthy than digital. She had to ring the doorbell with the mask on so her ex-wife would let her in. She had to show her the proof, because Tina always demanded documentation, so she had her mother’s letter and the photos with her. And then she would talk to Magnolia. She had to tell her face-to-face, keeping her from yelling as she did sometimes because she was a little spoiled. It was going to take some

time, but Alex was still breathing, she was breathing without a nose, almost without a mouth. Was she breathing through her skin? Was she mutating?

When she was a hundred meters from Tina's house, Diego's car stopped dead. The key in the ignition did nothing. The battery wouldn't respond. Not a sound, except for that clicking of an exhausted engine. Outside, in the silence, the call came on the wind. The whistle. Alex didn't stop to think. She got out of the car even though she couldn't see—she knew that block—and walked, feeling her way along the houses, the door to the rotisserie, the massage parlor curtain, the friendly old man's beautiful door, the building only a few stories tall. Tina's place was a few meters away. She ran as fast as she could with Tina's keys in her hand in case they didn't open the door for her immediately, she always had them on her in case of an emergency, this was an emergency, and she ran with the air hitting her face and it didn't hurt, it was almost pleasant, and she didn't know if that face was even hers anymore, if it was still there, if it was her mother's or her grandmother's, if she was going to find the house or was running the wrong way toward the river, she didn't know whether telling her daughter everything was going to be the end or just another mocking laugh on the heels of that whistle, which didn't stop and sounded ever closer, she didn't know if telling her was just another trick like the feet whose footprints always led somewhere else, far away from the thing that made them.

JULIE

I shall plunge down into the abysmal horror of madness and death—or I shall walk upon the dawn.

—MARJORIE CAMERON

They brought her from the United States straight to our house in Buenos Aires—they didn't want her in some hotel while they looked for an apartment to rent. My gringa cousin, Julie: she'd been born in Argentina, but when she was two years old, her parents—my aunt and uncle—had migrated to the States. They settled in Vermont: my uncle worked at Boeing, and my aunt—my dad's sister—birthed children, decorated the house, and held secret spiritist meetings in her lovely, spacious living room. Rich blond Latinos of German heritage: their neighbors didn't quite know how to place them, since they came from South America but their last name was Meyer. Still, their firstborn's features betrayed the infiltrated strain of brown blood passed down from my Indigenous grandmother: Julie had the dark dead eyes of a rat, untamable hair always bristling, skin the color of cardboard. I'm pretty sure my aunt even started telling people she was adopted. My dad got so mad when he heard that rumor that he stopped writing and calling his sister for at least a year.

Though frequent, the communication with my gringo relatives was superficial. Photos taken in the snow. Those awful studio portraits Americans love so much: big smiles, a summery sky-blue background, their Sunday best. Updates on their family achievements, all financial: a new car, trips to New York and Florida, college applications—only for the boys, though; Julie "went a different route"—the white Christmases, the little forest animals that just ate up the garden, the constant renovation of bedrooms and kitchens. No one could be that happy, of course, and we

knew full well they were lying, but we hardly cared. They lived far away in that other, rich world that they never invited us to visit: they never said, “We’ll buy the tickets” or “Come spend New Year’s in the snow.” It only proved how selfish and stingy they really were. In the photos they sent, Julie always looked serious, badly dressed, and, to be honest, ugly. Fat. Bloated, maybe, with hair that was tangled and brittle. She looked gravely ill.

Julie was twenty-one—only a year older than me—when my aunt and uncle decided to bring her back to Argentina. There was a lot of yelling, first over the phone and later in our house, about whether or not my parents would accept the visit, which threatened to be long. I still lived at home: I couldn’t find a good job, and I didn’t have the money to move out. The house was a little run-down, but it was big and comfortable, so space wasn’t an issue. The issue was that our gringo relatives had never done a thing to help us. They’d never sent us a single dollar. Never asked what we needed, and we had needed a whole lot during all the years of Argentina’s crisis, rebirth, loss, madness, disaster, and rebirth. Plus, my father had an ideological objection. They were returning because Julie was in fact sick, and they had spent a fortune on treatments in the United States. Apparently not everything was covered by the all-powerful Boeing health insurance. Or, more likely, my uncle wasn’t as high up in the company as he liked to brag. “They’re coming so they can ransack this country’s healthcare system!” my dad bellowed. Mom didn’t try to soothe him, didn’t say, “But she’s your sister.” She let him slam the doors. She knew that in the end, we would take them in.

They arrived one rainy night in the middle of summer. I went with Dad to the airport. Julie was cross-eyed and obese, wearing a gray cotton sweat suit, and the plane ride had made her hands swell. I thought she seemed beyond saving: some people just let themselves go for too long, and one day they wake up crazy and monstrous. That’s how Julie was. Full-on abandonment. And we didn’t even know exactly what was wrong with her. My aunt had only cried over the phone: “Certain things can be discussed only in person, but it’s a mental problem. It’s mental.”

—

The arguments took place around the kitchen table. I was working and studying, so I didn't see my parents or my gringo relatives much, but I never missed those nighttime showdowns. The gringos were crabby, for a whole bunch of reasons. They didn't like the broken sidewalks (they weren't really broken: sidewalks are uneven in Buenos Aires, the tree roots push the slabs up, but anyway, my aunt and uncle had tripped and fallen); they didn't trust the doctors they'd come to see; they missed the cold weather; they were scandalized by the number of people living on the street (that complaint would set my father howling, "What about all the homeless in New York and L.A.!"); and they didn't like the food, they missed Nutella and the wide variety of yogurts in the grocery store. Julie barely spoke, though she was polite. She spent most of her time in her room. My aunt told us that Julie was schizophrenic and had gotten much worse in recent years. She didn't give details. She'd never told us because she wanted a normal life for her daughter, she said.

They always wore workout clothes around the house, all three of them. Cotton T-shirts and sweatpants, sneakers, no makeup. "That's how gringos are," my dad said. "But they're not gringos," I insisted, and he patted my head.

The discussions continued. "I don't want her going to doctors at the Moyano, that place is like a nineteenth-century asylum," my uncle said. My mother, offended, informed him that she had gone there to treat her depression, and sure, the facilities were a little shabby because they were underfunded, but the staff was excellent. I added my two cents: "You lived here," I told my aunt and uncle, "and not that long ago, either. The Moyano has always been like that." Everything looked decrepit to them, the royal family of Vermont. Meanwhile, Julie didn't seem all that crazy to me, except for the way she ate: without stopping, using her hands, never taking a breath until the plate was empty. Then she would smile and down a half-liter of Coca-Cola. She was medicated, and surely that's why she was so silent.

The big argument broke out one evening when the three of them came back from a consult with a famous psychiatrist. They had clearly been crying. They were also grumbling about how expensive the taxi had been, and on top of that, it was an old car that stank of gasoline (they said *gasolina,* like characters from a movie dubbed in Mexico, and not *nafta,* like normal Argentines). When they came into the house, they ignored us. I had the day off, and my parents had just gotten home from work—it must have been around six.

"It's your fault," my uncle yelled at my aunt, in English. "It's all your fault, you and your damned Ouija board!"

My dad broke in to say that in this house, we speak Spanish. "You are my guests. You're my sister. You're Argentine, goddamn it!"

They looked at him disconcertedly, and I saw my aunt break. I noticed the gray hairs sprouting from her scalp, her crooked glasses, the wrinkles at the sides of her mouth like vertical cuts or ritual decorations. "That wasn't it," she said, turning back to my uncle. "It couldn't be, that was just a game."

"Enough with the mystery," my dad said. He stood up, crossed his arms, and demanded to know the story. And my aunt told him, crying like a baby all the while. Julie was right there, wordless but clearly affected. My uncle kept his eyes on the floor, and at a certain point, when the account of Julie's madness rose to the level of indecency, he had to go out to the patio.

The story wasn't all that complicated—it was even a horror movie cliché. Practically *The Exorcist.* When she was little, Julie had started to play with an invisible friend, and then with several. They lasted too long: at fourteen years old she was still talking to these friends. Eventually she told my aunt that they had come to the house during those séances that, for years, had served as social gatherings. Gatherings that came to a stop immediately after that revelation, and it was decreed that the "voices" had nothing to do with ghosts and everything to do with Julie's schizophrenia, intensified by problems at school that made it necessary to homeschool her. (Julie had zero possibility of surviving high school with her looks, not in the United States or anywhere else.) The friends-spirits-voices didn't *do*

anything, they just talked to her; they made no ghoulish suggestions, didn't break things or make noise like poltergeists. It was easy to live with them, and with Julie. Sure, it was a little creepy to hear her chatter and laugh and sometimes cry with nobody there, but if that was as far as it went, then fine, it was compatible with a normal life. What about her brothers? They were off at college by then. Luckily, they had missed the worst, most recent phase of her illness.

It was my aunt who caught Julie having sex with the spirits. My mom choked on her wine when she heard that, and she spat a mouthful onto the table: it looked like watered-down blood on the white Formica. My dad peered diffidently at Julie, and she met his gaze unabashed. That's when my uncle left.

"I don't know how she does it," my aunt went on, relieved now, unburdened by shame. "She masturbates, yes, but it's not normal masturbation. If only you could see it: there are fingers that press on her body. There are hands that squeeze her breasts! Invisible hands!"

She started to cry again. Just to say something, I told them it reminded me of the movie *The Entity.* That's when Julie spoke. Her Spanish was neutral but perfect.

"This is different. In that movie, the protagonist is raped, if it's the one I'm thinking of. But I like what they do to me. They're the only ones who want me."

She didn't storm out or join in her mother's sobbing. She merely opened a bag of chips and started eating them the way she ate everything: with both hands, the salt and grease coating her lips.

"The doctors say it's possible," said my aunt as she dabbed her face with a tissue. "They say sometimes the mind can exert such great power over the body that it produces inexplicable reactions."

"Like psychosomatic events," my mom interrupted, and she started talking about her depression and her ulcerative colitis, the bloody diarrhea, the asthma that had appeared out of the blue and vanished the same way. I don't like to remember my mom's depression: it was postpartum, and I

think of it as my fault. Well, I know it was. I caused it—doesn't matter if I meant to.

Julie finished the chips, shook her head, and assured us that all the pills and treatments in the world weren't going to cure her, because there was nothing to cure. "I like it," she said again. "I don't know why it's a problem."

"Oh, you don't know?" shouted my aunt, and she snatched the empty chip bag from Julie's hands. Julie wiped her greasy hands on the sofa. Our sofas were pretty dirty anyway.

"I *don't* know," Julie said. And in English she added that her life would be normal if it weren't for the medication, the pills that made her fat and deformed. "I became a monster," she said. "But they want me anyway."

My uncle came back in. He listened as Julie told us, still in English, about the joy of those ghost fingers, how they weren't cold at all, how they were pure pleasure. He slapped her so hard that her mouth swelled up immediately, though it didn't bleed. And he called her a whore. She seemed used to it; she just picked up her phone (which she was never without) and went to her room. We all sat there trembling. My aunt faked a fainting spell, I think so we would stop picturing her obese daughter's rolls of fat being fondled, lustfully and lovingly, by hands from beyond the grave.

—

Three weeks in, they threatened to leave: not to go back to the United States—we hadn't asked about the status of my uncle's job at Boeing, and they didn't bring it up—but to rent an apartment and "get out of our hair." Mom asked them to stay out of politeness, and they, rude as ever, said thanks very much and never mentioned leaving again.

"They're stone broke," my dad said through clenched teeth as he watered the plants in our garden. Out of pure rage he soaked the cat, who ran to hide behind the big fern, indignant. "They brought her here because they can't pay for treatment there. Psychiatry is really expensive in Yankeeland, and the exchange rate works in their favor here. Plus, we have

better mental health professionals. They don't know anything in the U.S. They just load you up with drugs and call it a day."

Still, he wouldn't kick them out. They were his family, after all, and Julie always locked the door to her room. If she was having ghost sex in there, she was very discreet about it. She had started a new treatment that entailed spending half the day at the hospital in addition to more medication. She came back half-asleep, and she grew paler and fatter. I felt really bad for her, but I didn't know what to do. My uncle went to bed drunk. My aunt spent all her time on Skype with her gringa girlfriends and sometimes with her sons, my other cousins, who said hi politely but seemed very checked out. I understood: what a relief to get Julie and their parents off their backs and so far away.

Sometimes, before I left for class, Julie and I had breakfast together on the patio. It was fall, the days were beautiful, and she ate a little more decently, maybe imitating me. She still spilled on herself, but it wasn't her fault. It was the medication that made her shake. I started to like my cousin. She had dignity, and she didn't back down. I listened to her parents fighting in English—they assumed we didn't understand—because the doctors couldn't convince Julie that spirit lovers didn't exist. She was sure they did, and she felt loved. Why take that away from her? I'd see her on the patio before she left for the hospital, looking at the plants or smiling at the cat, and every morning, as she gobbled her cereal and I drank my coffee, I tried to think of a solution, one that would set her free and get my aunt and uncle out of the house. Plus, from listening to those conversations—those arguments—I had learned their intentions: they wanted to commit her. Leave her in Argentina. Go back to America without the crazy daughter who came off so badly at parties. Not so much because of her sex with spirits—that could be kept a secret—but because her condition prevented them from taking trips to Florida, or maybe moving to a new house, perhaps one overlooking a lake. They were going to abandon her. They couldn't pay for an institution in the United States, but here, they could place her in a public hospital for free. Julie was Argentine, after all. And who would be left to visit her? My parents? Me?

There had to be other people like her. I don't know if I believed her or not: that was beside the point. I didn't say a word to my parents or to Julie or to anyone; not even my friends knew the details of her situation. I turned to the internet. There had to be other people who had sex with spirits and I figured they must gather together, hopefully in a community that wasn't anonymous or online-only.

There were people who shared their fetishes for statues and mannequins, even stuffed animals. There were men who had sex dressed as babies, and women addicted to plastic, and people who got off by licking eyeballs. But sex with the ghostly dead didn't turn out to be so easy to find. Julie let herself be loved by the invisible dead—her deal had nothing to do with flesh, hot or cold. At first, the closest thing I could find were necrophiliacs constantly complaining about how they couldn't get near an open casket. Reading all their filth, I started to appreciate Julie's elegance, the grace in how she rejected all her parents' hopeless vulgarity. In how she had ruined her body until it was grotesque as demonstration of the fact that even so, it was beautiful in a place that we couldn't reach and she could. Did I admire her? I don't know. I envied her a little. I certainly didn't want her to be abandoned, but I didn't want to be her caretaker, either.

After a week of intense searching, when I was ready to give up (a week-long search is really too much), I found a group in the United States called the Marjorie Cameron Church in the Desert. I had to pay a fee and write a note requesting admission and then wait for a reply from the administrators, but one morning I found the "Congratulations" email in my in-box. And that same night I chatted with a Melinda and told her all about my problem. Our problem. She wanted to know why Julie wasn't speaking for herself, and I explained that she was heavily medicated. Melinda understood: "They always pathologize us," she told me. Without a word to Julie, I arranged a meeting with Melinda for the next day. Over Skype, but just a voice call: not enough mutual trust to show their faces.

When I told my cousin, she started to shake even more than usual. I spoke some in English and some in Spanish, though I knew perfectly well that she understood me in our language. I never got to the end of my

explanation. She dropped her breakfast to the floor, took three strides over to me, and hugged me with true gratitude. Strange: she smelled really good. In spite of her coarseness and her clumsiness with food, she was scrupulously clean. Did she prepare herself for her lovers?

I met her eyes. "Why didn't you look for them yourself?" I asked. "You're always on your phone, always online."

"I don't know," she said sincerely. "I was scared. Other people like me? People scare me."

"Then are you going to be scared tonight? Should I cancel the call?"

"No," she told me, her eyes round as she waved her chubby fingers. "They want to lock me up. Did you know?"

I knew.

"You have to run away," I told her.

Julie nodded.

—

On the ferry that took us to Uruguay, Julie was so happy she didn't even mind the disapproving looks from skinny women who were crossing the Río de la Plata to spend a weekend in Colonia. We had escaped just in time, with the family shitstorm well underway. My uncle had already gone back to the United States, and now my aunt was announcing her departure as well, weepy, whiny, so utterly false it was outrageous. She had found a very good private hospital for Julie, she said, and swore up and down she would pay for it. "As if I wouldn't pay for my very own daughter," she yelled. My father, cruel and certain at the same time, called up the clinic and put the phone on speaker, and he made us all listen as the accountant told us that yes, they had an admittance date for the patient, but they hadn't received a deposit. My father hung up, and my aunt, spitting mad, screamed that she was not going to condemn herself to spend what remained of her life with that monster, and if it really had been her fault, if it was her séances that had brought about this disgrace, well, she wasn't planning to carry that guilt around, either.

Since that first talk with Melinda, she'd made great strides: they were friends now. They had forbidden me from taking part in their meetings and I had complied, even though I was curious. I understood.

It turned out that it wasn't only women who were—as they put it—"visited by spirits"; many men were visited as well. It also turned out that they had their own community, headquartered in the United States: they lived in a trailer park in Arizona. The association was named after a widow, Marjorie Cameron, who had managed to have sex with the spirit of her own dead husband. (Cameron's story is longer and more outlandish than just that.) There weren't many like Marjorie, but Melinda promised Julie that if she wanted, she could find out the identities of the spirits who visited her. If she didn't want to, they would remain anonymous. She had total freedom. The problem was that the church didn't have any branches in Argentina: "Our one small community in South America is in Uruguay." Her pronunciation of the country's name was awful, and it was even more stupidly awful that this Melinda didn't know that Uruguay is right across the river from Buenos Aires, but I never thought that her ignorance meant she was a fraud. She was a gringa: that's how they are. They don't know anything about the world, they're incapable of figuring things out, they never think to look at a map. Julie agreed with me. "That *is* how they are," she admitted.

Melinda helped Julie and me organize admission to the Uruguayan community. It was on the outskirts of a town near Colonia called Nueva Helvecia, the Swiss colony. The place was famous for its New Age retreats and communities that practiced alternative spirituality. I understood: it was a good place to hide.

I could tell that Julie was a little afraid of the boat. We had taken the first ferry of the morning, bright and early: we left right after our usual breakfast ritual. I hoped to get back that same day, so no one would even notice I'd been gone. She wasn't at all scared, though, when she crossed the border with her American passport, or when she rented a car and gave a fake name. She knew how to cover her tracks. Had Melinda given her instructions? I drove. Nueva Helvecia was very close, only sixty kilometers from Colonia.

Julie was still taking her pills; Melinda had explained that the community would be able to help her quit and get through withdrawal. We had the coordinates, the description of the house we were looking for, and a name: Rolf. I'm sure it wasn't real. It's so easy to disappear, I thought. All you need is determination, and not even that much of it, plus someone you can trust and a little money. Julie had stolen five hundred dollars from her mother. That was enough to start; they didn't ask for more. The group was self-sufficient: they had a farm and received donations. Also, they lived on land that was owned by one of the members. A rich Uruguayan. I don't know if he was visited by spirits or was just a morbid benefactor.

Julie talked a lot on the short trip there: an hour on the ferry, another by car. She told me about her first visitations, about how she told her visitors apart, about one in particular who liked to lick her asshole. She said it just like that, so savage, and I almost felt dizzy: she was losing her elegance. Or maybe she really was crazy. Now I'd never know. I told her to be quiet, that I was worried about getting lost, and she stopped talking but was clearly annoyed. I did not know her, I realized. Maybe her parents, as stingy and gringo and unpleasant as they were, had been telling the truth. Maybe they had heard her talk this explicitly, unchecked, and they'd had enough. Maybe they had taught her how to behave in public, with help from the pills. Oh, what if I'd made a mistake?

We reached the house. It was pretty but looked neglected. The silence was broken by the clucking of chickens. Rolf was waiting for us, dressed all in white. He was tall and gray-haired and wore black glasses. He could, of course, have been a murderer. My cousin threw herself into his arms and then into mine. Leaning against the car, I lit a cigarette and offered one to Rolf, who declined. He talked to Julie, welcoming her. I handed Julie's bag to him: she was hopping up and down like a little kid, her enormous ass (the same one the spirits ate out so well) bouncing around as if it were full of water. The sun was blinding, and I put on my sunglasses. Rolf thanked me and then said, in a pure Uruguayan accent that betrayed his fake name, "This is as far as you go."

"Will you take good care of her?" I asked.

Rolf smiled at me. His teeth were perfect, very white and well cared for.

"Of course," he said. "And you can always visit her."

Julie gave me another kiss on the cheek and left. Rolf carried her bag while she chattered away nonstop.

I understood what was going to happen.

I would go home. I'd pretend to know nothing about Julie's whereabouts. They'd look for her for a time. We'd report her as missing. Her brothers would come; her father would return. She'd be given up for dead. And I would come back to Nueva Helvecia and I'd never find the pretty but neglected house, I'd never again see Rolf's teeth or my cousin's bulging ass walking away down a dry dirt path under the sun, heading off to meet the other people who were just like her.

NIGHT BIRDS

Under the influence of Mildred Burton

On the shores of this river, all the birds that fly, drink, perch on branches, and disturb siestas with the demonic squawking of the possessed—all those birds were once women. How maddening to overhear the neighbors and tourists who come to spend a weekend at the little beach talking about the peace they feel in nature, with the birds soaring through the cloudless summer sky, pecking at the breadcrumbs people drop when it's time to brew maté. There's no point explaining that the birds aren't what they seem, though anyone could realize if they looked into their eyes, straight into those fixed, crazed eyes begging to be set free.

My sister, Millie, always wants to talk to the bird-women. She knows the legends same as me, but there's a big difference between us because Millie knows the language of things and animals. She spends the sweltering afternoons beside the fan at the little table where she works on her self-portrait every day, because, she's convinced, she's going to turn into a bird, too. "Don't let them change me," she says to me sometimes, crying and sitting on the damp floor of this ridiculous mansion built to shield us from cold and rain that don't exist in Paraná. I can't help her because I don't know who has the power of metamorphosis, if it comes from an evil god or divine Providence. In her self-portrait, Millie wears my light blue shirt printed with cockatoos. I don't remember having lent it to her but she takes what she wants, and anyway, if I ever accused her of stealing it, she would just lie. She lies all the time. She'll often tell me, for example, that I don't exist, that I'm a figment of her imagination, that she saw me for the first

time when she was in the psychiatric hospital, and that ever since then I've followed her everywhere. "It's fine," she says, smiling as she takes a bite of an apple. "You don't bother me at all."

I never leave this house even though I hate it. I detest the tapestries, the flowered wallpaper that Grandmother proudly calls "William Morris–style," the wooden staircases, and the smell of old things. Once, I saw a group of kids sneak onto our grounds, frightened and stealthy. They wore Bermuda shorts and sleeveless shirts, their skin tanned from the sun and their hair tangled from the river. Must be nice. I listened to them talk. They said that our house was abandoned, and that it was haunted. That's dumb, I thought. Everyone knows "the English family" lives here. That's what the neighbors call us. Though, it must be said, the neighbors are pretty far away, because our house sits in the middle of a park that's very large and untended, with withered grass, a useless well, and animals no one cares for, dogs, cats, lizards, and snakes that slither at night.

That day, I put my face up to the window to scare those kids, and it worked: they ran away screaming, and one of the girls lost her yellow sandal when it got caught on a withered rosebush. I think she cut herself, but I couldn't see blood from where I was on the second floor. Millie came to see what was going on and pulled me away from the window. Millie is beautiful, with dark hair and blue eyes, and she always shoos away the flies that land on my face, because I can't feel them, I'm numb. No one really knows what to call it, but I have a disease and its primary symptom is that my skin rots as if I were dead. Luckily it doesn't smell bad; it's just the greenish color that's so shocking, and also how, sometimes, my skin falls off, and I'll go leaving strips of myself around the house. They took me to the doctor years ago, when they thought it was leprosy. It isn't. Grandmother thinks it might be contagious, so if I get too close to her she uses her cane to keep me away. She can't hurt me with it because I don't feel pain, but she makes me keep my distance. It's fine. The house is really big. If I do go out, the people who see me react just like those kids did, eyes wide and mouths round. They've never seen anything like me: bald head with a few little maggots, my lower lip drooping because the muscles aren't

strong enough to keep it up, my right eye totally black, like a beetle, or like the birds' eyes.

Millie draws me. She says that now that she's used to me, she thinks I'm beautiful. That at the clinic, on the other hand, she'd been afraid of me, because I'd spent all my time in a corner staring at her and smiling like I was crazy, and not just crazy, but also a rotten corpse. I don't remember that; I don't think I was allowed to visit her at the clinic. But there's no point arguing with Millie. When she goes out, she comes back with stories that are pure lies; Mom pulls her hair, Dad pretends not to notice, Grandmother devises punishments so she'll stop making things up.

One of those punishments went too far—she had to clean the old latrine, the one that's outside, in the park—and Millie made plans to murder Grandmother at night, with a paintbrush. She said she was going to stick it right into her jugular. I convinced her not to do such a crazy thing: Millie was the only one in the house who painted, and stabbing Grandmother with a brush would have been like leaving evidence behind, a criminal calling card. She could cut Grandmother's throat at night, I explained. It's not so hard. You don't have to saw like you do a piece of meat. You just have to get a really sharp knife and make one cut: the blood will flow like a waterfall, like the Paraná River, so brown and beautiful, or like the champagne when Mom is happy and wants to celebrate and pours some for us into very fine glasses that we're allowed to smash.

Anyway, back to the birds. All birds are women who have received a punishment. In the popular mythology of our region, Entre Ríos, but also of Corrientes and Misiones (I have a book that gives an exact location for each myth), the punishment for disobedience, bad behavior, or desperate love is to be turned into a bird. There are some bird-men too, but not so many. The *chingolo* was a man, for example. He was once a singer who rode a white horse, like a knight with armor and lute. He was the only one in the village who sang, and he wanted it to stay that way. One day another singer turned up, an old man with a guitar, and people liked his voice a lot. The blond guy on the horse couldn't stand it; he challenged him and killed him. The village didn't have room for two singers. He went to jail, of course, but in the cell

he was granted metamorphosis and went flying out through the bars. He has a red tuft because in those days, prisoners wore a red hat.

The fates of women were much worse.

The *urutaú,* also called the potoo or the ghost bird, only goes out at night, and when it sings, it sounds like it's crying. Supposedly, it was once a Guaraní princess who was in love with the Sun, and he abandoned her to rise into the sky; she calls for her man every night. Her punishment is endless because the sun always rises again, always. The *calandria* was a pretty girl who rejected the advances of an insistent warrior, and her punishment was to no longer be either pretty or a girl: Tupã turned her into a bird for being prideful and arrogant. The bird known as the *chochi* was another young girl, newly married, who went out to dance when her husband was sick and had so much fun that she lost track of the time, and when she got home he was dead. Punishment: she must call for her husband as she walks through the brush on her short little legs. Another girl who was crazy about music abandoned her aged mother, and the old lady died, too: that girl transformed into a *chesy,* another bird that goes around crying in mourning. I could go on, but you get the idea. Walking along the bank of the Paraná and seeing a flock of birds means imagining yourself surrounded by castigated women, transformed against their will, longing to be human again. When you hear the songs of the birds at night, when you can't sleep for the heat, you're listening to a concert of widowed cries, and of injustice.

Millie always says that when they put her away, she thought she would eventually come home, but transformed into a bird. A cockatoo or a parrot, though, because they weren't going to get her to shut her mouth. I remember when that mouth of hers smelled like acetone. I thought she had swallowed a jar of her paints, though my sister, unlike my aunts and other women in the family, never expressed a wish to die. It was really weird: she talked and the air stank of nail polish remover. It reminded me of when Mom used to paint her nails in the gazebo out in the park, on the bench that was painted moss green: she said it was a comfortable place for it and the light was ideal. She placed cotton between her toes to keep them separated and painted her toenails red. It was a little disturbing to look at, though,

because the red polish made it look like she'd had an accident and someone had sewn her toes back on. Really, that idea isn't mine, it's Millie's. She's a little obsessed with severed fingers and toes; she says one day we'll have to wear the tip of a finger as a pendant around our necks, like we wear our little gold medallions. *Our* fingertips? I asked. "Of course not, my little monster sister," she said. "Grandmother's!"

They made a mistake with Millie when they put her into a psychiatric hospital. Her problem was really with blood sugar. Too little or too much sugar, I don't know the details. It's hard for me to think about diseases because it forces me to think of my rotten face and the flies walking over my nose, and I start wondering how many bugs there are behind the orange-flowered wallpaper and whether, at night, those creatures—cockroaches, centipedes, spiders, black ants, grubs, and slugs—crawl over my body. I don't sleep in the nude, in spite of the heat, for just that reason. Millie, who sleeps in the bed next to mine, tells me not to be scared, that she'll shoo them away, but I don't believe her, because many nights I wake up and see her sitting in bed with her brown leather-bound notebook, drawing just my face because she can't see my body.

My body is rotting as well, but the process is slower.

—

Millie's ketoacidosis—that's what the disease that got her locked up is called—started when she stopped eating. I think that's the reason the family decided on the psych ward: she didn't eat for days, not even the green apples she likes so much. But she didn't stop eating to kill herself; she did it because she was so focused. She was also hallucinating; she saw things and that's why she thought I was a hallucination, too. She was more confused after that time in the hospital—I think they gave her too many medications. Doesn't matter: she still loves me. Millie is a great sister, even if she lies and can't tell what's real and what isn't.

—

If I'm honest, Millie was confused about the reality of things even before she was hospitalized. One day we went out onto the grounds, my face covered with a stocking of Mom's just in case. They never buy me the mask I want; they think it's too morbid. It's a lot more morbid to rot like this, but my family is fickle and quite cruel. I asked Millie if we could go to the river because I like the fish: it's lovely to get into the warm water and feel them play between my legs, they give little kisses that are like nibbles and then flit away, all bashful. Millie doesn't like them so much: she's a little scared because Mom once told us about *palometas,* which are like the Littoral's version of piranhas, and they bite. They don't dig in and eat your flesh like their tropical sisters, but they can hurt you. My dad interrupted, I remember, and said that *palometas* only live in lakes, not the river, but Millie was scared after that. Not me. I love eating river fish, too, especially the *surubí,* which taste like mud. Or maybe it's just that they don't wash them well in the kitchen at my house. Fried *surubí* with potatoes: I could eat that for the rest of my life. Though I eat less and less: I don't feel hungry. It must run in the family, because Millie eats very little. Like a bird.

That time at the river, we remembered the girl who'd turned up dead. She was a neighbor, younger than us, and they found her hat first. My sister and I think she was raped, but our parents never give us that kind of sordid detail. They also found her little shoes. She was dressed in white. No one knows why she left her family and wandered out into the brush, where the murderer found her and tore her apart as if she weren't a human being. In the papers they said that the girl, whose name was Juana, had been "slashed." Millie wanted to communicate with her spirit that day. She poured out her paints around the tree where the girl's body had been found; the line drew a sort of star trapped inside a circle. She recited some words with her eyes closed and waited. I heard the water lapping on the riverbank, the snakes sliding through the grass, the despairing screams of the bird-women. The girl's voice, however, didn't come. Millie kept trying, irked. She took out her leather-bound notebook, the one she used for drawing, and read out loud from something she had written there. I didn't understand because the words were in English. Maybe, I thought, that's why the girl

isn't coming—surely she doesn't know that language. When Millie was about to give up, a cat appeared; it walked boldly over to sit inside the circle of paint. The cat and Millie looked into each other's eyes for a while until, purring, he went over to her. "It's the dead girl," Millie told me, excited. "She turned into a tiger."

I stared at the animal Millie was now holding in her arms. It's a cat, I told her, just a kitten. Not a tiger at all. Plus, shouldn't she reincarnate as a girl cat? "What's that got to do with it? Girl, boy, it doesn't matter. What do you know, rotten-face?" she yelled at me, and stalked away with her baby tiger in her arms.

Mom saw us come home with the kitten. "Millie, you're the one who's going to feed it—I'm not spending a cent on pets."

"Of course," said Millie, glaring at Mom with contempt, because my sister hates people who don't like animals; she thinks they don't deserve to live. She named him Jeanne—after Juana, the murdered girl—and gave him water in a beautiful bowl that she'd painted herself with a Paraná landscape.

My grandmother saw him for the first time that same day. She came in toying with her pearl necklace and patting her always perfect hair and said, "What is this filthy critter?" She went over to the cat and Jeanne's hackles went up. He recognized his enemy. "He's a jaguar," Millie answered. "Not a critter." Grandmother laughed with her head flung back. "A jaguar. You stupid brat—jaguars only live in Misiones, in the jungle. Here we have plenty of that shitty underbrush, but no jungle." She turned around and left; I can't forget how she was wearing the same belt that, sometime later, Mom used to try to hang herself in the bathroom. My mother didn't die by hanging, she died of something else, but I can't forget the belt and its buckle, which looked like the crown of a carnival queen.

Jeanne grew, and during those months it was all-out war between him and my grandmother. Jeanne peed on the William Morris–style wallpaper. He also sharpened his claws on a table that, my grandmother claimed, was an heirloom passed down from her Scottish aunt. Sometimes he seemed possessed by a destructive madness and would start racing around the living room: he scratched the Persian rugs, knocked over the ornaments on the

glass table. He looked like a dragon in spite of his small size, a dragon with a long tail and blazing flames coming out of his mouth who had come to destroy my grandmother's mansion.

The battle lasted until Jeanne, I don't know how, jumped so high he managed to pull down Grandmother's reproduction of the *Mona Lisa.* It was a cheap painting, of course, but the fall broke its frame—which was really nice, I have to admit—and scattered shards of glass all over the floor. We were picking them up for days, and Mom cut the sole of her foot when she walked barefoot. Millie hid Jeanne in our room to keep him safe, but what was bound to happen happened. One morning, we couldn't find the cat anywhere. Millie and I scoured the whole house: the attic, full of useless tools; the kitchen, always a little dirty and fishy-smelling; the living room, with its heavy furniture, velvet sofas, mahogany, moldy curtains, dark wood details. Jeanne was nowhere to be found. "My tiger, my tiger," Millie cried. I remembered the legend of the jaguar. There was a very powerful warrior in the jungle, so famous that another one just as strong challenged him to a duel. They fought all night long, and when the sun came out, one of them managed to pierce his rival's heart with a spear. But the wounded man didn't die. Neither of them died, no one lost or won the fight. They were transformed, their bodies fused together into the jaguar, the animal that shines in the forests of the night, trapped in the most perfect symmetry.

(All the legends where men change into animals are about competition. Most of them. Only women are doomed. It's the same with flowers—so many flowers were once women. The ceibo flower, for example. Everyone knows the story of Anahí: she was burned. Men are never burned.)

When we finished searching my parents' bedroom, and my grandmother's—she was out—and the rooms that had once belonged to my aunts, Millie ran outside, desperate. We saw him right away. Jeanne was hanging from a branch of one of the trees nearest the house. Grandmother had claimed her work with her own calling card: she'd hung him with her (fake) pearl necklace. She hadn't done anything else to him. Millie took down the body with my help—I gave her a boost—and checked him over like a professional to see if Grandmother had tortured him, too. He only had

a broken neck from the necklace, and mucus had come out of his nose—it hung green from his beautiful face, sullying his whiskers—and he wasn't stiff: the murder had occurred just hours before. Millie screamed and cried: if only she'd realized sooner, she hadn't taken good care of him, her poor tiger who stalked majestically through the rooms of the house on his velvet paws, golden yellow, with his eyes of fire and his slow-moving shoulders. Jeanne was not at all how she described him: he was a skinny, hysterical tabby cat who howled for food. My sister had always seen an elegant jaguar; she had always believed that the dead girl had been reincarnated as the king of the Littoral.

"That cunt killed my tiger and she killed Juana a second time," Millie said, and she carried the dead cat into the house. I ran after her as best I could, because by that time the rot had reached my left foot and I couldn't help but limp. Millie locked herself in our room with a canvas and a pencil she used for sketches, a black pencil that stained her fingers and sometimes left smudges on her clothes and sheets. She didn't eat for days. She had blocked the door with a chair. The dead cat started to smell. Mom screamed that she'd had it up to here with all the death, with my rotten face, the cat, the smell of damp from the river, the heat that ruined everything, this family of crazies, she wanted to go to Buenos Aires, to Rosario, anywhere that was far away from this hellhole, from these mildewy tapestries and the stagnant well water.

I was scared.

When Millie came out, her mouth stank of acetone and Mom thought she'd tried to kill herself with her paints. But like I said, that wasn't it: it was the not eating that brought on that effect in her body, because of some weird imbalance in her metabolism. They only discovered that later, though, long after they started drugging her so enthusiastically. When they got her out of the room, the dead cat was on the bed, very rotten by now. The mattress had to be thrown out, and they took the body away wrapped in a sheet. Millie had drawn two portraits of Grandmother, though with a face much younger than her real one. In both, she was wearing a dead cat around

her neck like a fox stole, plus the murderous pearl necklace, and her face was half-rotted away, like mine.

I didn't visit Millie in the hospital because I didn't want to leave the house, and anyway I wasn't allowed because of the possibility of contagion. Sometimes she tells me she invented me during her treatment so she wouldn't feel so lonely. Other times she admits that I'm her little sister and that she watched my birth in this very house, upstairs; she cut my umbilical cord herself. She lies a lot and I get confused, but I love her more than anyone because she's the only person who doesn't feel sick when they look me in the eyes.

—

At school, Millie was assigned to write a composition about our grandparents. Not just her; the whole class had to do it. About how they had come to Entre Ríos, an immigrant story. The province has people who come from all over: Jewish people (they have some lovely cemeteries in Basavilbaso, Millie says, really simple, no sculptures or chapels, but I can't go see them unless she takes me in secret), and Italians, Swiss, Volga Germans. My sister wrote that we were descendants of Richard Burton, the explorer, geographer, translator, writer, cartographer, spy, diplomat, and poet who spoke twenty-nine languages, translated *1001 Nights* and the *Kamasutra,* and discovered Lake Tanganyika, in Africa. They believed her because we have the same last name as Sir Richard, and then the school invited the rest of the family to come in and tell more memories and anecdotes about our celebrated ancestor. My father met with the principal and told her that we were not in any way descended from Sir Richard Burton, and he apologized for Millie's lie. A week later, my sister said that actually she'd made a mistake and we were really descended from Robert Burton, the English intellectual and author of *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* It was less impressive and they brushed it off, but she repeated it so much that my dad had to talk to the principal again, and when he came home he chased Millie up the stairs with a belt.

My sister claimed she could control snakes. She'd go back behind the house and make some strange sounds with her tongue, hissing a long, hard *s* sound. That, she declared, was how you summoned snakes. When she managed to get close to one, she picked it up wrong—she didn't know how to handle snakes—and it bit her. It wasn't poisonous, but my sister told my aunts and any visitors that it was, and that she'd had to suck the poison from her arm; she'd say that her skin had turned black, the tainted blood had reached her brain and heart, and that a neighbor had saved her (conveniently, she never named the neighbor). My aunts said we needed to move closer to the city, get away from the river, and they remembered Juana, her murder, her little shoes and her hat. The aunts never looked at me because my face shocked them, and also they were afraid of catching what I had; that's also why they never took off their gloves. At least, that's what my sister said. "Hide behind the curtains, like Emily Dickinson—that way they won't mess with you." I obeyed.

One time Millie ran away to Victoria, a town near Paraná. She claims that one of the Rosas brothers brought her, but I don't believe that because the Rosas are a very aristocratic and boring family. She says she went into a cabaret, that they didn't ask for ID, and that she got to sing one of her songs with piano accompaniment. I don't think I mentioned that my sister composes as well as paints. I don't really like her songs, except for one that goes, "Sweet mother dear / a living locket / for your gown." I don't know if there are cabarets in Victoria or not, but I do know that my father threatened to send her to live with the aunts in Tucumán if she ever ran away again, and she admitted to me that when she was coming back from her escape, she was afraid that a bolt of divine lightning would turn her into a crane or a swan.

Millie says she hears the voices of objects, especially boxes, but also mirrors and end tables. She swears they walk around the house by themselves at night, that they slowly descend the stairs. There are so many nighttime noises that could be the walking table, or the bird-women, or the spirit of Juana or of Jeanne the tiger-cat. "When I have a child," she told me from her bed one night, "I'm going to train it to have telekinesis. Know

what that is? It's when you can will things to move, without touching them, just with the strength of your mind. The Russians have had it all figured out for years. Maybe I can send my child to Russia to study. Wouldn't you like to go to Russia? Me either. I like the heat. We need to learn Guaraní. And we could also go to Buenos Aires, right?"

My face, I reminded her. The rest of my body, which is falling to pieces.

"Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

—

My sister fell in love not long after our mother's death. The boy would bring her roses and she'd let him into the house. My father didn't scold her; I don't know if he was sad or drunk or both. I hid behind the curtains and watched her kiss the boy, and she would motion to me whenever she could, gestures that said, "Go away!" No. With my skin, this rotting disease, no one's ever going to kiss me like that. So I had a right to watch them, all night long if I wanted. Millie wasn't really mad, in any case. I think she was a little embarrassed, and that's why she told me to leave them alone. Later she'd sit and talk to me, eating apples and telling me about her plans to go to school in Buenos Aires. Everything was ready. She would live with one of our many aunts, one who lived in the capital. Millie was a good painter but she wanted to be better, she wanted to learn. "We'll go together," she told me, but I didn't dare. "They must have better treatments for your skin in Buenos Aires," she said, and waved away the flies that are now always crawling over my lips. They'd even made a nest there. I'm disgusting, I cried. I'd cry into the humid night and she wouldn't answer, because Millie always loved me, but she also agreed that I was disgusting. It's just that to her, it wasn't a problem.

During that time, along with her romance and Mom's death, she got obsessed with killing Grandmother with cyanide. In an early phase of the plan, she wanted to give her a kind of apple jelly made with a lot of seeds. She'd read that apple seeds had cyanide in them. "That's why Snow White went to sleep," she explained, her eyes wide and amazed. "The queen gave

her an apple with lots of cyanide, but not enough to kill her. Isn't it spectacular how they already knew back in those days, when people first told that story?" Soon she realized that she would need tons of apples to get enough and she gave up. She didn't have enough money to buy cyanide and didn't know where to get it. "It's so hard to kill someone," she said. "Who would have thought?"

Instead of killing our grandmother, she bought some boots and wore them while she sat on the stairs to wait for her boyfriend. Blue eyes, red boots, paint-stained fingers. Her drawing and painting teacher from Paraná had told her, "Millie, you've got to get out of here, in this province you won't amount to anything, Buenos Aires is where everything happens, and with those eyes and that last name of yours, you can go far."

When Millie left for the capital, no one saw her off. She took the pearl necklace Grandmother had used to hang Jeanne. She wore it: she'd painted the pearls red in remembrance of the crime, and it looked like a brutal scar around her neck, like from decapitation, like someone had sewn that beautiful head back onto her thin body. A lot like Boris Karloff's monster in *Frankenstein.* For a time she'd considered poisoning Grandmother's jewelry, so that when she put it on the poison would filter through the skin until it reached her blood. But she couldn't figure out the right method. Millie had big ideas but frustrated plans. In the end she left home without killing our grandmother.

She made me promise I would call her if I ever wanted to leave Paraná. I never did. She didn't call me much. One time she asked for the self-portrait of the bird-woman, the one where Millie is mid-metamorphosis, with parrots and the sky-blue cockatoo shirt. I couldn't find it. "That evil old hag must have thrown it away. Don't worry, I remember it. I'm going to paint it again, and I'll do it better this time." I would like to see that second version, if she ever made it. She never told me. She sent me letters for a while, and they all ended with the instruction to burn them. I did. It wasn't hard for me to obey. I was the only one left in the house, and when I looked at myself in the mirror with my single eye, I saw a black face. I don't remember much about my life after Millie left. I know that Grandmother died. They took her

away in an ambulance; someone found her sprawled on the floor in the kitchen, but it wasn't me, because I never went down to the kitchen, or downstairs at all. I don't need to eat anymore. I think it's part of my rotting disease that I don't need to ingest nutrients, but I can't know for sure because I never went back to the doctor, and my father never spoke to me again after Millie left. In her letters she sometimes sent me photos of her paintings and said, "I need you to come, I want you as my model." But there wasn't much left of me to model. My darkened face with the bones almost poking through my skin, a color so black it was easy to confuse me with a sliver of darkness, especially in this house by the river, where my sister once drew me, when I was very little, with a fish in my hand. Sometimes I go down to the river and let the fish play between my stiffened feet. It gets harder and harder to walk. I wonder if Millie will come live with me when she dies. Sometimes I sit on the stairs to wait for her, but only if there's a wind at night and the moon hides behind clouds; I don't want anyone to see me with this face and almost no mouth, I don't want to scare or horrify anyone. I know that my sister, though she doesn't call or write, remembers me and paints me. And when she comes back someday along the dirt road, kicking up dust, her hair loose and her boots red, I'm going to welcome her with open arms. And if she returns as a bird, I hope I'll recognize her call. No, not her call, her song: my sister sings very well. When she comes back she'll be a bird that's never been seen before and I know she will land on my shoulder, here, on the wooden stairs that creak and are covered in moss.

METAMORPHOSIS

The body is not a punishment: the punishment is that people talk about the body so much that it hurts to have it.
—SONIA BUDASSI, *Companion Animals*

No one tells you, there's no warning. It makes me furious. Your skin dries out, the fat builds up on your hips and legs and belly, the cellulite deepens from one day to the next, and the dead, gray hairs become impossible to tame. It doesn't happen to everyone, and that makes it even worse—someone should tell you in advance that you're going to be in the deformed, overheated, weepy minority. Because I go running and out for walks and I move through life at a brisk pace; and in this city's summer, which is long and intense, I look at the legs of women my age, forty-a-lot, and they don't all have fat adhered to them, not at all, and not everyone turns matronly—the world is full of narrow hips, and pants that drape freely, and bellies that are more or less flat. Those women must eat less cheese and meat than me, I'm sure, they can't all be anorexic, or maybe they are, but I can't stop eating because I get migraines and one of the triggers for my headaches is an empty stomach, because some kind of gastric acid produces that hammering in the eye that hurts even down into my neck. Maybe they can take it, could be I'm just weak; in any case I hate them and want them to die. I said as much to a friend of mine and she said don't hate, everything comes back around, and I never saw her again and she's not my friend anymore. Positive thinking is perverse, same as goodwill.

My gynecologist exudes both things, just oozes them, she perfumes rooms with her smile. I put up with it because I know how good she is professionally, I know about her experience in the public hospital and as a professor, and at her expensive private practice where she makes the most

of her prestige, which is fine by me. She sits behind an old wooden desk that's meant to give the impression of solidity, I suppose, or masculinity (though she is a delicate, freckled redhead, so feminine she smells of jasmine), and atop it she keeps a movable model of the feminine reproductive system. It's an intensely psychedelic object with ovaries that move, or rather spin like on an abacus, and a uterus that seems to float, and at first glance looks just like a white scorpion without a tail. The uterus is what she points to with her pale little freckled finger as she tells me that *tssk,* it's gotta come out. I have a lot of fibroids, she explains. They're benign tumors, but they bleed a lot and that's why I'm always anemic. I already had two iron transfusions and they gave me tendinitis. Those weren't transfusions, she tells me. Whatever, I said, they injected iron into me, and right next to people who were getting chemotherapy, so that all my dizziness and the pain in my arm seemed cowardly and shameful.

"It's a routine operation. Your ovaries are in good shape, so we'll leave them be and you'll go through menopause when the time comes. I don't give people hormones."

"Okay," I said. "But I'm already in menopause."

"Perimenopause," she tells me, still smiling, "otherwise you wouldn't menstruate."

"Okay, but you understand what I'm saying, right? I'm dry. I have hot flashes and I have to go home and change clothes because I sweat like a camel."

"Camels don't sweat," she laughs, and I look at her with contempt, but not much, because she's the one who will wield the knife over my belly.

She suggests some creams. She talks more about "climacteric," and the word makes me picture flowers preserved in a greenhouse before death. She recommends gels and intimate wipes and other upkeep mechanisms, in particular a substance for the sores the dryness produces.

I'm glad I don't have a partner who would have to touch this body sloshing with lotions. She assures me that certain brands, the most expensive ones—which I can afford, I clarify, because it's not lack of money that makes me dress sloppily, it's just indifference—are absorbed

well, and soon the dry skin is nourished and not sticky. It's a lie, of course, and some of the lotions, when I massage them into my skin, leave disgusting black threads that look like dirt, but it's just the lack of absorption. Or my cantankerous skin, which refuses everything.

In addition to the lotion recommendations, I leave the doctor's office with a date for surgery. "You're going to love not menstruating anymore," she chirps. For once, she might be right. I also leave with an order to buy a girdle that I'll have to wear to keep me from coming unstitched or my organs from floating (her words); she only now, in this latest consultation, let me know about the existence of this thing and my need for it, because, as I said, they don't warn you about anything. They don't tell you that your body changes again. I'm as astonished as when a friend of mine told me that when she gave birth, the effort and the baby's head broke her coccyx. Another friend, in the same conversation, said that she'd ended up with a pelvic problem that kept her from running.

"But come on," I said to them. "Don't you hate the kids?"

"No," they replied. "It's not their fault."

Of course not, I thought. It's your fault for wanting to be mothers.

—

Nor do they warn you, of course, that removing your uterus hurts so much you end up sobbing and screaming. It's routine, they repeat, routine—routine for you, you heartless sadists, but I can't even turn over in bed, they want me to sleep faceup, and I howl for opiates. My ex came to "take care of me," I think because we still haven't signed divorce papers and we own a house together and he's trying to seem supportive. When I couldn't stop calling for the nurse because I thought I was being torn apart inside and out, because I was bleeding, because the pain, because fever infection and death, he reprimanded me, as always. "Don't you realize you're bothering him? He has other patients too." Well, I told him through the tears and the drugs, it's his job to look after people. If he has too much work, it's not my fault, it's the hospital's. Having patients who complain is normal. If you're going

to keep correcting me the way you did my whole life and I put up with it because I was too lazy to leave you, then just go. I don't mind being alone. This is a great hospital. He left, acting like I was in the wrong and not him for being unable to stand the tantrum of a woman who just had a hysterectomy. I feel bad for his boyfriend, who seems like a good person, and who has to deal with that good-for-nothing's critical nature and his need to discipline. Plus, as further proof of how little he cares about his fellow man, he left me alone, which only meant more work for the nurses. Vain people like him don't think very much.

After my night in Avernus, my freckled gynecological surgeon appeared in the morning looking like she had conjunctivitis, I suppose from lack of sleep, and showed me how to put on the girdle. "A shame it's summer, because you'll have to wear it for a month or more!" Again, information I could have used a little sooner. She told me I could walk around, always with the girdle on, and she prescribed me a battery of antibiotics and painkillers, forbade me from exerting myself for thirty days, and told me that I could leave the hospital the next day; really, I could leave right away, but there was a stitch that was a little strange and it was best to wait. She treated the weird stitch and then told me:

"The fibroid was the size of a small melon. It was practically a pregnancy. I don't know how it didn't hurt you to touch it or how you weren't any more swollen. It looked smaller on the MRI." (The doctors' love for abbreviations and shorthand is beyond words. MRI, chemo, cardio, EEG, echo, BP.)

"Do you want to see it?" she asked.

"Well, yeah," I said. She picked up her iPhone and opened a photo that she evidently had at the ready.

"I thought you were going to pull it out in a plastic bag on ice," I told her with a smile, because laughing, I thought, could worsen the stitches, and anyway I didn't feel like laughing.

"No, it's on ice in path."

(Path is the pathology lab, where they keep the samples for biopsies and things like that. I'm no expert, but I've gone there with friends to leave

moles and other suspicious tissues.) She went on:

"Since it's a benign fibroid, it will be one of the last to be analyzed, so you could actually go and visit it," she cackled.

I peered intently at the fibroid, because the screen of her brand-new phone was plenty big enough to get a good look. It was beautiful. A pale pink egg of flesh, irrigated with veins, it had a kind of tuber-like head or handle of tissue and an extra little head, as if it were still growing. Like a hormonal ginger root. Like a fat mandrake. I ran my finger over the screen and asked if what she was showing me included the uterus. "No," she said, "this is the largest fibroid; there were other, smaller ones. This one caused the bleeding. It weighs two kilos!" Then she went on, talking about cases of gigantic fibroids (mine didn't qualify) and cases she'd dealt with in the past. She turned off the phone screen, but I kept thinking about that mass of smooth flesh, like a chicken breast with red veins, spherical, the plant of the gods in my belly.

"You're okay to eat now," the doctor announced, and she turned on her low, chic heels and left. The servant-nurse brought me a horrendous pumpkin-and-vegetable soup and a glass of water, because it was essential that I urinate (otherwise, he threatened, I'd need a catheter). I peed right away. They want to scare you over nothing, and, once again, by springing new information on you. How was I supposed to know that one of the surgery's possible complications was a displaced bladder? Well, it didn't happen.

As I swished the nasty soup—just a few little threads of pumpkin—in my mouth, I got to thinking. I looked up images of fibroids online. Not all of them were as pretty as mine. Some were granulated and others had a lot of heads, even more gingery but ugly ginger, like one of those balloon animals that clowns make (or used to make at parties when I was a kid). Twisted balloons. But not mine: mine was delicate. It had its growths, sure, but they were like subtle decorations, the kind you see on a teapot. I came up with so many comparisons. No, I did not think of it as my child. You take care of a child, it's a person. This was something I'd created that had no personality or life, but it seemed unfair that they couldn't give it to me.

Or maybe they could: a friend had told me that when her mom had her uterus removed, she'd asked to see it in person. True, she was related to the doctor who removed it, and she was an eccentric who kept it beside her the whole time she was hospitalized, in a little hotel fridge. A minibar. My mom saved my umbilical cord until one day she found it gross and tossed it in one of her periodic cleanings, and I know of some intense mothers who keep their children's appendixes. A fibroid isn't transplanted, it's not good for anything, it goes in the garbage. Why wouldn't they give it to me? Who should I ask? My gynecologist, I thought.

I called her as soon as I finished my Jell-O. She answered; she wasn't operating and was on her way to the office. Without much beating around the bush, I asked for the fibroid. My opinion of her rose a few notches: she didn't ask for an explanation.

"It's yours, technically. Pathological remains are thrown out, burned. After the biopsy, you can take it if you want."

Her direct manner—a little dry, but not aghast—as she went along with my request made me realize this wasn't the first time she'd heard such a thing. I imagined a bunch of dumbasses asking for their extracted uterus because it had sheltered their little children. I detest those nerds, but I can no longer feel all that different from them.

I got a message from the gyno (now I'm talking in abbreviations too): "Bring your own cooler with ice, because they won't give you one. Later you can let it dry out."

She didn't tell me how to take care of it, though, because surely it'll start to rot, and there must be techniques. Maybe put it in some kind of fluid? But it's big; I'd need a bottle like the water coolers you see in offices. Anyway, that wasn't my plan. My old friend Virginia was already circling in my head.

I asked my sister to bring a cooler, and they handed over the fibroid when they discharged me. She drove me home and didn't ask about the cooler; I don't know what she thought, maybe that it held medications. She wouldn't have freaked out anyway, she's crazy, but I don't want to share

things with her: she understands, but she blabs, she's got the biggest mouth in existence and has no concept of respect, secrecy, or privacy.

That's how she dresses, too—always half-naked. Lucky for her she's got a great body and this city is hot as the Sahara.

Since she is crazy but thoughtful, she'd filled the fridge with food that was easy to prepare and had arranged for our father to stay with me at night: he is old but useful, not like my mom, who I don't want near me at all. My sister has orders to keep me away from her sticky, selfish love—we can stick to video chats.

Anyway, all I have to do is lie still in bed or on the sofa or wherever I want, and dress the wound myself, which really isn't all that bad. The first night I screamed when all of a sudden I felt like my whole belly was losing sensation, and I knew, I felt with utter certainty, that it was the onset of death. My father, who overdoes things like I do, hurried his creaky hip into my room and said:

"Call the surgeon. It's three in the morning, but it's her responsibility."

I did. She wasn't asleep. That woman is tireless.

"It's normal," she told me. "Just think, we cut the nerves—"

I interrupted her, sick of the microdosing of information.

"You should have told me. I got scared."

"Well, it doesn't always happen, and we don't want to predispose people."

"Well. Does it go away?"

"Not for now."

"Does it last long?"

"It can last months or never go away. But you'll get used to it."

"Okay."

Bitch, I thought. And I ran my finger over my navel and nothing, nothing, as if I were touching one of the oranges on my nightstand.

When my dad found out it wasn't serious, he headed back to bed. My rages over the lack of information didn't faze him; he's a man and is used to my sister's verbal indecency and my mother's scatological descriptions. To him, it's good to hide things.

I agree, but with a caveat: depends on what things.

He didn't ask about the cooler in the fridge, either: it's not his style to investigate other people's belongings. Plus, it was already enough of an effort, at seventy-seven, for him to take care of his hysterectomied daughter, even though he does yoga and is one of those old guys who stay in good shape. I hope for his own good and the good of us all that death catches up with him when he's out on one of his walks.

The first thing I did after the night I lost sensitivity was call Virginia. I hadn't seen her in years, but she still lived in the same place as always, and she still owned Skin, her tattoo and body-modification business, though the latter is secret, because a lot of body modifications are considered illegal medical operations. So she'll do them for you, but she doesn't advertise. And evidently she does them well, because no one has gotten infected (at least not seriously) or sued her.

Virginia has two small silicone horns above her eyebrows. She makes some beautiful cuttings, or scarrings, that leave delicate designs, mostly on people's backs where the skin is thick. Not long ago she sent me a photo of her new neck: tattooed totally black. In the image she is leaning against a dark background, and it looks like her head is floating. It's a great photo. She's also done beautiful work on women with mastectomies who decided against implants and instead had designs tattooed over the scars where their breasts had been. I know she is busy, but I also know that few people respect childhood friendships like she does, those intense nights of blood and first piercings, the searches for prostheses for our trans friends who didn't want to put cheap silicone or airplane grease in their bodies.

I caught her in her studio and heard the unmistakable sound of the tattoo parlor, a little like a dentist's office with different background music (Slipknot in this case—she's classic). When we were younger, putting silicone under your skin was just called body modification, but now there are body hackers and transhumanists. But it's the same procedure + time + vocabulary. And they can do incredible things, like attach an ear to an arm or tattoo colors on eyeballs so you get a red or fuchsia or turquoise eye. It

must hurt like a twisted nerve, but hey, sometimes you have to suffer for what you want.

I explained that I wanted the fibroid back in my body. Since it's enormous, it would be complicated to put it somewhere external, not to mention it's potentially deadly to wear human tissue around before it dries out; plus, risk aside, I think it would be horrible aesthetically. But, I said, I had an idea: you've done some reptilian implants on the spine, a little silicone ball under the back skin at each vertebra. What if we put part of the fibroid inside the little balls? My body won't reject it, it's mine.

Virginia told me she didn't dare do a surgery like that, and she didn't know what the risks were. Come on, I said. She repeated the same thing very seriously, but added: I do have a friend who specializes in complex requests. I don't know if he can do this. But I'll ask him. And then:

"Did the surgery hurt a lot?"

"I'm on a lot of drugs now, but yeah, it's awful."

"I've heard it's easy."

"Someone's lying to you. It's not a question of your pain threshold."

"You have someone to take care of you?"

"My dad, and my sister comes sometimes."

"What about Robi?"

"We broke up—he has a boyfriend now."

"You and I need to catch up."

—

I went to the spotlessly clean apartment of Colson, Virginia's South African friend, a mastodon with white hair who was tattooed from head to foot and spoke acceptable Spanish. She'd given me the address in a voice message that she asked me to erase afterward. All unnecessary security measures, seems to me, but I obeyed anyway, and, just as she instructed, I copied the address into something analog (that is: my address book). I had lied to my dad, saying I was going for a checkup and it could take a while. I hailed a taxi so there was no record of the trip, unlike in the apps. After a long

introductory chat about Colson’s career and accomplishments and his reasons for moving to South America, he asked for the specimen. I handed it to him, still in excellent condition, in my opinion, which he seconded. After all that preamble and résumé review, I thought he would do the surgery that day, but he told me he had to first implant the fibroid into the silicone and see how the fusion went. Only then could he do it without risk. Near the spine, he explained, you had to be extra careful.

He seemed trustworthy, and of course was a much better communicator than the various doctors in charge of my menopause and bleeding and fibroid-filled uterus. And the delay was for the best too, I thought. Because with those protuberances on my back I should at least be able to sleep on my side and dismiss my dad, who is discreet and willing to live and let live, but has his limits.

Virginia volunteered to take care of me; plus, she wanted to see how the modification turned out.

—

It is beautiful, my new, protruding spine. For the first time I understand what it means to love your own body. Virginia took a lot of photos and asked again for my discretion about Colson, who works in secrecy, but I have to say: he is very gentle and very clean and I recommend him. He did the surgery with a local anesthetic, which is logical because the anesthesiologist has to be saved for extreme operations and must cost a fortune. But I didn’t feel a thing, not even when he told me, “Now I’m cutting, now I’m pulling.” (He pulled to stick the ball inside. The fusion with the silicone was normal.) I had a little swelling in the area, that was all; I needed anti-inflammatories in minor doses. I was already overloaded with antibiotics and up to date on my tetanus shot, so I didn’t leave much of a trail: I didn’t have to buy anything or get any extra injections. My back has a different profile now. There’s something dragon-like about it. Colson tattooed the skin with colors, and it looks iridescent. A false saurian spine. Something like a chameleon, like a lizard, a mythical snake, cold blood. I

can’t caress my back, because my arms don’t reach, but I can spend hours looking at it in the mirror, and Virginia can help me reach for it or can touch it with her fingers, gently. She tends it with Vaseline and disinfectant. There is no pain, I repeat. As if it had always been there. I feel ancient, with my slow, precise movements. With my body whole and right where it should be: under my skin.

HYENA HYMNS

Sites that had been host to extraordinary suffering will eventually be either burned to the ground or turned into temples.
—CORMAC McCARTHY, *Stella Maris*

It's raining over the mountains and Mateo's dad is talking about his opposition to the mural that city management plans to paint on the dam. I feel the stress and boredom, leftovers from my depression, accumulating in my throat. Mateo's eyes keep me from replying. "You can't decorate a historical place," his dad says. "Does everything have to be a tourist attraction?" Maybe at another time or place he would be right, but the dam is a real piece of concrete shit without an ounce of beauty, and it also has a crack and smells bad, like it's stagnant. That is, the city management of this big, proud town would probably do better to investigate what's going on with the water and why it stinks.

I excuse myself to smoke, and Mateo doesn't follow me because he knows I need a few minutes alone. He's smart that way, at least with me; in certain situations, though, he can be a risk-taker, because he has trouble reading danger. I like him like that: beautiful and daring but almost always sensitive.

My dad, over the phone, listens to my whispered complaints and then asks:

"Are they nice people? How do they treat their son, and you?"

"Oh, all good there."

"That doesn't seem like much to you?"

"It should be the norm."

"Well, it's not. What else bothers you?"

“He talks shit about Argentina nonstop, says stuff like ‘I would understand if my kids left,’ and ‘They can go whenever they want, they have passports.’ ”

“Eighty percent of Argentines will say the same thing, and then the minute they hear a *zamba* they’ll start bawling.”

“I guess you’re right about that.”

“Do you feel okay?”

I consider his question. It’s not easy to differentiate between a bad mood and returning depression. But I know: it’s a bad mood. I think of last night, when we’d had sex and gone to sleep with the window open, waiting for the black storm over the mountains, and yes, it’s a bad mood. I say so.

“Go back and have tea with those folks, and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

He never says “I love you,” my dad, but he doesn’t need to.

When it stops raining, Mateo’s sisters, who are older than him (one is a massage therapist, the other a gym teacher, and you can tell they both worry about being beautiful), show me the small rose garden they’ve planted on the house’s enormous grounds. They have a lot of money thanks to the father, who is a retired veterinarian and took care of all the animals in the area, and to the mother’s family, owners of a golf course on the outskirts of town that’s frequented by rich people in general. Mateo’s dad joins us as we’re caressing the white and red petals, and he tells us how pleased he is not to be a vet anymore, because everything they do with animals in the countryside is terribly cruel. I’m surprised he would say that, and think I’ve misjudged him. Now he sees the cats and dogs of his neighbors and friends, he says, but he didn’t specialize in pets, and that’s why he doesn’t charge: he does what he can, but he always recommends that they go to a professional who knows about small animals.

“Me, I know about horses and cows.”

And right when he says that we hear, carried on the cool wind, laughter, or cackling, which then turns into the sharp howl of a raspy, choked throat. We hear it many times and then it fades away, and we are all silent after that inhuman peal of laughter that could maybe have been a bird, except it came from ground level. They know they have to explain it to me.

“The hyenas,” says Mateo’s dad. “Some real sons of bitches.”

Mateo, who is a little farther away from us with his teacup in hand, starts to explain.

“To attract more tourists to the town—”

“To the city,” says his dad.

“Whatever. To attract more tourists they set up a swanky zoo and didn’t even think about the expense, or how a lot of people these days think zoos are like prisons, right? *I* think they’re prisons.”

His mother interrupted. “It’s one thing to think zoos are bad, and quite another to set one on fire.”

“I *didn’t* set it on fire. You’d be a likelier suspect, since it was right by the golf course.”

She finished the story:

“They brought in, oh, who knows how many animals. All kinds of monkeys—these guys are about to correct me, *simians,* because they’re nitpicky, but you get my drift. Everything except gorillas, I think. Lions, a tiger, giraffes, seals and other animals like that, a huge reptile house that scared the daylights out of me, birds…and they also brought hyenas. There were pumas too, poor things. They burned up because they couldn’t get out.”

“When did this happen? It must have been in the papers.” I was shocked. I pictured those animals, the fire, and felt a shiver.

“Has it been a year, Mateo? More or less. Yes, it was in the news. Even in the capital!”

A year ago I was in the hospital and drooling from medication. That’s why I hadn’t heard anything.

“Oh, you don’t even watch TV,” said Mateo with a smile, taking care of me, again.

No one knew who had started the fire, if it was the mayor’s political enemies, or if it was accidental (in summer, the eucalyptus forests often caught fire, and the flames could have spread to the zoo, which had a lot of trees). There were also fingers pointed at animal rights activists, and in fact they had been charged, though they denied it, reasonably arguing that they

would never cause such harm to the very creatures they wanted to protect. But they had protested the zoo long and hard, so they ended up as scapegoats.

“The trial starts this month,” said Mateo. “Now for the hyenas. The animals that died trapped in the fire were not, let’s be honest, the majority. A lioness died, which was awful, and two pumas, I don’t really get how, because cats can jump, but I guess they were cornered. The others escaped and were recaptured later, even the two giraffes, and were sent to the zoo in Luján. The water animals survived in the pools. The only ones that escaped and couldn’t be found dead or alive were the hyenas. There was a pair, so they might have had babies. And people hear them. I’ve never seen them, but I don’t go up in the mountains.”

“I do,” said the gym teacher sister. “And I haven’t seen them, either. But one time I heard them laughing like that, really close by. I was out running in the mountains and I hightailed it straight back, believe me. I didn’t go up there again for a month.”

“They’re scavengers, though,” said Mateo, and he went over to tickle her. “They’ll only eat you if you’re already dead.”

“Let me go, you little shit.”

Hyenas are not just scavengers and he knew it, but he wanted to cut the tension a little. He managed to make her laugh without dropping his teacup.

“There are people who’ve seen them,” said Mateo’s dad, cooling things down, too. “It’s just that hyenas blend into the brush, and they’re no dummies.”

We didn’t eat together that night. The sisters left, Mateo’s parents had a birthday party to go to, and Mateo and I made a ludicrous hors d’oeuvre plate with meats from the region and all kinds of cheeses, plus local beers and a bottle of champagne. Alcohol hits me like a hammer ever since I stopped taking pills, but I only got a little drunk. Neither of us felt like fucking, so we lazily jacked each other off, which made us get sleepy and want to be under the covers. Mateo left the remains of our picnic in the hallway: in the morning they’d be taken care of by Doris, the maid, who was like a shadow.

“What’s it like to have rich parents?” I asked, already lying down.

“It’s great,” he said, and jumped on the bed a couple of times before getting in beside me.

I caressed his hair, which always stood a little on end; the only light came from the muted TV. I don’t like to sleep in the dark, and Mateo doesn’t care either way.

“Did you know that female hyenas have dicks too?” I asked.

“Oh no, not the hyenas again.”

In the gloom, I heard his curiosity in spite of the complaint, and I kept going.

“Well, they have a penis-shaped clitoris that mimics a dick. They even have a false scrotum.”

“Balls?”

“Yep.”

“Hyenas are trans.”

“Don’t even think about saying that outside this room.”

“You know I’m well trained. Do they get hard?”

“Yeah. But it makes it difficult for them to give birth, because they don’t have vaginas or something.”

“Then where do the babies come out? They have to have something.”

“I don’t remember. I’m not sure why they evolved like that, either.”

“So this is from your days of watching *National Geographic.*”

“Yeah. That detail just stuck with me.”

“You’re morbid at heart,” he said, and yawned.

It was raining hard, and I had trouble falling asleep. I heard Mateo’s parents come home from the birthday party, quite late and, judging from how little I understood of what they said, pretty drunk.

—

We got up early so we could tour the town. “The city,” Mateo corrected me with a smile. There wasn’t much to see, but the cemetery had an entrance built by the architect Francisco Salamone, featuring an art deco Christ taken

straight out of a nightmare *Metropolis* and stuck on a giant cross over ten meters tall. The cemetery was nothing special, he told me, but we could take a look another day if I wanted. "Salamone designed some private houses in the city too—I'm going to show you those. The owners fucked them all up on the inside, people are some real animals, but they can't touch the exteriors." The regional museum was closed; it still had the heads of Indigenous people who had been killed during the Conquest of the Desert, and a bunch of locals had started petitions to get the museum to at least put them in storage, if no one claimed them, and not keep them on display.

"But they're still there." Mateo shrugged.

We sat outside the museum in the plaza, which was very pretty. Statues brought from France, one of a young man throwing a disk that must have been the craze of the town's queer kids, and a gazebo that was clean and empty of teenagers on telephones, at least that day. Mateo was practically a teenager compared to me, but the age difference wasn't that noticeable. It didn't bother his parents—I actually think they preferred it, though they didn't even bring it up. Ten years isn't all that much, I suppose.

"I know where we can go," he said, and gave me a kiss right there in the gazebo. I tensed up, but he looked at me with his ever-surprised eyes and shook his head. During the day, at least, no one in town would do anything more than yell "Fags" at us. At night, with drunks on motorcycles coming from the pre-party, it was a different story. And he went on with his plan: "To the Aguirre palace."

Now I shook my head.

"I hate concentration camp tourism," I grumbled.

"No, it's really nice! And plus, the inquest is over, the evidence has all been gathered. It's a spectacular mansion. The park has a plaque and a monument that's pretty good, considering it was made by a local sculptor."

"You're just confirming it for me. It *was* a concentration camp."

"Yes, they know the basement was used for torture. But the place was a lot of other things, too. A summer house for those rich people, who by the way made all that cheese you ate last night, so you've already got Evil in you. Then Perón expropriated it—the mansion, I mean—and by the time it

was given back their fortune was gone, and they quote-unquote donated it to the Ministry of Education. So from ’55 until the coup it was…what’s it called? Where you used to study to be a teacher.”

“Magisterio? A teaching college?”

“Right. And it was only used as a clandestine detention center for a year, according to the inquest, because people would go and play on the property. It’s huge, like fifty hectares, and even though it’s pretty far from the city, it wasn’t all that secret. People have always gone to play on the grounds. It has a gazebo like this one but a thousand times bigger, all covered in ivy, it looks like Rivendell.”

I sighed.

“People sneak in to live there, too. Not too long ago, my sister told me, the stairs collapsed. They have Italian tiles, there were even Venetian decorations, it was crazy. Now there’s a lot of graffiti.”

“Pentagrams, I’m sure.”

“Satan! The kinds of things that are right up your alley, don’t pretend they’re not. If you start to feel bad, we can leave. I have the car.”

“I won’t feel bad,” I said, and tried to swallow my hypersensitivity. “Let’s go.”

—

We entered from the back, through what Mateo called Rivendell. The gazebo was roofless and had a round table in the middle, and, especially from the stairs, it really did look like the setting of the Council of Elrond. From down there you couldn’t see the ruins of the castle, as it was called, I guess because it was built in the 1920s in the style of French castle—though with a very Argentinian take, as I would see later. I’m no expert, but I know a Spanish tile when I see one. Don Aguirre, he of the cheeses and countless agricultural fields, was Basque, obviously; his wife, the woman he built the castle for, was French. They had a house in Europe too, in Germany. The same fire that had claimed the zoo had consumed part of the castle.

“So this one was intentional, too?”

"You're just as Argentine as I am, don't ask dumb questions. There's no way to know."

That was Mateo's answer, but he wasn't being grumpy. Quite the contrary. He talked to me about picnics and recitals, and even first loves at Rivendell, about being afraid of staying until nighttime, mostly because it was far away (or so he said). He pointed out the collapsed stairs and the fireplace, which was incredibly well preserved. All the Carrara marble and the gold fixtures in the bathrooms had been taken by the military.

"The thing that gets me is that they were thieves on top of everything," I said.

"People who visited also stole stuff—don't fool yourself. There used to even be furniture here. The fire attacked the trees, some of which were really old. It hardly rains at all around here. This way."

We circled the castle on the left side. There was only a little graffiti, mostly declarations of love. The unpainted boiserie had been preserved in what had surely been the foyer and maybe the main dining room.

"I like ruins." I whispered, because the utter absence of other visitors or of people playing or running or sunning themselves in the park was making me nervous. "But still, this could have been fixed up."

"Not anymore. But they won't tear it down, either, because people would hang the mayor by his dick. So it stays like this."

We saw a bucket-less well that looked very deep, and some windows with broken panes covered with tin. The roof tiles were still in place, same as the entrance columns. It was strange: the place exuded a sense of fragility and permanence at the same time, as if it were resistant to calamities, to time and neglect. It held on with very little, clinging with short nails and arthritic hands to this rural existence, to its sad majesty, to the burnt trees' slow return to life.

"Come on, let's go in, it's still early."

I wanted to say no, but what was the point? Almost as a reflex, I checked to see if there was a cell signal. There was. Inside, large chunks of roof were missing in many of the rooms, and ivy was creeping into some of them. But not that much. Not like in real ruins. Inside, that became clearer.

Someone comes in here, I thought. Not just homeless people, not just people who come to spend the night. Someone helps maintain the building.

The idea made me shrink back, and I almost tripped over a broken toilet. When I turned around I caught sight of one of the bedrooms and had to stifle a scream. It was full of clothes. Almost a meter high, not a pile in the middle but covering the full expanse of the floor. Mateo saw it too and his reaction was the exact opposite of mine. I realized this was one of those lapses in judgment he sometimes had, a temporary blindness to danger. But I couldn't explain what the danger was.

"Look! How crazy is that? I know: there are flea markets in the park where they sell secondhand clothes. They must take the ones that aren't good enough to buy and throw them in here."

"Don't touch them."

"They're not dead people's clothes!"

"How do you know? Anyway, they're other people's clothes."

"Oh, why would they care if we play a little, when they just left it all here gathering dust."

"It's a lot of clothes, Mateo."

I don't know what I meant by that. Just that such an accumulation wasn't normal. The clothes weren't organized and didn't have any clear purpose, but they reminded me—and I couldn't say this to Mateo, because he would laugh—of the clothes left behind on the way to a gas chamber. Extermination happens naked. It was silly. The clothes were new. And some, as Mateo discovered while I tried to breathe normally and patted the pockets of my jeans in search of a pill (a "lifesaver," as my shrink calls it), were costumes. In fact, right over his T-shirt, he put on a long-sleeved gold blouse with giant red buttons that looked like something a clown or a ringmaster would wear. *Stop it,* I thought. As if my plea had reached him, he tripped and fell onto the clothes, but, far from being scared, he laughed his carefree laugh, which nonetheless, in the solitude of the castle's high walls, sounded like a cackle. I had a flash of fear that when he got up, he wouldn't have the tanned skin I liked so much, but rather the hyenas' mottled spots.

He got up, chipper and playful. He'd found a torn top hat in his fall, and he put it on tilted jauntily to one side. In another context I would have rushed to hug him: his long hair looked great with the black top hat. I hadn't gone into the room yet but he came out, still wearing the costume, and, in the hallway, he pretended to pull something out of the hat, his legs curved like a silent film comedian. He put it back on and kept exploring without a care in the world. I stood there for a second to swallow the pill. I was still nervous. The sense of warning hadn't passed.

I lost sight of Mateo and called out to him. He didn't answer. He wouldn't play those kinds of jokes on me. Not on me or anyone else. More afraid now, I walked faster, not running only because I didn't want to stumble over any of the many things, beams and planks and mattresses, that were strewn around.

The next room wasn't a room. It was a garage, although nothing from the outside suggested that it was there. I guess some walls could have been pulled down and the roof fixed to create the uncanny effect I was seeing now: unbroken, not a crack, not a hole, just one skylight in the center that dimly lit the whole space but shone very clearly in the center, like an artificial, theatrical light. A spotlight. And beneath it, a man.

My eyes took a moment to get used to the semidarkness, but then I saw him. Totally bald: his head was enormous and heavy, like that of a bronze bust. He was wearing a white shirt and work or police uniform pants, it was hard to tell. He was hard to see in another sense: his presence appeared in flashes, like from a camera.

He had one arm around Mateo's neck. His other hand held a knife.

"Always the same," he said. I didn't see his lips move, but there was no one else there. And then the worst began. He started dragging Mateo by the feet all around the room, and when Mateo screamed, the man kicked him in the face or ribs or stomach until I had to tell him myself to shut up, shut up, and the man thought I was talking to him.

"You're next!" he yelled at me. Or barked. And he laughed when I took out my phone, which was dead. "That won't work here. You're somewhere else now."

He picked Mateo up and threw him and I thought he'd hit a wall, but no: he landed on a bed. Without a mattress, just the straps of a bed. I looked around: there were many more, like in the shared dormitory of an orphanage or a prison. Or a torture chamber. Mateo was half-conscious, but the man kept hitting him, and when I could finally bring myself to move, I tried to run but fell to the floor. My feet were tied. I hadn't tripped or gotten caught on anything: they were bound together, and very tightly, with duct tape. How had that happened? Had someone done it without me feeling it?

From the floor I saw the man's boots approaching, and at the same time I heard, coming from the beds, sobs, screams, pleas, curses.

"No one can hear them," said the man, his bald head shining under the skylight. "We're far away. Plus, I have help. The daughters of the night!"

And the hyenas started to sing. There's no other way to describe it. They laughed and howled, but their chorus held a certain aesthetic sense, horrible and funereal: the anticipation of an infernal pack of hounds tasked with preventing our escape and enjoying their task deliriously.

The man took Mateo from the bed and threw him to the ground. I saw his bloody face, but his eyes were vacant. Had the man killed him? No. His hands trembled, probably from the pain.

"The weaklings we get in here, huh? Can't even take a beating anymore. Me, I have a lot of resilience. I always did."

The hyenas laughed and I thought: This does not exist. But how do you run from something that doesn't exist? The man yelled:

"Lookie here, kids! Now, this is resilience."

And he cut off his ear with the knife. It wasn't a sharp, definitive slice. He cut it like a salami. Sawing at it.

I watched him in silence, with hatred, with fear, but also with the certainty that he was not a person. He couldn't be. The beds bucked as if they had people on them, the same people who cried and whose sobbing was drowned out by the hyenas. Poor hyenas. No one ever spares a compassionate thought for them. I held the bald man's eyes and said:

"Let's see what else you can take."

The same way, as if using a handsaw, he cut off the tip of his nose. The blood dripped onto Mateo and woke him up, and when he saw the man he struggled to get away. The guy kicked him hard between the legs. But he was already losing energy. Or was I imagining it?

"I want you to laugh like your friends. Make your smile bigger. Go on. Can you take the pain or not?"

"Fuck your mother," he said, but then he did it; with two slashes, he made his smile bigger. The laughing man.

I saw his old molars, yellowed and with lead fillings, under the skylight. But his presence was diminishing, those camera-like flashes in which he appeared were getting shorter. Flashes between spells of darkness. He ran from the beam of light, bleeding. I crawled closer to Mateo, whose face was red from the blood and from the effort of trying not to scream and provoke more beatings.

I heard the man bellow when he saw me crawling, and he started kicking Mateo on the ground again: he knew that was more effective than hitting me. He knew it hurt more.

Something happened when I closed my eyes, trying to think better about what to do, who to call, how to run. My hands could reach the tape around my feet, which was very tight: I would need my own knife. The beds wouldn't help me there, but maybe they held the key. When I tried to get closer to one of them, though, they were gone. The beds had vanished the same way they had suddenly appeared. Then, I knew. He was going to disappear, too. I had to keep him from taking Mateo with him. And the only thing that worked was to challenge him, make him waste time. For some reason, he obeyed orders. A soldier under the skylight. A soldier who wanted pain.

"Cut off a finger. I get the feeling you don't care about your face. But a finger, with your work…"

He growled at the skylight like a trapped animal, as if that light created him, as if it were his silent god who wouldn't allow him to say no and finish the job, wouldn't let him disobey orders from that worm crawling on the

floor. I took out my phone again. It was on. There was no signal, but there was light. I turned on the flashlight and shone it onto him.

If only I hadn't, because now I can't forget. The cheeks slashed open, the nose like a skull, that clean and shining baldness.

When he was about to take the knife to his finger, he disappeared. And with him went the skylight and what was left, if anything, of the beds. The duct tape around my feet. Mateo and I were in a big, abandoned room, similar to the others; that is, we were in the ruins of a castle. And it was daytime. My phone, which was working now—even the clock—said that ten minutes had elapsed.

Mateo had passed out again, so I picked him up and took the clown clothes off him outside, on the grass. I left the gold blouse and that torturous top hat out there. He didn't have a scratch on him, not a single bruise, and none of the bald man's blood was on his face where I'd seen it smeared before. I lifted his shirt. The same skin as always. I put him into the car and tried to remember how to drive. There weren't many cars in town, but motorcycles and bikes zipped along, and no one wore a helmet.

I reached the hospital pale and trembling; by then, Mateo was awake. I convinced him to go inside with a lie: that when he'd come out of the clothes-filled room, which was the last thing he remembered, he'd tripped over a beam and fainted from the fall. They checked him over without much concern, because he seemed fine. They didn't have an MRI machine in the town, but there was no sign of a concussion. "Maybe you didn't eat enough," said the doctor, and he ruffled Mateo's hair a little. Everyone knew his family and had watched him grow up.

We went back in silence, with me at the wheel. He wasn't scared by the supposed accident, but something kept his lips pressed tightly together. Of course, when we got to his family's house he was all smiles, though he didn't tell anyone about the clothes.

"I don't like that place," his mom said. "I wish it would collapse, or they'd tear it down. The investigation is done—what more do they want with it? They won't find anything else there, and it's sinister."

Mateo went into the kitchen and poured a glass of Coke. When he kissed me, he had the sweet, metallic taste on his tongue.

"Don't tell me anything that happened in the castle. Don't tell anyone," he whispered into my ear.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I replied, very seriously. "Maybe you do have a concussion."

He pressed a finger into my chest. The gesture said: You know how to keep secrets.

It also said: Thank you.

DIFFERENT COLORS MADE OF TEARS

Oh, this wound the color of old clothes!
It splits, it smells of scalded honey.
—César Vallejo, "Absolute"

I walked up and down the block several times, corner to corner, and though I checked the address on my phone, I thought it must be wrong. The place couldn't be on the other side of the street, because the botanical gardens were there. And the buildings on that block were all embassies, libraries, or houses so ostentatious that the financial impossibility of maintaining them meant that now they were old folks' homes or luxury hotels: they were all improbable as private housing. "People live here?" my friend Willa always asked when she saw a spectacular house, the two of us in the car smoking a joint with the AC cranked up as high as it would go, because she hated the heat—and by "heat" she meant anything over sixty-eight degrees.

I looked at the address again—sometimes customers get a number wrong—thinking I could call for confirmation, but then I found a building entrance half-hidden among the embassies. It looked like it could be a consulate of the Vatican, but no: it had doorbells for each apartment, one per floor, and an entryway with the bronze fixtures, mirrors, and marble that were typical of the area. I rang the bell. The customer had written to offer us more than twenty-five dresses plus jewelry, and while normally we would have asked him to bring the items to the store himself, he'd let us know in a message that he was an old man, that he didn't have a car or a driver, and he didn't want to carry it all in a taxi. We would have let the offer go with a "Thanks anyway" under other circumstances, but he included a few photos with the message, and Willa, Delilah (our boss and the store's owner), and I were left speechless. The dresses looked like *real* vintage, as we called it.

That is, not garments from the ’60s or ’70s, with fabrics that were already brittle and yellowed, but from earlier decades, of better quality and apparently in good condition. And the jewelry! “I’m sure they’re copies,” Delilah said, almost breathless. “They look like Lalique or Fouquet. They can’t be, because those pieces are usually in museums, but even if they’re copies, they’re exquisite.”

“They look like they’re made of tears,” said Willa as she zoomed in on the photos and let a few tears of her own fall. “Different-colored tears.” For once we let the melodrama pass, because that jewelry deserved it.

The response over the intercom came quickly: I’d thought it would be a woman, maybe a maid, but no, it was the unmistakable voice of an old man. I couldn’t avoid a certain feeling of disgust in the pit of my stomach. I know I can’t say this in public and I certainly shouldn’t feel it, and I know old people have plenty of problems, what with the solitude…and meager pensions and cruel children and getting sick and losing their minds, but I just don’t like them—I don’t like old people. I don’t know what I’ll do when I’m old myself; I hope I die before I get there. It’s a strange feeling: I get the sense that they’re faking. That the aches and pains, the plodding steps, the constant chatter about illnesses and doctors, the smell of their skin, the false or decayed teeth, the same anecdotes told and retold—it’s all an act put on to irritate. I know that’s not true, of course; still, I can’t help but feel it, and my suspicion toward them makes me keep my distance, remain unmoved by grandparent stories, roll my eyes when some employee at the shop takes days off because their dear old granny died. Who, I wonder, can suffer from that death so much that they can’t go to work?

Maybe it’s the memory of my own grandmother, her hooked nose and all-black clothes, so incapable of a tender touch, who judged all the women in the neighborhood to be whores or, to use her favorite word, *hussies*. Not that she traumatized me: I cut her off as soon as I could, and my father took care of her burial and vigil, which I went to in the early morning. Almost no one was there. She deserved that final contempt.

The elevator left me in a small waiting room outside the apartment’s front door. When I was little I used to wonder what those rich people’s

homes were like—did they not have stairs? But they did have them, just at the other end of the apartment, near the service rooms, like a dark secret. The old man wore a gray suit and white sneakers and held out his hand to me.

“Noah,” he said. And he smiled with teeth so white and artificial they were revolting. “Like from the ark.”

There was a black piano in the vestibule, but I didn’t get a look at the brand because he ushered me quickly—he was speedy in those sneakers—into the library. It was beautiful and uncomfortable, with leather armchairs that were slightly worn and too soft to sit in easily, and some very small tables that could have been used at a French café or for reading tarot. Books took up all the walls except one, which had a picture window overlooking an inner garden. It could have been his or the building’s, but I intuited that it belonged to the apartment—though by that point the word apartment was seeming too small for that place.

On one of the little tables, an espresso was waiting for me, very strong with no sugar.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” said Noah. His eyes were a bit cloudy—cataracts? They looked like a gray sky. “The girl couldn’t come today, and I’m afraid I’m useless on my own.”

I smiled and downed the coffee in one gulp. He was looking at me so intently I was afraid the coffee might be some kind of concoction to put me to sleep or drug me, but then I thought: No, that’s your phobia of old people talking. And this particular old man is pretty repulsive, because he pretends to be charming.

He started to tell me about his wife, who had been dead for a couple of years. They both had a lot of money (here there was a diatribe about the country and its sorry economy and corrupt politicians, which I stopped listening to, because all those diatribes are exactly the same). She came from a traditional family, heiress to farmlands and dairy yards. He was a successful businessman, owner of real estate and a marble workshop, whose name he said and I forgot because all I could think about was what marble workshops made, and there was only one answer: headstones. Niches.

Morbid old codger, I thought. The only thing I liked about him was his hair, white and thick and enviable. I explained how we worked: he could sell us the clothes, or we could take them on commission for a percentage and he'd get a better price if they sold. He interrupted me. "I want to sell them outright," he said. "At whatever price. He would even give them away. The price he was asking, in fact, was very low for the kind of dresses and jewelry he was offering, but he didn't want them to stay in the house. They smelled like his wife, they were her presence locked away in a closet, he didn't want to take them out anymore in search of an aroma that would fade over the years, didn't want to catch a glimpse out of the corner of his eye of her ghost in the mirror, smoothing her waistline and wrinkling her nose if she wasn't pleased. He didn't want to spend what was left of his life with them. There were more dresses, but he was going to give them to family members or donate them to the Clothing Museum, which was very interested.

I had to go with him to the room where he kept the clothes, down a dim hallway lined with some very dark paintings, like landscapes at midnight or during storms. The closet was open and the dresses hung up. To one side, an enormous full-length mirror where his wife—he hadn't mentioned her name—must have once looked at herself and wrinkled her nose. I glanced around for photos, but there were none. Maybe he kept them in another room. The place seemed infinite.

"These are the ones I'm selling," he said.

"How did you find us?" I wanted to know. The man must have been over eighty, and our business runs almost exclusively on social media.

"On Instagram," he replied with a mischievous smile. If he was lying, I wasn't going to know it.

"May I?" I asked, and started taking out the dresses. There were ten of them. A turquoise lamé with a cape. A sublime Balenciaga, also with a cape. A flapper day dress made of chiffon, with sumptuous flowers below the waist and at the left shoulder. An evening gown, black, long-sleeved, exquisite brocade with stonework of some kind (I'd learned about fabrics and garments, not much about the rest). A blue, sleeveless one with gold

lamé details. A sort of blue-and-gold Indian sari. A marvel with embroidered wheat that bordered on kitsch but was a real beauty. All of them dated from the 1920s through the ’50s, I was sure. Some of the fabrics were a little weak, but that was more from storage: these dresses had been worn very little, maybe just once. While I was admiring them—they were works of art, Delilah was going to cry—Noah brought out the box of jewelry. A dragonfly brooch with a woman’s head, her eyes closed: Mermaids, jellyfish, seahorses; glass, crystal, gemstones. The pendants were insane. Sphinxes. Peacocks. One in particular, made of opal and depicting a forest in rebirth, didn’t deserve to have me take it in to Isis, our shop, much as he insisted. It was too valuable, I was sure. I told him so, but it was no use. He wanted to get rid of those memories. Still, when I called the car to come pick me up (I placed the dresses into a suitcase with the utmost care), the old man said to me, “Don’t you want to try one on?” I was surprised by the question itself, but much more that he didn’t add, “I’ll leave you alone while you do it.”

“No. I don’t like to wear dead people’s clothes,” I replied curtly, to make it clear that his question had made me uncomfortable. I looked at the phone. Eight minutes until the car came. This app is evil, I thought.

“How silly, my apologies. But all clothes are dead people’s,” he murmured, and he sat down on the single bed. He seemed exhausted. “A lot of the clothes that you all sell are from people who have passed on, or, I don’t know, maybe a young woman sells them to you and then dies the next day, right? And the clothes you’re wearing now, even if you bought them new, will belong to a dead person when you die.”

“In general, I don’t try on the shop’s clothes.” Seven minutes. Time is absolutely relative, I thought.

“But you touch them. Don’t your fingers end up smelling like mothballs and dust?”

“What was your wife’s name?” The question threw him off, as I’d intended. He hesitated, as if he didn’t remember. He wanted to lie to me. But he knew that these days a simple internet search would expose any deception. He was a crafty old guy. Cunning. I detested him.

“Susana,” he finally said.

“How did she die?”

“Cancer. She didn’t suffer much.”

“I’m glad.”

I handed him the money, which was quite a lot but still a ridiculous price for the treasures I was taking with me. Two minutes. I thanked him and headed downstairs as fast as I could. I wasn’t afraid of the old man—I could kill him with a single kick—but who knew if he was the only one in that giant place.

—

Delilah, indeed, cried. And when she saw the Balenciaga logo, she shrieked. Willa tried on the jewelry with indescribable care, and Delilah said, “These won’t be put up for sale, at least not here at Isis. We have to talk to a good antiques dealer, and I think we could make a ton of money. If they’re not Lalique or Fouquet—especially this one with the landscape, it has to be Fouquet—they’re such good copies that they’ll still go for a high price.” As she did when she was very excited, she waved her arms to jangle her colored resin bracelets, trademark Delilah, the best boss in the world. I didn’t mention the old man’s strange sermon about dead people’s clothes. I don’t know why. Nor that he’d suggested I try on the dresses.

Willa was on the computer, still wearing one of the rings on her pinkie. The other rings were too small for her fingers. I think she had fallen in love with a choker that was as unwieldy as a neck brace, but looked like a vision from on high.

“Look, look. I found the old man. He owns Seidel Real Estate. Noah Seidel. Good thing he sent us his full name, because this dumbass is incapable of asking anything useful.” The dumbass was me.

“She’s not a dumbass, she just gets a little distracted sometimes,” Delilah said in my defense. The three of us were alone in Isis, which closed at eight P.M. Outside, night was falling.

“Anyway. Susana, he said. It’s Susana Swanson.”

“Ohhhh,” we said in unison. She was a rich and well-known woman, but discreet. Her last name often appeared in the social pages. I couldn’t remember if she’d had children: I think not, because otherwise the inheritance drama would have been public.

“But wasn’t there some kind of scandal? I feel like I remember a divorce a long time ago,” Delilah asked.

“I’m getting to that. It says here Susana left her millionaire husband for a doctor at a public hospital—a little poorer, sure, but these rich girls never go for a real peasant, do they? And I bet a peasant sure knows how to fuck. Well, Sir Noah went all crazy and apparently attacked the doctor and broke his face in, right there at the Hospital de Clínicas, and check this out, he went to jail. Not for long, though. He didn’t really hurt the doctor, anyway, just a broken nose and some bruises. This happened in the ’80s, she was already getting up there, the ol’ gal had guts. She died of cancer, that’s true.”

“At Clínicas?”

“She’s buried at Recoleta. It doesn’t say what hospital she died in—I’ll look.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Delilah. “The guy had the clothes for like forty years, so why didn’t she send for them? I can understand if she didn’t want to see him, but these people have employees.”

“Maybe she didn’t want them anymore,” said Willa.

“Look at them, hon: Wouldn’t you want these dresses?”

I broke in, because I was the only one with this information.

“They were gifts from him. Maybe she didn’t want anything he’d given her. There’s something weird about him. I bet he beat the shit out of her.”

Willa closed the laptop and cried, “Time to try them on! Now that it’s just us here.”

The two of them went running to the mirrors, and I followed. I felt safe now, and I wanted to enjoy the touch of those fabrics on my body. The dresses were made for a tall person and it was logical for Willa to try them on first, but, generous as always, she said that since I’d gone all the way to the weird old man’s house, I could take the first prize.

I chose a short-sleeved red dress made of silk and velvet that had intricate embroidery with purple, blue, and red stones. From the ’20’s, said Delilah, Paul Poiret or a good copy of his style (Delilah had studied design and fashion history). There is no way to describe the feeling of wearing a marvelous dress. Everything changes. Your expression, your posture. With a sumptuous cut like this one, no imperfection—real or perceived or imposed by other people’s eyes—is noticeable. It’s like pouring a magic elixir over the body, like biting into the apple, like opening your eyes onto another possible world. I despise people who don’t understand fashion. They don’t know what it is to really feel silk, they don’t know what it is to turn and look back over your shoulder and have your face, your same, everyday face, become different, lips shiny, eyes mysterious, a shadow under your cheekbone that wasn’t there before.

Willa clapped, and Delilah put a hand over her mouth because her lips were trembling.

I went closer to the mirror and saw the first bruises. They started on my arms and spread slowly but surely to my wrists, where they looked like two purple bracelets. The girls saw them too, but if they said anything I didn’t hear it. I lifted up the dress and looked at myself in the mirror. Above my underwear there were two huge slashes in my belly, like incisions, open but not bleeding, though when I moved, an organ—maybe an intestine—peeked out. I touched it with inexplicable fascination, felt a throb, and then the pain came. Little by little, in waves. I lifted the dress farther, and under the bodice I saw the violence of a gaping wound; shocked, I took in what could only be my heart, spent, pale, emptied of blood. I remembered Saint Thomas’s doubt (I’d studied art history) and stuck my finger in. All my organs were cold and still. But then the pain reached around my neck and I saw the gash and I couldn’t stand it. I started screaming. I didn’t use words, I don’t think, but my request was clear: Take it off me, please, I can’t do it, I’m afraid I’m dying! Between the two of them they got the dress off me, and as soon as I was stripped down in front of the mirror—lying on the floor because I was crying and the pain was unbearable, though already starting to subside—I saw that the wounds were disappearing. There was

nothing left on my chest: the skin was clean and healthy, as always. The bruises were fading. My neck, normal.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," said Willa. She grabbed the dress with the wheat and put it on. We didn't stop her. Just moments later, when she raised it to look at her legs, she saw dozens of cuts, one of them very deep on the thigh, which must have severed the artery. Her wounds were different. On the chest, for example, she only had one, which split her sternum. One of her arms started to swell up, and, unlike in my case, her lips split open, one eye closed in a black-and-blue bruise. She couldn't stand it either but she took off the dress herself, as fast as she could, and soon was wearing her own black dress again.

"What are we going to do?" Delilah cried, and the three of us embraced.

—

"Maybe it's just us. Maybe it won't happen to the customers." That's what Delilah said that night when she brought us over to eat at her house. "The jewelry doesn't do anything," she added. "Willa already tried it on and it's fine, even if she doesn't want to wear it anymore. I tried some things on too and they didn't do anything. We don't know what might happen in the long term, but we already agreed we'd sell it. Tomorrow I'll call Aesop—they're the best and they won't hustle us. If they try it on and nothing happens, it's all good. Let's hope."

We slept at Delilah's house, in her neighborhood of tree-lined streets. And all three of us went to Isis the next day, as usual. Employees bought and sold clothes, people browsed the racks, sales were good. All three of us have the eye of the gods when it comes to spotting clothes, and Willa—who had studied accounting, though her real calling was design, especially party shoes for larger feet—also had gifted hands, and after one glance she could adjust a garment with a complicated cut or fit. She also knew how to recommend things that might not be so interesting on the hanger, but looked great on.

Of course, we hadn't forgotten the wounds, and I massaged my neck so much that Delilah had to tell me several times to cut it out. " 'Cut' is maybe not the best verb," Willa said in reproach, and Delilah covered her eyes with her hands, her nails short and neat.

A tall girl with cascading hair and slender legs asked to try on one of the dresses, one of the most beautiful: black, with a short rhinestone cape, a high waist and flowy skirt, in the style of Jeanne Lanvin (she still didn't dare guarantee any of the labels). She called it a "robe de style"—Delilah would switch into French and English when she talked about fashion, which was quite silly and annoying but also pretty funny. The girl went into the dressing room—of course, she wasn't going to try it on in front of the main mirror like we had. The music was really loud, though I was always asking Polcito to please turn it down, because people didn't come here to dance, they came to buy clothes. He called me a grandma—to me, of course, the worst possible insult. Delilah is half-deaf, so she didn't care one way or another. But Willa and I looked at each other, because we could hear the screams. I started to run, but Delilah stopped me. The girl came out with her hair on end, and the dark undereye circles she'd already had now swallowed her sunken eyes whole. She didn't say a word. Just dropped the dress on the counter in such a hurry that it slid to the floor, and rushed out. We looked at one another. We had to take the dresses off display, because that customer was going to talk, and nobody wanted a black legend going around about Isis, the best vintage store in Buenos Aires.

When we closed up, Willa did the day's accounting as always, and Delilah used another computer to check the offerings of clothes. She saved several emails before crying out, "You guys, come here!" and pointing at one from Noah Seidel. Before, he had called on the phone and sent WhatsApp messages, but it seemed he knew how to use all channels of communication. Him or someone else hidden in that enormous and, I now realized, horrific, decaying apartment.

To: isisvintage@eshops.com
From: noah@seidelpropiedadades.com.ar

Have you tried them on yet, WHORES? Sure you have, that's what that little WHORE came for, the one who looks so much like that WHORE Susana, they're all originals you little tramps, I spent a fortune on that HUSSY and then she didn't want anything, she rejected my gifts like she rejected me, and after I screwed her like NO ONE ELSE could, and she screamed like the WHORE she was with her eyes rolled back in her head. No, I didn't kill her. But I imagined so so so much how I would kill her and I drew it on all the dresses with a knife, I didn't tear them, didn't leave a scratch, NO NO NO never! I'm gentle. But I know people. In my business you meet people. And it's all in those dresses, beautiful dresses, fabrics with all the PAIN that hussy should have felt, I don't know why I hit that poor devil of a doctor when I could have killed her instead, I always was sentimental.

I have more if you WANT.

Hussy, I thought. The same word my grandmother used to use. All old people are evil. Delilah yelled at Willa to call the police, and Willa said, "You think that email is enough to make anyone believe you? A crazy old man, that's what they'll say."

"But there are laws!"

"What laws, honey? You're a dummy sometimes, you know. It's no good growing up with a silver spoon in your mouth."

So much like that whore Susana, I thought. Something else took hold of me: I went straight to the black dress with the the rhinestone cape, the supposed Jeanne Lanvin, and I took off my clothes and put the dress on before the others could stop me, and I opened my legs lying on the floor and yes, there was what the girl had seen, what the old man had wanted me to see, my mangled vagina sawn open, the clitoris gone, everything between my legs one giant pool of blood, a clot, and the pain, the pain shooting up through my belly and my screams like I was giving birth. I fainted.

The next day, with a mug of tea and a sedative, I called Delilah and told her I quit. She cried, asked me to work remotely, to scout for clothes, to stay

in contact somehow. I said no and hung up so she couldn't manage to convince me.

For weeks, I would inspect my vagina and be relieved to see that it was normal. For months, menstruating was traumatic. Willa was the only one I could talk to about it. We would get together for iced coffee and she would tell me about Isis: once, she handed me my share of the money from the sale of the jewelry, which, as far as the Aesop people knew, was all authentic and didn't have the same effect as the dresses. (Well, they didn't know about that part, but now we were sure. It was a lot of money. "Buy dollars fast," Willa told me. I did.) I had already gone back to teaching art history, but of course, teaching never pays well.

At one of those meetups, a day when we had to move to the tables inside our favorite café to escape the pouring rain, Willa told me that old man Noah had died. They read about it in the newspaper, and she and Delilah—who left me messages I didn't answer—had driven over to the apartment. In a dumpster, along with some books, they found a box with more dresses. No jewelry, just clothes.

Willa told me how Delilah had touched a beautiful sleeve that was hanging out of the box, a green print by Schiaparelli—she'd taken a photo to check it—and a minute later, when she let go, her hands were all sliced up, her fingers so wounded they were practically hanging by threads. Her left thumb, in fact, was a stump.

"The effect wore off fast, fortunately. I was slow, I should have taken a photo."

"We never did take pictures of the wounds."

"Right? That must be what happens when people see UFOs or ghosts, and then we complain that there are no good pictures. Now I understand why. It's the shock."

I thought about that and about my arguments against the idea, but I didn't say anything. The rain took away my desire to fight.

"So what did she say when it was back to normal? Her hand, I mean."

"You know how Delilah is." Willa took a sip of her coffee and waved her hand to order another. "She stood there looking at the dress and said:

‘What a shame.’ ”

“Did you throw them out?”

“Not yet.”

Like a reflex, I touched my side and remembered the wound in the skin, my empty heart, my lung like a sponge you throw away when it’s worn out from use.

“I’ll pay,” I told Willa.

THE SUFFERING WOMAN

I dash against the walls, dash against the windows, flop against the ceiling, do everything on God's earth, in fact, except fly out again. And all the while I'm thinking, like that moth, or that butterfly, or whatever it is, 'The shortness of life! The shortness of life!' I've only one night or one day, and there's this vast dangerous garden, waiting out there, undiscovered, unexplored.
—KATHERINE MANSFIELD, "At the Bay"

Hello my dear, I understand if you don't answer, but at least get Claudio to leave me a message. How are you? How's the little one? Well, I know chemo is a nightmare. Oh, I love you so much. I'll keep sending messages, you know I'm here for you.

Paola had left it for days without listening because she ignored audio messages from unknown numbers, but she always checked to see what they were before erasing them. She never had that many, but with her job, sometimes she'd end up saving the number of someone who might have a high-paying event. That didn't happen often. This message, in any case, was clearly a mistake, and she replied right away because she felt sorry for those distanced friends.

Hi, I don't know who you are but I'm not your friend, I think you've got the wrong number, I'm answering because I listened, and, well, it's clearly a tough situation. Hugs to you both.

Anyway, it's weird, Paola thought. How can you not have the phone number of your friend with cancer? We don't dial numbers anymore, it should have been saved. She didn't remember giving her number to anyone at work in recent weeks. After eight hours of doing makeup she was always tired, and even though a freelance job could be good money, she almost always regretted doing them. She could afford the rent and lived alone, which at her age was practically a miracle.

She took the elevator up with her makeup case. The other girls usually left their products at the station, but she was paranoid and worried about theft. Plus, she wasn't friends with any of them. She didn't like their silly chatter, and she especially didn't like Liliana, the lead artist, who would order chicken skewers and eat with her hands, then wipe them on paper napkins and do people's makeup just like that, without washing them. With all the perfume and product fragrances the smell of chicken was relegated to the background, but Paola noticed it and felt sick. She'd thought about saying something more than once, but there were no sympathetic bosses at the station, and she didn't care that much anyway. She did her job and left, and things were fine that way.

She left her phone on the table and turned on the computer, and as she was thinking about whether to make food or order in, she heard the sound of an incoming message. Must be her mother or sister, who often texted at that hour. But it was the same number as before. Surely an apology or recognition of the mistake.

Hi, it's me again, I don't want to be annoying but you know I'm here for whatever you need. Anything, we can watch movies together, or I can babysit, whatever. I hope you're not in too much pain, I love you.

Hadn't the woman listened to her reply? Impossible to know, because the account was set to appear offline, so messages that had been read or listened to didn't have the confirmation of two blue check marks. She called: it was depressing to get heartfelt messages from a cancer patient's friend on her phone. No one answered. She tried again, this time calling on the landline. The result was even stranger. "This number is not in service," a recorded voice told her.

Paola dropped the phone on the table as if it were dirty. She started wondering: What kind of cancer did this woman have? She must be young. The friend calling her was young, and her child was young enough to need babysitting. Had it metastasized? What were the cancers that didn't metastasize? Thyroid cancer. Any others? She'd have to look it up. Why did she think it was cancer, anyway? Because the woman had mentioned chemo. Chemotherapy was only for cancer.

She didn't want to be alone in the apartment, so she went down to eat at the grill. She left her phone in the apartment so she wouldn't be tempted to look up symptoms, and also so she'd be far away from that voice, loving but with a hint of sorrow that, she realized, revealed just how sick the other woman was.

Luismi, the owner's son, welcomed her with a smile and brought her a glass of red wine. When he came back with half a grilled *provoleta* and her plate of meat with mashed potatoes, he sat down at her table, as he always did when she was eating alone. Without much preamble, she told him about the messages and confided the truth: they made her nervous. And she didn't really understand what was happening—it seemed like an impossible error.

"Babe, you need to block her. It's some crazy lady fucking with you."

"I don't think so. I swear, if you heard her, you could tell she's really worried."

Luismi snorted.

"For someone so sharp you're really naïve, I swear. I've got one for you. So, our phone number gets to a lot of people through delivery orders, and of course numbers are online now too, which I think is a disaster, but whatever. I get forwarded messages all the time. I just delete them. Lots of requests for money, prayer chains, send this message to five other dumbasses or you'll have bad luck, that kind of thing. But there was one I almost fell for. Some asshole sent out a chain about a little girl who had a skin disease. I don't remember its full name, but it was something about gangrene. You can't imagine the photos. She had holes everywhere. Sores. I'll never forget them. I looked at it a lot, too—I don't know, morbid curiosity. It didn't have a number where you could send money, nothing. But there was an Instagram link. And can you believe it? Believe it, because it's the truth. The link took you to a story where there was a cartoon that laughed at you and said, 'This was a test of your online safety,' or something like that. But I think it was some piece of shit who did it just to fuck with people. I don't know where they got those photos—hopefully they're fake. Block the number."

"You think?"

“I think. This world is full of mental cases.”

“Do you have the photos?”

“Don’t get crazy.”

“Show me.”

“Finish eating.”

She did. Before going to sleep, a little drunk because she’d stayed chatting with Luismi after he closed the kitchen, she blocked the number. She was off work the next day, so she could sleep in.

The doorbell woke her up: it was her sister, who needed help stringing stones and beads for the necklaces she sold, because she was behind on the orders. While they worked, Paola told her sister about the messages, adding, “It’s just that they had such a realistic texture.” It was the only way she could describe them. That voice hadn’t sounded like someone playing a sick joke. She didn’t say it, but the messages felt more concrete to her than her own sister sitting there concentrating on the thread and little Murano beads. They came from a place more palpable than her apartment in its small building with its tiny balcony that wouldn’t even fit a flowerpot. Paola brewed maté for her sister, who listened attentively as she separated different colors of stones. Her sister’s necklaces were very pretty; she had good taste and designed the pendants with a local metalsmith who was sort of crazy, but quite talented.

“What could that gangrene in the photos be?” Paola wondered aloud.

“You’re changing the subject,” her sister said. “Don’t obsess. You know what happens when you fixate on something. You really think you should block her? Call her again.”

“You just told me not to get obsessed!”

“You’re right. I just feel sorry for her.”

“Me too.”

When her sister turned her attention to cleaning some dirty crystals, Paola did a quick search on her phone, pretending to be reading messages. She found only images of normal gangrene, nothing in children. *Was* she turning into a medical obsessive? Something was going on with her. Maybe it was the cleaning fluids her sister was using, but she was getting a strong

whiff of disinfectant, like in hospitals. And also the smell of hospital food, the boiled squash, the insipid chicken, that odor that emanated when the tray was delivered. Paola hadn't been around that many sick people in her life, just her father when she and her sister were kids, but he had recovered. Not many others. And yet, now she was remembering that hospital from years ago, the waiting rooms, the dripping IV, the uncomfortable bed, the moans of pain from the other patient in the room, who'd had a collapsed lung.

"Remember Dad's roommate in the hospital when he got the stent?"

Her sister lowered her glasses to peer at Paola. "Yeah, more or less. Poor guy, I think he'd been stabbed. Why?"

"No reason. I just remembered. Has it been a long time since you've talked to Dad?"

"He called me last week, says it's impossible to live in Montevideo in the winter, that it's cold as hell."

"It's true. When I went to visit him the wind was insane—people were crossing the plaza holding onto a rope they'd tied to the statues."

"I want to go see him, but I have so much work. Plus, he's really poor these days and can't pay for my ticket. Hey, did you get the bathroom fixed?"

"Yeah, and anyway, what if I didn't? Were you going to go down to the grill because of a little leak?"

"I just might!"

While her sister was in the bathroom, Paola googled "gangrene + children." Nothing. Had Luismi made it up?

Her sister came back and put on her glasses.

"Your mirror is always scary when you leave the closet door open. I saw my reflection and it looked like a guy who was hunched over and rubbing his hands over his face. But I guess it was just me—I used a little of that amazing Estée Lauder lotion you have."

Paola bit her lips to keep from opening her mouth, and when she said goodbye to her sister, she tried to hide her hurry.

—

Sitting on the toilet lid, Paola could use the handle of the floor squeegee to move the mirror, or, rather, the closet door that had the mirror on the inside. She referred to that closet ironically as "my dressing room." At nearly every angle, the mirror reflected the bathroom, then the doorless hall that led to the living room, and then, at the widest angle and almost at the end of the hall, there was the man. He wasn't motionless, but neither was he moving much. His face was in his hands, and his body was shaken by unmistakable sobs. He was tall, wearing jeans, and it looked like he was barefoot. He wore a sweater, which seemed odd in early December, such a suffocating month in Buenos Aires. More than the man crying ceaselessly—because he did nothing else—it was his surroundings that caught her attention. A big window that looked onto a patio: she could see plants, and a vine climbing the wall. That was behind him. To his side, the end of a white bookshelf: she could see a few books, but mostly some figurines that looked like Funkos. Plus an indoor plant, the kind that always seemed to die on her. It was not her house reflected in that mirror. That was reassuring, because the mutely crying ghost wasn't there; that is, he was in the reflection, and not even all of the reflection. And he was frozen in an instant. Paola watched him for almost ten minutes and he just cried with his hands over his face, nothing more; he didn't run them through his hair, didn't dry his cheeks or rub his eyes. No gray in his hair—he was young. She closed the mirror door with the handle, dried her sweat, and opened it again. Same thing: her bathroom, her living room, and, at the end, with the door open as far as it could go, the young man crying in another house. Usually at that angle, if the mirror reflected her apartment, it would show the TV and a poster of Kate Moss.

That night Paola hardly slept, but she went to work the next day anyway. The same as always, at first. Prepare the skin, suggest a smoky eye, agree to a more natural look, apply caffeine to the undereye bags and murmur, "You've got such great skin," even if it wasn't true, outline the lips, hydrate them before color (suggest that they never go with nude), ask if they could

handle the eyelash curler, don't close, look up, look down, do you use false lashes? Paola recognized one of the women who had asked for her phone number, a young evening news anchor, and asked if she had called. The woman said no, that in the end she'd gotten sick and hadn't gone to the wedding. And the anchor asked her to please do whatever it took to get rid of the undereye circles, because "I look like a woman on her deathbed."

A woman on her deathbed. She gave the anchor some Korean patches that a friend had brought from the United States and left them on for five minutes, while the anchor went over the script for the program she would record in a few hours. While they waited for the patches to take effect (doubtful; people thought they worked, but Paola was sure it was all in their heads), she noticed a small wound on the anchor's arm, like a cigarette burn. There were a lot of women on TV who cut themselves, and it was always hard to cover up the scars on their arms and the dark circles from not eating. But the anchor didn't ask for makeup on the wound, and Paola was too embarrassed to bring it up herself. And that wasn't all. Because when she took off the patches she saw another little wound, near the anchor's hairline. She didn't say anything, just covered it with foundation.

"You think I need makeup there?"

Didn't she see it?

"Just a little, it was uneven."

She thought about sticking around to see if the anchor came back later to cover the wound on her arm, or if she went on air like that, with the sore in view.

Don't obsess, she heard her sister's voice saying. Liliana went past, laughing, relaying some bit of gossip about the degenerate bosses. She waited for the next patient. (That's what she called them, patients, because being in the makeup chair was a little like the dentist's. She felt a slight shudder.) The next woman was pregnant, she thought, so she went lighter on her makeup. There was no mention of her condition, though, much as pregnant women always like to talk about their bellies. It was a strange day. Cold, from the air conditioner. She left five minutes before her shift ended, and Liliana muttered, "This one doesn't even say goodbye anymore."

—

Paola hauled her makeup case up the stairs, exhausted, panting as if she were the one on her deathbed: someone had stopped the elevator. She'd knocked a few times on the iron door, which made a lot of noise, but gotten no reply. While she fished for the key in her purse she heard the elevator start moving, and then caught a fragment of the conversation of the person who was using it, or the people, because there seemed to be two voices.

I didn't know it made you swell up like that, I wasn't expecting it, she looks pregnant again.

It's awful, she's already in hospice.

Then the voices were interrupted by the noise of the elevator door. It couldn't be a coincidence. Paola dropped her case on the landing and ran back downstairs. There was no one in the lobby, and when she went out to the sidewalk there were too many people: her street had shops, several restaurants and cafés, and there was always a lot of movement, especially at that hour, around eight in the evening. She couldn't stop and ask every woman. Resignedly, she went back inside, but only to bring the makeup case into the apartment: she couldn't get rid of the smell of disinfectant. She didn't like incense, but she lit a stick anyway and went back down to buy food. But she didn't want to stay and eat at the grill, because she'd only end up talking about the crying man in the mirror. When Luismi handed her the *milanesa napolitana* with salad, she asked him:

"What was that gangrene again?"

"Say what? You sound like a sicko."

"You know, the sick little girl that someone sent to your phone."

"I don't remember."

"Think."

Luismi sighed.

"You want me to come over later, after I close up?"

"No, I'm beat."

"Really, I don't remember."

"Okay, just message me."

“You could send me a message one of these days too, I miss you.”

“Liar. Give me a kiss.”

Back in the apartment, Paola found a note that had been slipped under the door. It was short and polite, but bizarre. She read it as she opened the cardboard box with her *milanesa. Please,* the note said, *we know you need to watch TV at night, but sometimes it’s too loud and other people can’t sleep. From, your neighbor in 5C.*

She watched the occasional movie at night, sure, but always with headphones. An insomniac habit to keep from annoying others when she still lived with her mother and sister, or when Luismi stayed over. And, more importantly, the building had two apartments per floor. Hers was 6B. There were no C units. The A’s were the larger ones, the B’s were one-bedrooms. Eight floors, two apartments per floor. She was very sure. Her cellphone vibrated on the table, and she was certain that it was the blocked number again, that it had managed to cross technical oceans that were powerless to stop it.

But it was Luismi.

I found the message. It was pyoderma gangrenosum. Does that help? And a kiss emoji. Since she wasn’t going to be able to eat, she put the food in the fridge and sat on the sofa in the half-darkness with her phone, planning to search the internet for what kinds of cancer caused the stomach to swell.

And from somewhere in the apartment, the bedroom or bathroom, she heard a cry of pain or fear; *I can’t take it anymore,* said the voice, *I don’t want to talk to anyone,* said the voice, *Take it away,* the voice said. Paola looked at the blank TV screen that acted as a mirror, and saw the woman there. Saw her silhouette, but also some of her features. She looked pregnant, and was too thin. And, obviously, she was bald. Suddenly the shape doubled over and Paola thought, That’s what ghosts do, they move strangely, but that wasn’t it—the suffering woman threw up, and when the smell of medication and bile reached Paola’s nose, she couldn’t take it anymore and stood up without knowing why or what for, and then her apartment returned to normal.

No one had lived there before her; the building had been new when she'd rented her place. This wasn't an Indigenous burial ground situation, or something that had been razed and built over—a hospital, for example. Before, on that lot, there had been a pasta shop, and then residential buildings went up, the classic gentrification story. She wasn't going to find any photos of the family who'd lived here before her. Nothing like that. She turned on all the lights and lay down in bed, not knowing what else to do. The smell of vomit was gone. She felt hungry. But if she ate and then vomited in turn she would die of fright, so instead she opened the computer on her bed and started to search.

Swollen belly, swollen belly. A swollen stomach could mean so many things. Cancer + swollen stomach.

Ascites is when an excess of fluid builds up in the abdomen (stomach) due to pressure from tumors. This can make the abdomen feel hard and swollen. Ascites can also cause nausea, vomiting, and tiredness.

Yes, we're getting closer.

What kind of cancer causes ascites?

Cancers of the ovary, breast, endometrium, colon, stomach, pancreas, and bronchial tubes have a high incidence of ascites.

She had a son, the suffering woman. But what did that have to do with it? It could be any of those. Still: the first three were women's cancers. That's why she'd thought of it, of the boy and the swollen belly. The cancer that made her look pregnant again. Paola went back to the bathroom and the squeegee handle, to see if the man she presumed to be the husband was still there. But he wasn't. It was the suffering woman now, on the other side of the window. It was daytime in the world of the woman with cancer. She was sitting in a lovely wicker chair. She was rich, or upper middle class. A nurse was putting in an IV and the woman said, *Ow.* And it repeated. Like with the husband. Who knows what her face had been like. Her nose looked long, but maybe just because she was horribly thin. She had a tube going into her long nose, which was surely how she got food. The sun reflected off the mirror and blurred the image. Was the woman close to Paola's age? She was a little far away, it was hard to tell, especially without hair—the

woman had no scarf covering her bald head, and no eyebrows, either. Maybe she was a little older. Over thirty. Paola was close to thirty. She could die, too.

What were the symptoms of ovarian cancer?

Signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer may include the following:

Abdominal swelling or bloating

Feeling of rapid satiety when eating

Weight loss

Pelvic discomfort

Fatigue

Back pain

Changes in bowel habits, such as constipation

Frequent need to urinate

According to the Mayo Clinic, she didn't have ovarian cancer yet. She didn't even have back pain, because she almost always did people's makeup sitting down. "You're so lazy," Liliana would say through a mouthful of chicken, and Paola would think to herself, Well at least I'm not bitter and resentful.

Paola moved the mirror a little to see if she could glimpse anything more. Just a beautiful plant with deep purple flowers. And then the woman with cancer moved her head, and their eyes didn't meet, it wasn't that, but the reflection of the sun in the mirror flashed onto her face and the woman reacted like an ant under a magnifying glass, as if a giant in another world was trying to burn her, and she tried to shift away. When she did, the scream of pain filled both homes, the one in the mirror and the apartment. And then the image disappeared.

—

Paola spent the whole night alert, listening to the apartment and her own body. Every little ache and pain: what would happen if someday the swelling that she attributed to her poor diet turned into something bad, and then to her mom caring for her, her sister making her little bracelets, and

Luismi nothing, she didn't want Luismi, he only knew her body as beautiful, she didn't want him to smell it when it was sick. Some years back she had fallen at the gym and hit one of her breasts against a machine. She'd had a bruise, and now she couldn't forget how her sister had told her, Go to the gynecologist and see if you hurt something. A bruise can't turn into cancer, Paola had thought. She was lying in bed with her arms to her sides to help her relax, and she palpated her armpits. Nothing out of the ordinary. But it could start with just a mole. Or it could be too deep. She remembered a movie about a man whose cancer hadn't been detected because his symptoms were very imprecise. One of them was that his feet tingled. Paola had that, or more like they itched. And she didn't have fungus or anything. Bad circulation from sitting too much, her mother said, but, Paola thought, she should still see a doctor. About her feet, and about the bruise from the gym. And what had she done with her life, anyway? Put makeup on women at a state TV station. And do it badly, too, because although she liked her job she was lazy, just like Liliana said, and didn't stay up to date. She didn't even know what the best new skin-care products were! Her coworkers talked about Matrixyl and Haus and she ignored them. Nor did she have anyone who cared about her. She should get back in touch with some of her high school classmates. Glenda, for example—they used to sneak off and smoke cigarettes together. Or Laura, whom she'd run into on the street and who now had a painting studio and was beautiful, with hair like a lion's. Why had they fallen out of touch? Laziness, pure laziness, the same reason she invited Luismi to spend the night less and less, and she knew he had other girls, even if she was his favorite. How long would that last? Time, that crushing monstrosity, time was the only thing you couldn't stop and you couldn't even feel it, and there she was alone in the dark listening to the woman moaning in the kitchen, saying *I'll do it myself,* saying *If only I could eat again, I'm dying for a ham sandwich, how dumb, or some prosciutto on a plate, heaps of it,* and the murmur of her husband lying to her, saying *You'll eat again soon,* and she covered her ears to keep from hearing the answer and its rage.

—

Paola was so tired she went to the TV station in a taxi. She hadn't slept at all, and her head ached because she'd spent a long time online, first looking up symptoms and then, in the early morning, on forums, reading posts by sick women, their friends and families, and wondering if one of them was her suffering woman. Or if the woman was already dead and it was a ghost she was seeing. Or if she was sharing her space because that's what happened when death was close. Some women talked about experiences that were impossible to explain, like when they lost consciousness, for example. They would wake up in an unfamiliar room, and then feel like they woke up a second time back in their own beds. Lucid dreaming, others said, but it was clear they convinced no one. All the partners sensed their dead, heard women bathing or laughing but especially screaming in pain. Paola didn't go into the forums for men with cancer, it wasn't the same. She wanted to know about those orphaned children. The boy still hadn't made an appearance. Maybe he wasn't there. The suffering woman had nurses in her house. Surely her parents were rich, or her husband's parents were, and they took care of the child so he wouldn't see her die. Don't infect me, she thought. My life is small.

—

Doing makeup when she was so tired, fighting to keep her eyes open, was madness. Paola had to spend so long correcting one woman's eye makeup that a line formed. She got lipstick on two women's teeth. And, more seriously, she poked a third with the eyelash curler. People were scared of the curler anyway, and this woman was a bit of a hippie: "I don't ever wear makeup," she boasted. The hippie gave a start and cried out, which attracted Liliana, who, without much ado, sent Paola home. "You can ask for the day off, you know, if you're tired or sick, it's fine, no one here even checks." Why is Liliana being so generous all of a sudden? Paola wondered. "You

must be coming down with the flu, it's so cold in here. Go on home, and if you're still feeling bad tomorrow just let me know."

Maybe she *should* call Laura; maybe she could study art, too, she thought, while she waited for the bus with the damned makeup case in tow. She knew a little about color, and always enjoyed playing around with glitter and the more theatrical makeup. If she hadn't studied before, it was only because she needed to start working ASAP, and later on it was the same laziness as ever, leaving it for down the road, she was still young. But being young meant nothing, she realized. Being young was an instant, like being trapped in a mirror and sobbing.

As soon as she pulled the bedspread over herself she fell asleep, warm and safe. The apartment smelled of the fruity incense she had burned the day before. A citrusy smell of summer and clean things.

—

She could go on sleeping forever as cozy as she was, night had already fallen outside, she could stay where she was and call the station and take the day off tomorrow, but she had to use the bathroom, what a poorly designed thing the body is, to have to interrupt a dreamless sleep just to pee. She turned over in bed to reach the only lamp, on the other side where she read before going to sleep, and something was in her way. She jerked back and sat up. Was it Luismi? Her sister? She fumbled in the darkness. She didn't know that thin body. She touched its arms. Why didn't the person beside her wake up? She went on to the stomach. The skin wasn't just taut: it was like a balloon filled with water, like a garbage bag with liquid inside it. She understood: it was the suffering woman. In her bed. Or no, not really. It was a dream. Like the lucid dreams she had read about. She gingerly pulled her hand away, but she felt it burning. That rubbery skin was hot, and not just from being under the bedspread: the body had a very high fever. She got out of bed, trembling. She didn't know if it was a dream, it didn't feel like one now, but she wanted to see her. When she turned on the light, the woman's body disappeared. Paola caught a glimpse, though, for a split second, of the

suffering woman’s terrified eyes, her belly enormous as if she were carrying quadruplets, her skin stretched over her cheekbones.

Paola showered before leaving. She couldn’t go back to that bed: the bedspread and sweat-soaked sheets no longer seemed welcoming. They were a burning coffin. She washed her hands well. Had the suffering woman touched her in her sleep? She didn’t think so. So far, the ghosts she’d seen hadn’t been able to move much. Just now, the woman had been still even when Paola had pulled off the covers and seen that flash of her body in a white T-shirt.

She tried not to look at the bed while she filled a bag with clothes. She was very calm, she realized. But when she heard a snore or maybe a labored breath she stumbled out of the room, the bag still open, without looking back. She’d left the computer on the table, and she put it into her makeup case. She also brought money and her red boots, which were in the middle of the living room.

Outside, the street was the same and that was a relief. It didn’t feel entirely real, but real enough. She put on lipstick though she didn’t usually like to wear makeup in the heat: she needed color, and the flavor of something that didn’t taste like medication, something beautiful and soft and sticky. She sent Luismi a message: *I’m going to spend a few days at my mom’s, call me on her landline, I’ll tell you why later.* She had a key to her mother’s house, so she didn’t worry about calling ahead.

The street was empty. Paola set the case and bag on the sidewalk. Then she raised her arm and threw the phone into the middle of the street with all the strength she’d had in adolescence, the strength of when she used to play volleyball, when she’d skipped stones on the water’s surface, when she’d tried, unsuccessfully, to play tennis. The phone smashed on the pavement. It wasn’t an expensive model, the kind that’s harder to break. She saw it come apart, and then waited for the morning’s first bus to pass, which finished the job when it ran over the phone with the full weight of its tires. Only then did she start walking toward her mother’s house, which was nearby. The case had wheels and she needed air. The suffering woman was going to die

soon. She just had to wait for her departure before going home. She had to leave her alone.

Paola wouldn't have wanted to die next to an intruder, either.

THE REFRIGERATOR CEMETERY

It may seem that a tree is not a tree but a signpost to another realm, a spectral thing full of strange suggestion.
—THOMAS LIGOTTI, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*

We never had anything in particular against him, we didn't even dislike him, we never picked on him for fun; we just had that one moment of desperation. A cruel moment, I admit, but so un-premeditated that it's odd how disturbing it is to us now, more than thirty years later. I said as much to Daniel, in so many words, over the phone after we learned the news (our contact was mostly through chat and audio messages, but this decision demanded the immediacy of a conversation). He replied that I had always been in denial about our crime, and, as a result, without therapy or support of any kind, I had turned into an insensitive person, cold and disconnected from the past.

"Daniel, do you really want me to tell a therapist what we did?"

"No." Daniel sighed. He's very prone to sighing. "You could maybe say that you have a recurring nightmare, or that you fantasize about doing it to one of your kids."

I do fantasize about it with my only son, it's true. But Daniel, who accuses me of being glacial and emotionless, knows nothing of my nightmares, because I'm not interested in telling him. He was just a companion that day, and a cowardly one at that, because he never said, "Clarisa, no, don't close the door." Daniel doesn't know that I see Gustavo. On the playground, sitting on a swing, a dried-up mummy as he must be now, still wearing the striped shirt and blue shorts. He doesn't know that once, at the bank, a coworker came in crying, and we crowded around her asking, What's wrong what's wrong?, and she told us how she'd just gotten

back from vacation to find her cat dead. Yes, he had water and food, her catsitting friends hadn't abandoned him, maybe it was heat stroke. In any case, since she was late for work and didn't know what to do, she put him in the freezer. And now she was crying over her dear dead cat, but also because, she thought, it was going to be hard to get him unstuck from the ice, and she started remembering the morning frosts in Neuquén, where she was from, and how her father used to have to chisel clothes off the line, and the sound it made, the sound of something rigid and lifeless. Someone advised her to pour hot water on him first, and I couldn't take it and had to run to the bathroom to throw up and cry and stifle my screams with a wad of toilet paper in my mouth, a ball that I bit down on so long and so hard that hours later I was still finding bits of it in my teeth. Daniel doesn't know this because he still has the same stupid moral superiority as when he was a kid. Really, he should have been the victim that day, but, of course, we didn't know anyone was going to be a victim. It's easy to call what we did an accident, if you omit our actions afterward, all the lies, the silence.

—

The cemetery of refrigerators is still right next to the factory that produced them, which shut down in the '70s. I don't know—and I don't think anyone does—why they put all the refrigerators outside, on the vast outdoor expanse that was used as a parking lot for trucks, cars, and machinery. The factory, which belonged to the Fortune company (what irony), suffered from the same thing that made many factories close during that time: the de facto government's decision to discourage national production. Many of the workers and engineers had lived in the neighborhood. As far as I recall there were no suicides or anything like that, but people did move away, there was violence (of the domestic sort: protests were forbidden), and an icy acrimony that shadowed even the best suburban summer. The factory is nicknamed "the Candy Dish" because it has a dome on top, a circle crowned with a concrete sphere, which looks like a candy dish or giant sugar bowl. It's still standing because some human rights organizations

thought it had been a detention center, but now there was news—the reason for Daniel's call and for our decision—that after decades of investigation, the conclusion was that the factory had not been used as a clandestine detention center after all, but for weapons storage or something like that. Yes, the army had seized it, but not so they could hold prisoners there. So the real estate developers' wet dreams were coming true. The neighborhood was and still is too ugly to allow any thought of building apartments or a private housing complex (who would live there, in that desolation of abandoned factories and car dealerships and auto repair shops?), but it could well be a mall, which the area has never had. Or a parking garage: people always need to park. They were going to tear the whole thing down and, finally, dispose of the refrigerators, hundreds of useless white and beige appliances of all sizes, arranged in lines like a labyrinth of dead soldiers.

We had to go back and find the refrigerator we had locked Gustavo in. I remembered it in detail, but it would still be hard to find. The place was a sea of rust and overgrown grass, with the Candy Dish looming like a trap of poisoned sweets crowning the devastation.

—

What I was trying to say to Daniel and he didn't understand is that when there is a motive behind an action, then that action has a meaning that justifies it. There was no intention behind what happened to Gustavo. None. We always used to play in the refrigerator cemetery, but our games were not macabre; they were all about agility, so to speak. I used to love P.E., and the boys—all of them, not just Daniel and Gustavo—played soccer. So our games mostly involved climbing up on the refrigerators, jumping from one to another, screaming when we lost our balance, and trying not to hurt ourselves, because even back then a lot of the fridges were rusty from the rain, and none of us had our tetanus shots. The groups of kids who played there were random, and I could just as easily go with Gustavo and Daniel as with my sister and her older friends or with other neighbors. We didn't have

any parks or playgrounds within walking distance. There was one about ten miles away that our parents would take us to on occasion, with swing sets and even a public pool. These days people ask me, But how could there be no parks? Well, Buenos Aires is like that. It just grew. No one planned it out. No one said, Let's put a park right here so the kids have somewhere to play. Downtown, sure, but we didn't live downtown. Some kids had nice backyards with swings and slides that we could use as playgrounds, and sometimes we did, but the refrigerators still enticed us. They were endless. They were dangerous. We knew the stories people told, of course, and they did scare us. One legend in particular—because that's what it was, a legend: I've looked for it out of pure morbid curiosity, and there's no record of it happening. The story is terrible. Supposedly, a man went to the refrigerator cemetery carrying his six-year-old son, whose throat had been cut. Supposedly a guard found him, and the man said he was coming to bury his son there. The boy's body had been mutilated: apparently, the father had cut off all the fingers of his right hand and was carrying them in his jacket pocket.

A thing like that, even back then, would have been in the newspapers. I almost never talked about the refrigerator cemetery, but I had also asked my mom about that story. She was dying then, but just as lucid as always, in the Banking Polyclinic (my family has always worked in banks, a sort of well-paid misery in our country). She told me that story was a lie, she thought, but others weren't. And she fixed her dark eyes on me in that way she had, and then asked if I had ever played at the refrigerator cemetery.

"We all played there," I told her.

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't. You're delirious."

"You really know how to play dumb, just like your dad."

"It's called survival, Mom. Leave me alone."

So that story about the father and son wasn't true, but others were, just as my mother said that day, lying in bed with a swollen belly and scrawny legs, when she made it clear to me that she at least suspected something.

During the economic crisis, some people abandoned their pets inside the fridges. Why not just let them go? I wondered. Maybe to keep them from coming back. To be able to forget them. I know the refrigerator helped me forget, as if the memory of what we did was also left frozen in there, although of course those fridges don't get cold: they're more like coffins that way. But coffins are also just fancy boxes made to lock away what we need to forget in order to move on.

The story about people disappeared by the dictatorship was another myth; that had been proved years ago, when the investigators had opened all the refrigerators (or so they said). I remember how, when Daniel and I found out about that inspection, we talked for hours: logically, they should have found Gustavo. Did they make a mistake? Were they lying? Had someone else already taken Gustavo away? In any case, we didn't go that time to see if our playmate was there (I can't call him a friend, because we weren't friends). It was said that people got rid of aborted babies by hiding them in the refrigerators—more nonsense, because that job was taken care of by the toilet or whatever nurse or doctor or butcher you could find (at least, that's how it was before abortion was legal).

In reality, the refrigerator cemetery was mostly used by homeless people, who slept inside or between the appliances. Even back when we were kids, the place was always full of mattresses, bottles, cigarette butts. It was also used for Umbanda rituals: once, my sister came home scared and upset because she'd fallen onto a dead chicken. It's true that even today, kids will occasionally get stuck in refrigerators and die. They're hard to find at first, but it's common knowledge that fridges can be the final resting place for a four- or five-year-old kid who can't get the door back open and suffocates. But what happened to us was simple bad luck, because we weren't little kids. I researched it later. Refrigerator doors are magnetic now, precisely in order to avoid childhood deaths. Up until the '50s, they were manufactured with a heavy handle that latched, and in fact many more children died in them back then. But by the end of the '50s those kinds of fridges were outlawed, even in Argentina, where laws are passed more slowly. In any case, they weren't around by the '70s. Gustavo went into a

normal refrigerator that day, same as Daniel and same as me. And he didn't get locked in. Our situation was different.

—

Jumping from fridge to fridge, our poor, primitive parkour, got boring that day. Daniel, though he denies it, was the one who came up with the idea. "One of us will get into a fridge, and the others will time how long they can stay in without suffocating. I'm sure not much air can get in, or else how would they stay cold?" We weren't scared. After all, the others were right outside, and it was easy to open and close the door. We tested it, getting in and out. The refrigerators were perfect for our size, because they didn't have those dairy and vegetable drawers in them; either the fridges were unfinished or the drawers had been stolen.

I don't remember who went first; we spent a long time playing that game. It was hot. Whenever I think of my neighborhood and my childhood, I smell the mold and feel the rotten-meat swelter of that refrigerator. I was wearing jeans and colored bracelets. Gustavo was chewing gum. We couldn't stay inside the fridge for long. Maybe it was the excitement. A minute, at most. We used Daniel's watch to time ourselves. In the pool, the boys said, they could last longer. We always opened the door from inside once we couldn't breathe, and we'd be dripping with sweat. At the time, I didn't think about needing water. We never brought any with us. These days, everyone walks around with water bottles and talks about staying hydrated, but it wasn't like that when I was little. I don't remember people drinking plain water at all. It was always soda or Tang, a possibly toxic powdered juice that you mixed in a jug of water, and that had a faint taste of orange behind the dominant taste of plastic.

Gustavo was the most frustrated by his bad performance. He ran a lot on the soccer field and could always hold his breath a long time underwater. "Must be the heat," I said, partly because I could tell he was getting mad and partly because I was getting bored with the game, the lack of competition. It was his turn; he went in and Daniel started to time him. A

minute passed, then two, and then the door was kicked open. We were going to congratulate him when we realized that the kicks were not intentional, not driven by a half-desperate need for air. He was having a seizure. His face red and sweaty, his jaw clenched, blood flowing down his chin, his eyes rolled back in his head. “We have to get him out,” said Daniel. “He’s going to choke on his tongue.” But we didn’t move. We just watched him until the seizure was over. It lasted a long time. We didn’t know if Gustavo had epilepsy or some other problem. We didn’t know anything about him. He sometimes came to play hide-and-seek with us, he lived close to the church, his dad was a pasta maker. That was it. He was heavy when we pulled him out, and totally limp: there were no more electrical spasms in the body. We lay him on the ground, on the dirt and dry grass and cigarette butts. When death comes, there are unmistakable signs. I learned that too early, maybe, but it’s a useful thing to know. First there is the pallor, and then comes the smell, the piss and shit. I don’t know why I had always figured that death was clean, but the complete muscle relaxation, of course, provokes evacuation. Daniel thought it was a sign of life and started to shake Gustavo. To me, though, it seemed utterly definitive, such a letting go. And then there are the eyes, which don’t close. And the lips, which, long before rigor mortis sets in, start to retract, especially the upper one, freed from the effort of shielding the teeth.

I was the one who said, “Let’s put him back in the refrigerator.”

Daniel wanted to call the family, tell someone, parents, I don’t know.

“Don’t even think about it. We don’t know him. They’ll blame us. I don’t want trouble because of some kid I don’t even know.”

I remember those words, “I don’t want trouble.” And even so, I had so much trouble later on. The sound of footsteps in every kitchen, in every house, my own, rented ones, houses of friends, parents, boyfriends. The times I watched my son run toward the fridge with bare, wet feet and I saw death, pictured his baby teeth protruding with no upper lip. The dreams of my son with eyes rolled back, locked inside a box. The times I thought we could have revived Gustavo, and that in reality we had killed him when we put him back in. That *I* had killed him. My hands shaking when I received a

striped shirt as a birthday present. My hair falling out inexorably so I have to wear it very short. My ability to lie right up to the end, until I'm found out, and then the sobbing, the debacle.

—

We didn't say a word, Daniel and I. My mom mentioned that the pasta maker's son had disappeared, and my sister, who barely knew Gustavo (at least I don't think so, because we never talked about him), said that he'd been wanting to leave for a while, that his dad hit him or something. I was twelve years old. Gustavo, thirteen. I know it sounds strange in light of the exaggerated care kids get today, but back then, leaving home at thirteen was premature but not unheard-of. They looked for him, I do know that. No one asked me anything. That day, we walked home silently from the refrigerator cemetery, and before going in for dinner we went over our story: we'd been at the old train station, where kids also often played ever since the train service had stopped. And that was it. No one wanted to know any more than that about our summertime inanities. Hide-and-seek, tag, foot races—what else could we get up to?

There weren't even "Missing" posters with Gustavo's picture hung around the neighborhood. I saw cops and I guess they were looking for him, but in those days police were everywhere. I don't know if they went to the refrigerator cemetery because, I repeat, I didn't know anything about him, I don't know if he told his parents he was going there to play, I don't know if they considered it dangerous. Maybe they looked and didn't find anything, like the human rights people did. It's astonishing how he could just vanish, and how easy it was to leave him behind. I felt guilty and I still do, but it hits me suddenly, as if I'm being shocked, precisely, by a giant electrical appliance that brings back the spasms of the boy I let die. Most of the time it's a distant memory. Some sleepless nights at first, when he was a powerful memory and I lay waiting for his furious return, Gustavo alive and accusing me of murder, or dead and carrying me off to his prison to keep him company. But forgetting is much easier than people say, and the effects

of trauma can be hidden behind fictional migraines, tiredness, and bad moods. I remember how one time, playing a game with friends, someone asked, What's the worst thing you've done in your lives? Several people told of infidelities and various kinds of cruelty; one guy, pretty drunk, even admitted to hitting his daughter. I had to think about it. Not in order to come up with a lie, I really had to ponder what the worst of my worst was, until the memory, so distant and yet so close to the surface, took my breath away.

I told about how I'd stolen money at the bank from a rich old lady's account. It was true, but anyone would have done it.

—

Daniel and I had agreed to meet at the factory gate and sneak into the refrigerator cemetery early, at six in the morning. We figured there wouldn't be a watchman. I don't know if there really ever was; no one bothered us when we played there as kids, and obviously I never went back as an adult. I waited an hour for Daniel. I knew that coward wouldn't show up, chickenshit, asshole, the worst accomplice I could ask for. The entrance was open—or, rather, the chain that had been looped through the gates and secured with a padlock was so loose that I could fit through the opening with my backpack on. It helps that I'm thin; women often tell me how well I carry my forty-plus years, but of course, they don't know how hard it is for me to keep the fridge stocked.

That's a joke. I've always been thin.

The Candy Dish rose up into the morning sky with its poisoned confections and dark, broken windows, where dozens of fat pigeons peered down at me. What was that dome for? What machinery toiled in there? I didn't know because I'd erased this neighborhood from my life; I don't even know if it has changed, if it's better or worse than before, if it's dangerous. We moved away when I was fifteen. I switched schools, and we didn't have any neighbors who were also close friends, people we would come back to visit. It was almost like we were running away. The refrigerator factory and cemetery, though, were never part of the

neighborhood: they weren't far away, sure, but it was and still is a place left behind, a failure, perhaps a horror, something no one wants to think about.

—

The grass wasn't so overgrown, and in the human rights investigations they'd taken the usual care not to move anything. How can I remember the place so clearly? I only return in dreams, but my dreams are very vivid. And I always stop in front of the refrigerator where we left Gustavo. It's easy to get there because, though we would often go deep into the heart of those labyrinthine passages, that day we chose a fridge that was on a corner, near a small tree. That tree has grown large by now.

Before going any farther, I called Daniel. He wasn't going to get out of it that easy. He didn't answer. I left him a very long audio message. "I expected this from you, but still, what a traitor you are, what a traitor and what a pussy. What are you scared of, you fucking dinosaur?" (Daniel is my age, but, well, we're not exactly young.) "I never understood why I kept in touch with you all these years, you've always been boring, you're one of the lamest people I know, I only needed you for today and you didn't come through, and I expected this but I'm still disappointed." I sent it. He listened to it immediately—the check marks turned blue. That idiot didn't even know how to hide his presence online. I thought he would at least respond with a few words, but he didn't. I left another message, this time for my son, who'd been asleep when I'd left the house. I told him where breakfast was, his fruit, cereal, milk, and all the rest of the sustenance required by a healthy, rugby-playing teenager who is blissfully unaware that his mother is a murderer.

Really, my son can take care of himself, same as me. And his school is close by. I could spend almost the whole day on my search if I needed to, because he comes home around five in the afternoon: he has lunch in the cafeteria and after school he goes to practice.

I headed to the row where our refrigerator was, but I got it wrong. Over the years, a lot of trees had grown up: I'd have to open every fridge that was

close to any one of them. Maybe a dozen. I knew the refrigerator was white, and that helped, because there were more beige ones than I'd remembered. While I looked, I returned to that night when, among friends, we'd called up the worst thing we'd ever done. After that, as always happens, someone asked whether we had ever had any supernatural or terrifying experiences. I made up some nonsense about how hands touched me at night, the usual story about the cold hand moving under the sheets, brushing against you when there's no one there. All the stories were bad. But that asshole Daniel, whom I'd invited that day because he was depressed after a breakup, told one that did scare me. He'd spent a weekend in his childhood home with his dad, who was long since divorced and was a bit eccentric—okay, he was a lunatic, but of the functional and not the raving variety. The electricity in the neighborhood went out a lot, so his father always kept candles or flashlights in every room. One night, Daniel had to go to the bathroom. The house had two. A big one next to the master bedroom and a smaller one, which he used because it was closer. Cramped, with no shower, just a toilet and a sink. The power was out, but he went in with a flashlight. The place was compact and familiar. When he finished peeing and tried to leave, he couldn't find the door. It's not that the flashlight didn't work or he'd gotten lost in the dark: the door wasn't there. The little bathroom was now four concrete walls with no way out except a small window over the toilet. Daniel paced back and forth in the tiny room, patting the walls, carefully inspecting every inch, and nothing. The door had vanished. He screamed and screamed in the darkness, the flashlight on the floor, and in minutes, seconds, Daniel's dad opened the door—his hair a mess, not wearing his glasses, cursing because he'd cracked his knee on something—and said, "What the hell is wrong with you, Daniel?" His dad opened the door as if nothing was wrong—evidently, it had never disappeared on the outside. Or else his father's presence had brought it back to this world. Daniel lied and said he'd fallen asleep on the toilet and had a nightmare. His dad looked at him skeptically; Daniel remembered him shaking his head in the darkness and muttering, "What a dumbass this one is."

I half-expected that my phone would vibrate with a message right then, but it didn't. Daniel had decided not to participate. All that moral outrage, and he was willing to just allow the bulldozers to carry off the body of the boy we had let die. I planned to take whatever was left of Gustavo, if anything, ask him for forgiveness, and bury him. In secret, yes, but I wasn't going to sit by and calmly watch the demolition break his bones between metal and brick, as if he were one of those medieval children who were walled up into castles to bring good luck. In La Paz, a Bolivian friend had told me once, builders sometimes kidnapped one of the drunks who are always around on the streets downtown and stuck him in a foundation as a way to bless the building.

I heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming down one of the rows. A watchman? A bum? Gustavo, all grown up now, and waiting? That asshole Daniel, who'd finally shown up? I stopped right at the end of the grass path between the lines of refrigerators, and at the other end, as though facing off against me in a duel, a man stood motionless. His hair was down to his shoulders, dirty or maybe tousled by a wind that touched him alone, and he was wearing a sweater, wool on a hot March day, one of its sleeves so long it covered his hand, as if he were hiding something. He was barefoot. A bum, I concluded, and a threatening one, so I ran, I ran to another tree. He was already there; he'd gotten there before me. His face was grimy as if he'd been working on car engines, a face mottled by oil or stubble. And then my fear left me, along with my sweat. Just evaporated. His bare feet approached our refrigerator and kicked it open—he knew what I was looking for. And then the man left. He must live here, I guessed. He wasn't a spirit. He was a person with a purpose: someone who didn't want any more time wasted in that place where time passed with no solution.

I peered apprehensively inside the refrigerator. What it held was both better and worse than I'd imagined. Just clothes. No bones, no mummified corpse. Clothes. Sneakers. White Toppers, a kind you don't see anymore. I picked them up, but they were rotten and disintegrated in my hands. The rest of the clothing, the striped shirt and the shorts, I stashed in my

backpack. I headed toward the exit, expecting to see the man. He wasn't going to disappear.

What if it was Gustavo? He looked the right age. He would have found some clothes lying around (maybe the seizure had left him brain-damaged and he couldn't get home, or couldn't remember the way). Maybe he'd formed a community with other vagrants. I called out to him. "Gustavo!" Not a sound. Just a slight breeze through the trees, and the pigeons, which, at the sound of my voice, flew from their perches on the Candy Dish. Too late, I realized it was a mistake to shout there. My cries disturbed something tense. The smell of mold overwhelmed me: it came from the clothes and permeated the backpack, as if it were seeping through. I touched it, but it wasn't wet. I looked around desperately for the exit, not thinking about the bones, not thinking about whether Gustavo had dragged himself to a different refrigerator, if he'd been found in the investigations and secretly returned to his family…That must be it! And for some reason they'd kept it secret, or I didn't hear about it because I shut it all out, the case, the murder, the abandonment, the cemetery. The news might even have been on TV or social media and I hadn't seen it, what with raising a son, working at the bank, doing accounting in the evenings to make ends meet, the days passing without any memories of the trapped dead boy, except in those occasional jolts.

I couldn't find the gate. I already knew. Daniel's story hadn't been just a ghost story: it was true, it was a warning. That's why he hadn't come. He'd left me alone because he had always considered me the guilty one, even though he'd kept quiet too, even though he hadn't had the courage to say, No, we're not going to leave him alone, it doesn't matter if we don't know him, he is someone, he was someone.

I leaned against the fence, though now not only did it not have a gate or a chain or a lock, it was narrower and had barbed wire, like a jail, like a barracks. I sat down. Daniel had found his way out of that bathroom by screaming. I didn't want to yell out loud again, but I could do it mentally. Who should I call out to? Gustavo wasn't going to respond to his murderer. I was locked in.

Tears clouded my vision, but when I wiped them away, I saw the bare feet in front of me, the overgrown toenails, the old machine grease on the skin. I reached out my hand to the long-haired man, so he could help me up.

A LOCAL ARTIST

For Desi and Carlo

They liked to get into the car, roll up the windows, and sing. She was a bad driver; he was better but could be careless, and so every trip they took—always short—was an adventure. Even so, they left the city a lot, usually to visit small towns in the provinces. Ivana was afraid of very open spaces but not of isolated villages, and Lautaro didn't like to be around too many people, so a small town was a perfect compromise: it helped Ivana with her phobia of the pampa—she felt safe with Lautaro—and it got him away from the city and the growing paranoia. If they worked as a couple it was because they never blamed each other: if one of them caused a problem, they talked it through. Being complementary in their quirks and manias was reason enough to bear with the relationship to the very end, because usually it was the opposite. Besides, for now, they didn't have to bear with anything: they loved each other with complicit smiles and intertwined fingers, with a timely facility for fleeing parties together and staying in bed watching true-crime series that gave Ivana nightmares, but still, she enjoyed telling Lautaro about her bad dreams over breakfast the next day and hearing him say "You've got a problem" while he made coffee.

That long weekend, their chosen destination was General Moore. It was one of many towns whose train stations had shut down in the '90s, where the locals had taken initiatives to avoid becoming totally isolated, so life could go on there. Recent ventures to promote tourism included restored houses for rent with pools and huge yards, guided tours to an old estate where the mansion looked like a French château, bird-watching excursions,

and tours through the Scottish cemetery and the old train station, which now had an art gallery and sold artisan crafts and regional products. It looked very pretty and earnest online. True, the road that led there was made of dirt: you had to enter through the town of Zancudos, and from there it was fifteen kilometers of gravel to Moore.

Ivana was very excited, maybe disproportionately so. The photos of the place were beautiful. She had even said to Lautaro: I could live there. Although, she thought, it *was* pretty secluded, and the people had been isolated for a long time. And so many of them had moved away—there were only three hundred inhabitants left. The hope with the tourist ventures was also to bring new people to live there. Apparently, there was already a gringa designer who made "natural" jewelry (Wonder what that is, thought Ivana), who had bought and refurbished a house in Moore, and a painter, a "local artist," as they called him, who exhibited at the former train station; this artist liked to live far away from any city. The website didn't show any of his paintings, which Ivana found disappointing, but it did say that his arrival had fostered the hope that Moore could be saved. Most of the townspeople were old and still felt the loss of the train.

"I don't think they've been all that isolated," Lautaro reassured her. "It's not so far to the next town over, you can even walk, and these are country people—everyone has pickups."

"But they *are* traumatized about the train; the website even has a soundtrack of clattering train tracks."

"Well, it was a whole thing. A lot of those towns died."

"That's why I'm a little scared—like you say, they were dead."

"But this one wants to resist, to survive, apparently. I don't see anything depressing about it."

"You're right," said Ivana. She started to pack her bag, taking extra clothes just to be on the safe side, as always, and thinking about the house they had rented, with a park outside and a terrace crowded with chairs of different styles, eclectic and surprisingly modern.

They sang in the car with windows rolled all the way up to keep out the highway's bugs, which they both found disgusting. At the halfway point,

Lautaro said he needed to stretch his legs and take an aspirin for his headache. Ivana got out of the car in a blue jacket to protect against the slight chill. It was May: not yet winter, but the farther they got from the city, the drier and emptier the landscape, with the wind blowing through the crop fields, the trucks full of cows giving off the smell of dung, the desolate roadside grills and rest stops, the feeling that they were crossing an enormous country where getting lost or hiding away would be so easy, a feeling that was only accentuated by those low, gray clouds and the black line of the horizon announcing a storm. How silly to go to a house with a pool this time of year, Ivana thought, though she knew that Lautaro liked a morning swim in cold water.

They'd found a rest stop, the kind they both had known since childhood, concrete tables and chairs decorated with faded mosaics that once upon a time, maybe in the '60s, must have shone like jewels along the roadside, especially under the sunlight that filtered through the eucalyptus branches.

Closer to the car, almost at the shoulder, there was a large roadside shrine. Ivana went over to it, sure it would be to Gauchito Gil, but was surprised to see that it paid homage to the Difunta Correa. She had never particularly liked that saint, but found her image captivating. She didn't know much about her, just that she was from San Juan, in the northwest, a desert saint. Somehow she had reached Buenos Aires—she was in many of the houses in the neighborhood where Ivana grew up, under the doorbell or in a small altar beside the front doors. It was customary for old houses to have a Virgin, a Nativity scene, or the Difunta Correa near the entrance—for protection, Ivana thought.

"Why do people leave her bottles of water?" she asked Lautaro.

"Because she died of thirst in the desert," he said, after getting up to see who was in the shrine, a little surprised because the highways were dominated by the Virgin of Luján, protector of drivers, or by Gauchito. "That's not the weird thing," he went on. "The weird thing is that people ask her for houses. Maybe because she died out in the open, or because of the earthquake in San Juan that destroyed the whole city. The path to the San Juan shrine is lined with all kinds of miniature houses."

"Have you been?"

"No, I've seen pictures. Do you like her?"

"No," Ivana admitted. She went over to see the image from closer up and wrinkled her nose. "Especially not when they make her like this, sort of green so it's clear that she's dead and the baby is still alive, drinking rotten milk from her breast. That's even worse."

"Supposedly the milk wasn't rotten, that's the miracle. If it was rotten, the baby wouldn't have survived in the desert."

"Well, right," Ivana said with a laugh. "I meant that's what it looks like."

"And it is pretty gross," said Lautaro, taking a sip of his soda. "A dead woman whose child stays alive by nursing under the desert sun."

"What I never got is why she even tried to cross the desert. There was no way she wouldn't die, in the middle of the nineteenth century during a civil war."

Lautaro finished his soda and left the bottle beside the others, some also empty, that were piled in the shrine. "I don't know—I think she was running from something. But maybe I'm just making that up, because otherwise, you're right, it doesn't make much sense to go out looking for her husband in the desert with a baby."

Ivana stayed another minute, trying to fight back a sense of dread. She knelt down and, without moving her lips, asked the saint for a house. It was a strange impulse, but it made her feel good. They only had an apartment in the city, and if they were going to have kids, she wanted a house like the one they had rented in Moore, with room to run around and enjoy being in the sun. Was she asking for a baby, too? No, not yet; they did want to be a family with children, but it was too soon. Although, why not? she thought. Maybe asking for a house was asking for a home, kids and all.

They sat down to an improvised picnic of cheese and bread and maté. It wasn't raining but it was windy, so they didn't linger long. The bottles, made of glass or plastic, clinked against one another with a sound like bells, and sometimes, when one blew away, it looked like someone was walking through the overgrown grass.

—

The road between Zancudos and General Moore was of fine gravel: the locals had clearly fixed it up in order to welcome visitors. They had no trouble finding the town, which was four or five blocks long at most, nor the house they had rented, with expansive grounds all around it and a lot of trees in back. They rang the bell and out came the owner, a very thin woman in a flowered dress with a shawl over her shoulders. She hurried out to them, saying, “Come on in, kids, there’s plenty of room here, you can open the gate and park inside. You can leave it open, too, safety’s not a problem here, not like in Buenos Aires.” Ivana smiled, but she was sincerely tired of that oft-repeated idea held by people in small towns, always so convinced that city dwellers lived their lives cowering indoors and that stepping onto the sidewalk meant braving a shootout. And she was a fearful person herself.

The woman practically pushed them into the house. It was cool, with reddish ceramic floors, dark furniture, and an enormous yard with Paraguayan hammocks, a grill, and a pool that was smaller than they’d imagined. It had a plastic cover over it, probably to protect it from the rain. The woman gave them the keys and explained about how to shut the windows tight (“but just to keep out the rain and wind”). She had left them a salami and a block of regional cheese on a cutting board on the table, along with two knives, though there were plenty in the kitchen. Ivana and Lautaro ushered her out, all smiles, and then, alone and relieved, they went to the bedroom. They wanted to rest awhile before going out to eat or look around.

There were two bedrooms, one with a double bed and the other with a single. But there were no sheets anywhere. They checked in all the drawers and closets, to no avail. Towels, yes, and tablecloths and dish cloths of all kinds, but not a single sheet. “I’m going to call her,” said Lautaro, a little irked. “Maybe she forgot, but it’s weird.” He put the phone on speaker as he always did, to include Ivana. After he complained about the sheets in his

own style of circumvention and unnecessary apologies, there was silence. The woman said, in a serious voice, “We thought you would bring them.”

Lautaro frowned, and it was Ivana who spoke. “Why?” she asked, simply.

“Because of the pandemic.”

They explained—because it seemed like she needed it—that the pandemic was under control, and that even during the worst of it the hotel industry had never stopped providing sheets. That, in any case, you just washed them and they were fine. Now the woman sounded more perplexed than hurt, and Lautaro realized why: she didn’t have any fresh sheets, and she’d have to go to Zancudos to buy them. She asked them to give her a couple hours. “Well, we wanted to rest,” Ivana explained. And with a smile in her voice, the woman said: “You can screw without sheets, can’t you?” And she hung up.

Lautaro put the phone on the table. “This isn’t off to a great start,” he said. Then he went out to the patio and the pool. He lifted a corner of the plastic cover. Shaking his head, he shouted so Ivana could hear: “I figured. The water’s not clean. It’s not a swamp, but there’s no way I can swim in this. It’s dark, sort of green.”

Ivana got the urge to cry, as she did every time something went wrong on their trips. She felt guilty even when she hadn’t caused the situation, and neither was it hopeless. She never knew how to say something happy or lighthearted that would smooth over the setbacks: she got anxious and looked to Lautaro for consolation. She tried something new this time, and gave him a kiss when he came back inside. “She’s an old woman,” Ivana said. “Maybe she misunderstood some of the rules. They’re just starting to host people.”

“But the website doesn’t say anything about sheets,” insisted Lautaro, who hated lying on a bare mattress.

“I know. She’s going to fix it.”

They sat on the sofa to wait. The TV worked fine and even had two streaming services, and the Wi-Fi was decent enough, though not perfect. After watching an episode of a show lying half-asleep on the cushions, they

heard the doorbell ring. It was a younger woman, who introduced herself as Delfina. There was no need for her to tell them she was the old woman's daughter: they were identical. She handed them two sets of sheets and apologized, both for the lack of bedclothes and for her mother's absence. "Poor thing is pretty embarrassed," she said. "We're new at this."

"That's what I figured," said Ivana.

"Plus, she spends all day in front of the TV, watching all the fearmongering about the pandemic."

"But she didn't even ask us to wear masks!" said Ivana.

"She's never used them." The daughter smiled. "Old people misunderstand everything." Lautaro joined them and Ivana thought he was going to bring up the pool, but instead he just said thank you.

Delfina, who was solicitous like her mother, told them a few more things about the place. "If you don't like creepy-crawlies, don't go out to the patio without sneakers or flip-flops, because there are slugs everywhere." Ivana stuck her tongue out, feigning disgust. Delfina ignored her. "We could put poison out, but we have a lot of pets, cats, dogs, plus the birds…We don't want any of them to die. There are natural pesticides, but I'm sure they'll be gone soon anyway. It's the humidity. The invasion of *gatas peludas* was worse. There's almost nothing you can do against those. Camphor is the only thing that works, can you believe it? The painter told us about that, you all just have to see his work. We spent the whole summer under the camphor trees—luckily we have a few of them around here."

"Do those things bite?" Lautaro asked.

"Yes! They can give you dermatitis, too. But it goes away. They're not around now, so don't worry."

When Ivana closed the door, Lautaro wiped his glasses. "I don't know if I feel like swimming anyway. It's pretty cold."

"She scared you with the bugs," she said.

"Right, 'cause you just love them."

"You know I don't."

"The worst part is, I don't even know what a *gata peluda* is."

“I’m sure you’ve seen them. They’re furry caterpillars. My grandma’s patio was full of them,” Ivana remembered. “And I don’t know what I had on my skin, but they really came after me.”

“It’s because you’ve got beautiful skin,” Lautaro said, and kissed her wrist.

—

Delfina had also told them that since it was Thursday, the restaurant wouldn’t be open in the evening; they’d have to go into town to find one. Otherwise, the grocery had all the basics, including ready-made food that was very good. Or they could cook. And the next day they could buy meat from Don Julio, who had the best in the area, and use the barbecue. Driving the fifteen kilometers into town didn’t sound like a good plan, so Lautaro went out to the grocery while Ivana stayed to look around the house. The lighting was beautiful, with a lot of floor lamps arranged for reading. There was also a box full of board games, for long weekends with no entertainment besides TV or internet or visiting neighbors, Ivana figured. She walked around the grounds with her sneakers on. There were frogs, which she didn’t like, and some of them seemed to be in the pool, because she could hear croaking under the plastic. The flowers, also well lit, were beautiful: exultant hydrangeas, rain lilies and calla lilies, even a rosebush with yellow blooms. She did see a lot of slugs, and silvered trails of slime like very fine necklaces that someone had dropped. Her grandmother used to get rid of slugs with lemon juice, she remembered, but she didn’t dare. She was disgusted by how those wide, wet, wormy things would squirm, like sucking mouths, and she preferred not to think about it. Wearing her jacket, since by then it was dusk and the cold was coming on, she opened one of the hammocks so she could lie down. She’d never found hammocks very comfortable—it was hard to move on the fabric and she was always afraid of falling, even though the ground was close—but she was game. When she opened it she saw a spot that she thought was a slug at first, until she shone her phone light onto it. No. It was a dried bloodstain right where

a person's behind would be. Menstrual blood, she thought. An old stain, clearly, brown by now, but it took away any desire to try the hammock. She wondered how many of these small details that were unfit for guests this house was going to have.

When Lautaro came back, pale from the cold, she didn't mention the hammock. He brought homemade *milanesas napolitanas,* nice and warm, with delicious cheese and tomato sauce. They ate without turning on the TV, in silence, listening to what must have been nocturnal birds, the frogs so close by, and in the distance the sound of a swing, its iron chains straining under someone's weight.

Lautaro finished eating, wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin, and said, "I need to tell you something." Ivana was alarmed, not because she thought he wanted to talk to her about something serious and personal, but because she saw him go pale again.

"It might be nothing. But when I was coming back here I saw a girl on the swing set, the one we can hear. It must be someone else now, or maybe she went back. She waved at me and I waved, too, but then she came running down and walked with me. She was wearing shorts and a short-sleeved shirt, even though it's cold out now. I asked if she shouldn't put on a jacket and she said no, that she felt different. And that her life began at night. I asked how old she was, and she told me she was thirty-three."

In the solitude of that house and the small-town silence, beneath a clock that ticked a slow time and echoed against the high ceilings, Lautaro's story, which could have been just a child's practical joke, seemed threatening and phantasmagorical. "No way," said Ivana.

"And then," he went on, "the girl turned around and said, 'My dad's calling me, he's the painter, you have to meet him, he owns everything,' and she went running off. But I swear no one was there, no one was waiting for her. The street isn't dark at night—they really went for it with the streetlamps around here."

"Did she look like she was thirty-three?" Ivana wanted to know.

"No. But she didn't really look like a kid, either. I don't know how to explain it."

“Maybe she was a little person!”

“Don’t get creative. She was little, and she had a little girl’s features, but her expressions were grown-up. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just tired, maybe I got spooked and I’m imagining things.”

“Why would you be spooked?”

“I don’t know. She asked me if we had kids she could play with. I told her we didn’t and she made an offended face, but it was like she was acting. How does she know there are two of us and that we could have kids?”

“The whole town must know we’re here. Maybe she heard that we’re a couple, but you know how people are, they always expect couples to have kids. You know I’ll always believe you and I would never call you crazy. But maybe that’s all there is to it. And about the dad, maybe she was actually cold, and she lied as an excuse to leave.”

The silence was heavy, and Lautaro reached over to cut a slice of salami. “Let’s go to bed,” he said.

Ivana had already made it up: all the sheets were clean, and the set for the double bed was new; the owner’s daughter must have indeed run to town to buy them. Lautaro always read before going to sleep, and she lay with her back to him and her eyes toward the window, which had the blinds drawn but not all the way, because they liked to rise with the sun when they were on vacation. She’d left a patio light on and it shone into the room a little, but it didn’t bother Lautaro. She listened to him fall asleep and she breathed in deeply, the smell of eucalyptus and a slight citrus scent, a cat meowing but not in heat, not screaming like a baby, just playful, and again she thought, What a good place to live, it just needs a few little touch-ups, with a paved road and people a bit better prepared to receive visitors.

—

The dawn was delightful, and they found a basket waiting for them at the door. It held everything they would need for an intense breakfast: fruit, several cheeses, country-style bread, jams, prosciutto and cooked ham, still-warm eggs, milk. The gift came with a note of apology: “The pool cleaner

canceled, but we still have time if you want." Lautaro read it and smiled. Ivana could see his face relax behind his glasses. It was very early and there were blankets to put over themselves, so they ate outside at the patio table: scrambled eggs with cheese, coffee with milk, ham sandwiches with butter; they tried all three jams and decided the blueberry won. Lautaro's tongue turned purple and he said, "What a good idea to come here in the end—we're always so suspicious."

They put on some music and each did their own thing: Ivana practiced French on an app; Lautaro graded tests he needed to hand back. Before noon, they decided to go to Don Julio's first to buy meat for the evening's barbecue, drop it off in the fridge, and then go to the restaurant for lunch. Everything was within a few blocks, just meters away: it was like being in a sort of theme park of a Buenos Aires village, and it was hard to imagine how the town would accommodate more people if it was to be a tourist destination.

There was no church, which was quite strange. At least, it wasn't in the usual place: facing the plaza and the town hall; instead, there was a warehouse. An old tin Fanta sign had come loose and was banging in the wind with a rhythmic sound, like the pecking of a bird. It was going to rain a lot, but Ivana thought it would be nice to watch the drops fall on the yard and its flowers and feel safe on the sofa even if the Wi-Fi cut out, as surely happened here during storms. Nice and warm and safe under the blankets. Again, she was overcome by the desire to live in a place like that, but then, when she caught a glimpse of the pampa through the houses and trees, out past the end of the streets, it looked like a vast carpet of yellow grass and its immensity terrified her. The pampa was never-ending, she felt sure, and there were only crazy, solitary people walking through the fields there, souls of the murdered, souls of people who had killed themselves when the trains stopped coming, of those who got lost out there where they couldn't be found, of the massacred Indigenous people.

They went into the restaurant and sat down by the window: it was a good spot considering that the place, which had only six or seven tables, was full. The waiter, practically a teenager, recited the day's dishes from

memory: potato pie, eggplant au gratin with mashed potatoes, or steak with fries. The variety wasn't what you would expect in a small town like that, but since they'd had such a substantial breakfast, they opted for the eggplant. No wine, just water, so they would be wide-awake enough to go to the old station and see the stands and the cultural center before the storm started.

The waiter asked what they thought of the town, and Lautaro said, "You're the expert—you tell us."

"I love it," he said. "It's a shame so many people left. What happened with the trains was a real crime. Before the station closed my friends and I used to walk along the tracks from Zancudos, and we'd do that dumb thing where you put coins down so the wheels flatten them."

Lautaro said, "Sure," and the waiter told them the eggplant would be out soon, and that it was very good. When he left, Lautaro leaned over and murmured to Ivana, "I'll tell you why later, but that was weird." The eggplant really was good, though very hot, and the mashed potatoes were delicious, cooked to perfection with just the right amount of milk. They paid in cash because of course the restaurant didn't take credit cards, and they asked for directions to the station even though they knew the way, just to be friendly. The waiter sent them off with instructions and told them, "Don't miss the paintings—you'll be impressed. The jewelry lady isn't showing today, unfortunately. She's out of town for a few days."

On the way, Lautaro started to talk, nervous, obsessively adjusting his glasses and cardigan. "It's impossible that the waiter was here when the train stopped," he said. "That was in '97. Did you see him? That kid wasn't even born in '97."

"Are you sure the train stopped running that year?"

"It's on the damn website—don't act like I'm crazy. We never call each other crazy, though you basically did last night with that little girl; you say you never call me crazy and here you are doing it now, but none of this is neurosis. Let's say the kid was just showing off or overacting. In any case, he lied, and that's weird."

“It’s weird, yes,” Ivana agreed, and she thought about the bloodstained hammock. “Let’s take a look at the gallery, and we can go home tomorrow, if you want.” Lautaro paused to light a cigarette, which was hard with the wind. There was no one else on the street.

“You’re right,” he said once he’d managed to take a drag. “I’m a little tense. Let’s wait and see if it passes.” Ivana didn’t answer. She wasn’t feeling anxious, but she paid attention to the details that Lautaro noticed because, it was true, she never called him crazy and she didn’t think he was. She, too, tended to get the creeps only when there was good reason. But she didn’t have them here. Except with the bloodstain that looked like a slug.

The station still had all its old details, and more recent ones, too. Dark green wooden benches, tiles, white walls. Each platform had an exhibition, plus some larger objects outside in the courtyard. An old foosball table, a car with a stuffed horse. The horse was pretty ugly—it looked like a real horse that had been preserved. Remains of the station, flags, objects that they didn’t recognize and couldn’t put a name to. There was no one to give them any explanation, no guided tour. Inside was more amenable. Most of the artisans were older women, except for one man who worked with leather and a teenage girl with portraits of Taylor Swift displayed on her table. Ivana smiled at her. The girl had made them herself, and she handed one to Ivana that depicted Taylor dressed in midnight blue with a song lyric: “If I’m dead to you, why are you at the wake?” A little morbid, Ivana thought, but teenagers are like that. The handicrafts were predictable. Crochet, maté gourds of various sizes, change purses, silver pillboxes. The antiques table was more interesting. There were some fantastic Limoges dish sets, complete. Several of them. Who knows what family had left those behind. Crystal lamps and a variety of beautiful stained glass objects. That area led into what was supposedly an attempt at a cultural center. It had a few overstuffed bookshelves with books by regional authors for sale, mostly poetry, illustration, and comics, and notices with the phone numbers of drawing or guitar teachers. A girl outside was playing the guitar, a strange folk song, or at least one Ivana didn’t know. Suddenly she switched to bossa nova, and Lautaro shot her an appreciative look. Taylor, bossa nova

—in the end the place had more than the standard offerings of leather and milk and meat.

Across from the library were the paintings: the ones on the right were typical scenes of rural guitar players or the endless, empty pampa at sunset. But the other side stunned them, made Lautaro murmur "Shit" and get out his camera. Ivana pulled out her phone, too. There were three paintings, all of them large. The first showed a violet-colored woman with a sort of climbing vine growing all around her body. She was holding a Greek column that seemed to rise up out of a pond. Behind her, in the distance, there was a small coliseum in flames, but the really startling sight was the crowd of small beings that surrounded her, sunk beneath the water. Bald, with faces that were incomplete, erased, pale, some reaching their hands toward the goddess, those farther away shrouded in a haze that could be coming from the fire. It was well done, but it seemed like it had two creators: one who had painted the sort of Pre-Raphaelite fantasy of the goddess rising from the waters, and another who'd painted the concentric circle of emaciated men in a comic-book style.

The second painting had at its center a long-haired woman or man, impossible to tell, who was wrapped in sheets or a shroud on a bed in a dark room. The head and foot of the bed were shaped like gravestones, two rectangles with rounded edges. The pale, violet-colored man-woman was accompanied by four man-beings: One emerged from the gravestone at the top of the bed, which was covered in symbols, and held the prostrate figure's head. Another came from under the bed, wrapped in flames. The most shocking one had his mouth open in a scream of horror and pleasure: he held the body by the hip with one hand and seemed to be having sex with it, but the man or woman in the shroud wasn't responding. The figure seemed lifeless. The man in ecstasy had his free hand in the hand of the fourth man, who seemed about to join the orgy. The four men were golden. The painting was called *The Demons* and was dated 2014, but it wasn't signed by the artist.

The final painting was a sky-blue horse-woman rearing up on her hind legs, with the head of a virgin or a medieval damsel and a tail that morphed

from a horse's into a giant black scorpion's. The apparition, with ocher-colored wings, was emerging from a eucalyptus forest painted in blue. Like Odilon Redon on acid. It was beautiful, as well. The colors exuded an intensity that seemed to light up the whole room. They were pulled from their astonishment at the paintings by the owner of their rented house. She was standing just behind them.

"Interesting, aren't they?"

"I don't know what to say," murmured Lautaro. "Not what I expected."

"This town has its surprises," she laughed. Ivana tried to remember the woman's name and couldn't. She wanted to keep looking at the paintings. She felt like something was creeping up her legs and she had an urge to vomit, but it lasted for only a second. Sometimes that could happen to people when they looked at impressive artworks. The woman noticed, and linked arms with her. "You want to meet the painter? The local artist? He's not from here, but he likes for us to call him that."

Ivana waited for Lautaro's reply and he shrugged, though his eyes held a "No." She tried to interpret why he felt such aversion.

"They want to come!" the woman said, and others came over, all old women, all wearing little pastel jackets and ankle boots. Ivana closed her eyes and thought she should go along with it, that it would just mean meeting some old coot and that was it, they could leave the next day—if it stopped raining, that is, because it was pouring down now, a curtain of water that made it impossible to see. The women pushed them out into the street and opened umbrellas. "It's just around the corner here, then we'll bring you back in the car, because otherwise you'll get soaked in the puddles," one of them said. "I'll send a message for them to set out pastries and maté." Lautaro was pulled away from Ivana. He said something to her in a low voice, something like "Let's go back, we can tell them we'll visit another day," but then one of the old women, who was very tall, blocked her view of him.

Ivana saw people running in the rain to keep things from getting wet: someone was moving the disgusting stuffed horse out of the storm, and now the straw sticking out of it really looked to her like dried innards. Others

were moving the foosball table, but what did it matter—it was already so rusted, what difference would a little more water make?

The local artist's house was fifty meters from the station. The old women's shouts and laughter were unbearably loud as they entered. Ivana wanted to talk to Lautaro but couldn't find his eyes, and she wanted to touch him but couldn't reach him; there was always an old lady or an umbrella between them. She cried out to him, and he said:

"Let's go get the car!"

"What's going on?" she asked. "Is something wrong?"

The spell was broken when one of the three old women closed the door. It made a disproportionate sound, as if it were made of metal. Like a bank vault. And inside, the voices sounded like they were in a church, like the very church that the town was missing. Ivana heard Lautaro crying and saying, "You didn't listen, you didn't listen to me." Ivana's eyes finally met his, which were unfocused.

"Some maté, or a nice cup of tea? We have some lovely herbal teas." But no one brought anything or went to the kitchen. They were only words. The masquerade was ending and the signs were in the air, in the echo of the walls, which seemed to be growing, in the stench of dung, which had nothing to do with any cows, in the old ladies' exaggerated makeup, which was starting to run in the rain and leave their features bare.

"I don't feel good, I want to go," said Ivana as a last resort, and Lautaro, desperate, echoed her request: "Please, the food didn't sit well with us, we need to leave."

"Oh, you think it's all so easy, don't you? That's how young people are. Everything solved by leaving. Why did you come inside?"

The old women parted and revealed a fourth elderly woman, this one with long black hair, whom Ivana immediately recognized as the one from the bed in the orgiastic painting. She was sitting on a pile of straw and sheets—ah, so this is where the sheets went—like in a manger scene. She wore a long white dress made of cotton, like an old-fashioned nightgown, but with sleeves decorated in gold filigree. Behind her there was only darkness, as if the room ended at a black wall or else never ended at all.

There was so little light it was impossible to tell if it was the blackness of open space or maybe a velvet curtain. The windows were closed and must have been very thick, because there was no sound from the terrible rain outside. The woman with long black hair had her legs crossed: she was very thin and seemed flexible. She opened her nightgown and took from the straw what at first looked like a pink animal, a worm of some sort, but very large: she had to use both hands to pick it up. Lautaro tried to run and they let him get as far as the door, but he couldn't open it. The old women gazed at the worm with their hands pressed together, as if admiring a beloved child performing a skillful pirouette. In the dim light, Ivana saw that the worm wasn't a worm: it had some recognizable shapes. There was a head and some slack legs that looked like tentacles but ended in human feet, with toenails. The mouth that started sucking at the nipple was also very real.

"Sometimes," said the house owner, "when you're abandoned, as we were by the train, someone comes to help you. Someone, something, doesn't matter! He came! When we were left alone, she got pregnant and the child never grew, poor thing, but he can think—he has an exceptional mind."

"He's very talented—you saw his paintings. Our artist. We have many more paintings; he never stops working," said another old lady. "Other things came to town with him. Some of them not so good. Like the ones in the pool. You didn't take a good look at the pool, did you? They are good at hiding, it's true."

Ivana sat down in one of the chairs and looked at the old women and then at Lautaro, who was still screaming and trying to open the door.

"What do you want from us? Please. We didn't do anything," she murmured.

"Us? Nothing. You all wanted to meet him. We're doing just fine, we've learned how to be alone, we got used to seeing our children and young people leave. But then he came along, and he brought his friends with him. You saw some of them—they're very young. But he doesn't grow. Maybe it takes them a long time to grow up."

"No one returns to towns with abandoned stations," said the mother. She had a tender, even warm voice. She took the worm from her breast and spoke to Ivana: "The towns just die. Isn't it wrong to let something die? That's what they did to us, until I got pregnant. He's not a worm like you must think. He has a name. It's Yolk. He told me himself. He saved me: he came when I was dying. I've fed him for twenty years now. He doesn't ask for anything, except to draw. Though you can't imagine how hard it is to find his paints for him…"

"Oils!" said the owner of their rented house.

"That's right. Here, they abandon you and no one even comes around on a bike to bring you things from the city." She said the word "city" with such hatred that Lautaro started trying the door again, and the house's owner told him: "Four-Eyes, don't be stupid, you're making me feel bad. We're going to let you leave when we're ready. I don't know why you followed her if you didn't want to come: she was the one who was interested, and it's her that we want." She turned toward the other women. "Yolk is finished feeding. Bring his chair. And let the girl get a good look at him—she seems less dumb than this other one."

The black-haired mother placed the human worm Yolk in one of the other old ladies' arms, and she in turn settled him into a high-backed wheelchair. She fastened some straps to keep him from falling over and rolled him to Ivana on wheels that squealed appallingly in that house with its crypt-like echo. Ivana realized what was wrong with his body. He was a person—it was easier to tell now that he was in the chair—but he didn't have bones. None. When he tried to talk, the voice produced by that body with no muscular tone was guttural but thin, as if he were making an enormous effort, contracting as much as possible to summon up a tiny voice. Ivana didn't understand a word he said, but the old women clapped. And Yolk tried to get out of the straps.

"He likes the girl," the mother said. "He's been wanting a girl for a while now."

"Don't worry, he's not going to rape you. He couldn't," said the homeowner. "He wants you, but so you can care for him. We've known that

he changes his custodian. Yolk is a big boy now, after all, and she's grown old." She pointed to the black-haired woman. "You should see him hold the brushes with his mouth. You should just see it! It's marvelous. I wanted to put a video on YouTube but his mother wouldn't let me. It's a secret, she says, but it's wonderful to see him overcome such difficulty to paint. Do you remember the painters without hands? Probably not, you're too young. They used to send out postcards. We never got them here, but they came to Zancudos. At Christmas. A few too many Picasso doves for my taste. Well, Yolk is better than all those handless painters—he paints from his chair, and it's marvelous."

Ivana didn't know who the handless painters were, but she remembered one night when she and Lautaro had been going home on the ring road from some friends' country house, and he'd told her about the Saint Francis Care Facility. It was a special home: there were mentally ill people who'd been abandoned, but they also took in children with deformities or delays that in many cases were compatible with social life, except the kids didn't have families, or their families were in vulnerable situations. Microcephaly, hydrocephalus, mental disability. When he was little and lived nearby, Lautaro explained, people told of one inmate who was like a ball of meat. He ate and shat, but that was it. He was a cyclops, just one eye. Ivana had searched online and found that he was in a part of the hospital restricted to doctors and assistants. She showed Lautaro, she remembered—it had already become an urban legend. That night had also been cold and rainy. Lautaro had said, "I used to be so scared of him; I dreamed the meatball chased me around my house."

The old women unbuckled Yolk, who spilled onto the floor. Ivana started to laugh, with a crazy laugh—he looked like one of those sticky toys that were everywhere for a few months, until some alarm went off in the media warning people they were toxic.

"Oh, open the door for Four-Eyes and let them both out, we're done here anyway," said the homeowner. "I don't know why they want to meet him if they're going to act like this."

Yolk shouted something, and somehow managed to sit up and put his head on Ivana's lap. He was covered in sores, and she felt how the blood, pus, and slimy drool soaked through her skirt. The slugs, she thought, I have to throw one of those teas on him, tea with lemon. Lautaro opened the door and it was night outside: How long were we in here? thought Ivana, and she leapt to her feet to get the worm's head out of her lap. But Yolk was not helpless—he followed her outside, crawling fast. Once she was in the street, she let the water drench her and wash Yolk's secretions from her lap, from her hands: they were sticky with blood, though she didn't remember having touched him, or touching her bloodstained skirt. She shouted Lautaro's name, but the curtain of rain was impenetrable, and she couldn't see or feel anything except the drops on her body and face. She intuited some movement, maybe a cry from Lautaro, his feet dragging. But maybe she was imagining it. There wasn't a single light now in that town that had been so well lit before, and her eyes were full of water. And after that real or imagined struggle, there was no other sound but the rain on the trees and, far away, the whistle of a train, its thundering locomotive screeching over the rails.

BLACK EYES

In the end, every last of us must glimpse the Minotaur in the maze.
—RICHARD GAVIN, *At Fear's Altar*

Though I didn't count them, I could swear that there were more every night. During the day, nearly all of the homeless people in and around Plaza del Congreso vanished: they worked as street vendors or went from one soup kitchen to another; some looked for work or a hotel; others wanted to stretch their legs, buy drugs, get their hands on some wine. But at night, when we came around with dinner, blankets, and some camping showers for anyone who wanted them (they weren't very well received in winter, though the water was nice and warm), they all came back, and were joined by others who were wandering the downtown. Certainly over a hundred, because we always brought a hundred and fifty meals and they ran out, though some people would ask for two because they'd spent the whole day sleeping and hadn't eaten at all. Sometimes we brought mattresses, just a few, always donated, and they found owners immediately, because most people slept on piles of clothes, or they discovered that, in spite of promises, in spite of the supposed camaraderie and all their best efforts, someone always stole them.

Once, with my coworker Julián, who works on the north side now, I witnessed a fight over the theft of a mattress. When the guy who'd been robbed found it, he pulled a Tramontina knife, and before we could stop him he'd stabbed the thief three times in the stomach. There was blood everywhere, and the people who tried to help slipped in it: the knife had hit an artery. The man, who was very young, didn't die from that, but from an infection: he had HIV and wasn't on medication. The other guy disappeared: the police took a long time responding and he got away. I

almost decided not to go back after that day, but Julián gave me good advice. “Don’t even take a week off,” he told me, “because it’ll only wind you up and the shit becomes impossible to swallow, like a peach pit. Come back tomorrow or whenever you have a shift, and work it like always.” He was right. I had a shift two days later, and when I came back I wasn’t afraid or any more nervous than usual: after all, I didn’t steal mattresses.

Now my most regular partner was Flora, a short girl from Burzaco who always wore pastels; she was very pretty and had something sad about her smile. I liked her, but I got along better with the driver, who went by Chapa and was less crazy than his nickname implied, and who helped out with remarkable enthusiasm. People liked him, too—he was friendly without overdoing it, and he was really sweet. He knew which kids you could pat on the head and which ones needed their dinner urgently because they were about to faint from hunger. If he saw a woman was pregnant, he would take the couple aside and give advice to the guy. Flora and I didn’t do that; we were more concerned about making sure the women went to checkups or would tell us if they didn’t want the baby, now that abortion was legal though still difficult to access for a woman who wasn’t just poor but lived on the street. We rarely thought about the fathers or partners.

I don’t know how other units worked, but we considered our method to be the least cruel: long lines seemed too prison-like, and fights tended to break out if someone cut or didn’t want to hold people’s places for them. So we passed out the food ourselves: we brought the meals to them, usually hot ones, and special meals for the kids. When I started working, we used to have a food pantry and everyone brought their own plate, because there was no other option. Now that an NGO was paying for everything, the portions were abundant. (It was hard to switch from working for the government, but there’d been so much inefficiency that I, for one, would rather swallow the occasional corrupt practice from my bosses.)

Handing the meals out individually not only avoided the humiliating choreography of need but also allowed us to get to know people. And though there were only three of us (with the government there’d been many more, but, of course, they’d been volunteers; we were all paid now), there

was something about spending a lot of time with the people that helped us. The government still gave us blankets and managed the mattress donations: it was something. And at least they had reopened the shelters after the pandemic, which was the most you could ask for, really, with everything teetering on the brink of collapse.

The night I saw the boys started out normal enough. It wasn't cold: the shower got some use even though we ran out of soap and people ended up bathing with dish detergent. We checked on some babies with colds and gave advice about whether to go to the hospital or not. Pepo, who was diabetic, had a leg that was pretty bad—I thought amputation would only be a matter of time. We changed Liliana's mattress because she had gotten drunk and pissed herself again. Chapa suggested that we cover it with a plastic sheet stapled on: better to shell out for that than ask her to stop drinking, which would never happen. As always, we said no when people asked for cigarettes or lighters. If they started a fire, we'd be at fault. Flora handed out water bottles, and there was also hot chocolate that night, which people welcomed. I passed out some books that had been requested. But it wasn't all sweetness and good, poor folks: there were a couple of sons of bitches who raped or assaulted people during the night, and also some really scary witches who, I knew, worked spells behind the palm tree. Then there were the mentally disturbed people you could understand and feel sorry for, but who, in addition to cutting themselves, usually on the arms, would often start fights that ended in injuries. That night there was a new girl, practically a teenager—she must have been twenty—who only by some miracle had escaped losing an eye after fighting off one of those violent hoodlums. Sometimes I wondered if we should even be giving them food—they could freeze to death for all I cared. Flora was excessively compassionate: it was her training as a militant community organizer. She wasn't just a social worker, like me, who came from a family of nurses.

The shower had gotten sticky with muck and Chapa waved his hand under his nose to let us know that the stench level was high. I don't know why they didn't use the city's shelters, especially the people who were newer to this life (the more seasoned ones didn't care about being dirty).

There were a lot of stories told about those places. Some violent, others paranormal. People said that one of the shelters used to be a barracks. Flora, who knew the city well even though she lived in the suburbs, said that no, the ex-barracks was nearby but it wasn't the building that was now used as a shelter. The morgue, though, was right beside it. Many people talked about hands touching them at night. What was a phantom hand, I wondered, compared to the dangers of real life out in the elements? But I didn't say anything. I had my fears, too. Just like Flora had her silences and sadness, which we respected. I would see her crying, or hear her, and sometimes it was from pity or compassion but other times she cried because she was sensitive and sorrowful. Chapa had told me she lived in Burzaco so she could be with her brother while he went through treatment. Chemotherapy, Chapa said while he made the sign of the cross, and I elbowed him in the ribs for being an idiot, as if disease could be avoided with prayer. He didn't know much about her parents, just that they were dead. "That's all there is to know, you brute," I said into his ear. "They're orphans and the brother is dying—of course she's sensitive. I'm surprised she can work here, it's depressing."

"Flora is a good person, not a shrew like you."

I laughed. "You mean a hot-ass shrew," I said, and I moved so my tits were in his face.

I was into Chapa, to tell the truth. I didn't know if it was mutual, but I was absolutely sure that he was one of those macho men who, if a woman put the moves on him, would be incapable of saying no.

As always, we made the rounds with black trash bags so people could throw out plates, plastic cutlery, and anything else they needed to get rid of, usually diapers and sanitary pads. Almost nothing else: saving things was fundamental, and everything had a use. We didn't hand out syringes or diapers or personal hygiene items: those could also cause fights. If a different NGO provided them it was another matter, and anyway, the hospital would give them many of those things, including condoms (which no one used, anyway). Flora insisted that we add those items: maybe there

was a way of doing it according to some logic of small quantities that wouldn't encourage pillaging.

We loaded up the bags, closed the shower, and checked the leftover meals: only six. The population was still around a hundred and fifty, but the fact that the number held firm was no reassurance—it was a plateau that could only rise. Chapa asked if he could light a cigarette, and I said yes. We were almost ready. Flora started rolling a joint, and I zipped up my jacket and let down my hair, having already cleaned my hands with alcohol. I felt cold and a little strange. I thought I'd seen something approaching the van, but figured it must be dogs.

When Chapa started the van, I heard knocking on the rear window. I looked back, but didn't open up. I knew from experience that those minutes before departure could be complicated. Someone demanding a second meal, or who had arrived too late to get one and was angry, or who wanted us to drive them somewhere, or who was enraged because they had health problems and we hadn't brought the right food. Or worse things. A robbery, someone going nuts, late-night violence. Occasionally, if it was just someone arriving at the last minute, we'd give them their meal, but I had to make sure first.

There were two children outside. At first I was relieved, but then I looked at them more closely, and the fear I felt was a thing I couldn't explain later, or even then, and I can't understand it now. They were *evil.* They were Evil itself. There are no words for the feeling they gave me. I am not superstitious. I know weird things happen and a lot of people believe they're supernatural, but that's not me; I remain skeptical. That night, however, my neck instantly went stiff and I understood what people mean when they talk about goosebumps or shivers of terror, the hairs on my neck standing on end. They were two boys, around six or eight years old. One had dark hair, the other's was copper-colored; both had neat side parts smoothed with hair oil or gel, like olden-day children. And their clothes were off, too. I caught a glimpse of moccasins and white shirts under brown overalls, like lederhosen. It didn't look like they were in costume; they just looked wrong. From another era. But the boys weren't ghostly. Flesh and

blood, skin that I could see in detail under the streetlights, the taller one dark, the smaller one pale. They didn't float and they weren't transparent, they were just too still. They didn't look like brothers.

Though my entire body was trembling and my gut screamed at me not to do it, I rolled down the window. I had no doubt, but rationally I knew I could be wrong. I wanted to be wrong.

The darker one said:

"Ma'am, would you be so kind as to let us into your vehicle? Can you open the door for us?"

What kind of eight-year-old kid who lives on the street speaks so politely?

"Should we go?" Chapa called back to me.

"Gimme a second," I replied. Flora was still sitting with her joint, rolling it slowly beside one of the bags of trash. She wasn't paying me any attention.

"Do you want food? I'll give you some."

They looked at each other in surprise, as if the trick wasn't working. I was shaking so much my teeth were chattering. Flora asked what was wrong and I told her I was cold, and to hand me two meals.

"Please, ma'am, let us into the car," said the smaller boy—I don't know if I should call him younger.

Flora asked if the people I was talking to were children. I didn't answer because I couldn't talk very well, and also because I didn't know. To say my mouth was dry would be stupid. It was no longer a mouth. It was a desert at high noon. I had trouble breathing because I was inhaling so fast, hyperventilating. I had never felt like that before, not even when my ex had threatened me with a knife at a country house when the two of us were alone. I could defend myself from that ex. I could talk to him, I could run. These *kids,* I knew with utterly clear certainty, were going to bring something worse than death if we let them in.

"Why do you want to get in?" I managed to say, as if in a trance. Flora got up to see.

"It's two little boys, let them in."

“Let me handle this,” I growled. And she, with all her good intentions, said, “They’re just kids!”

Then the bigger one raised his head and I saw his eyes. They were black. No whites, no pupils, no iris—they were shiny and made of obsidian. As if they had practiced, the other one looked up, too. He had two black hollows where his eyes should be, but the holes reflected the light and they reflected me.

Flora was beside me. When they saw her, they lowered their heads again, like two well-mannered little boys.

“We’re not armed. We cannot come in unless you open the door. Don’t make it difficult.”

When I saw Flora move to open the door, I shoved her savagely. Her head hit the metal of the van and she shouted, “What’s your problem?” along with a string of curses. She recovered quickly, and when I rolled up the window in one of boy’s faces, I heard him say in a flat, uninflected voice:

“Our mother will come and get us later. This will be over soon.”

“Go. Floor it!” I shouted at Chapa.

He did. He heard the horror in my voice, which sounded different to me, too, harsh and off-key.

“Those were little boys! You’re crazy!” Flora yelled at me.

I grabbed her by her little sky-blue flowered shirt, the blouse of a dumbass good person.

“Their eyes were dead, girl. Dead.”

“Oh, please.”

“Fuck you and your oh please!” I shouted, and started crying like a baby.

Chapa warned us:

“Someone’s running behind us, I think.”

Flora and I looked back. Just to maintain her moral superiority, Flora said they looked like dogs. But it was the kids. On all fours. Only they didn’t run like primates: they were rapid spiders, skinny asses in the air, nothing human about their movements. Chapa looked back before speeding up along Callao, and agreed:

"What the fuck are those things?"

"Sweet children, according to our little friend here."

Flora started crying and Chapa, scared, told her that no kid could run as fast as a van. Not even one who was high on meth.

"Then they must be dogs," she said.

My heart was pounding so hard I was dizzy and Chapa's speed didn't help, but if I fainted it would only be that, a fainting spell, and not whatever those little alien brats had held in their hands and their eyes. This will be over soon, they'd said. Chapa turned down Córdoba, where the main office of our NGO was, and in spite of Flora's grumbling, he didn't let us get out until he'd parked the van in the garage and closed the door. I had pissed myself, and my whole body was covered in sweat. Flora, determined, her temple bloodied, declared that we had to go talk to the supervisor right now.

He was in the office, our supervisor—he always waited until we got back. I don't know if that meant he was a good person. He ushered us in as soon as he saw Flora's blood and my trembling, my pallor, my own blood from biting my lip so much, the piss stain on my jeans. He must have thought we'd been attacked, and he wasn't wrong. Flora told her version of the story, and then there was silence, or more like a buzzing. I heard something scraping at the garage door, and for the first time since I was a kid I started to pray.

"Look, Juan Pablo," I said to the supervisor, who was a lawyer but always insisted we call him by his first name. "The only thing I know is that if those 'kids,' as Flora calls them, had gotten in the van, they would have killed us. Or worse. Period. They had black eyes. Black like an insect's, not just dark eyes, get it?"

Juan Pablo said it sounded like a cheap horror flick. Or like I was very stressed out.

"If only," I said, and accepted a tissue for my lip.

He crossed his arms and said he wasn't going to fire me. That my work had always been irreproachable. That I should rest. He called Chapa in and asked what he had seen, and Chapa, loyal, good guy that he is, described those spider children.

"They weren't dogs, chief. I swear. They were wearing moccasins, I saw."

The "chief" decided we were imagining things and gave all three of us leave until the next week. Flora made a show of bravery and got in her car to head back south, not looking at us, offended because we had abandoned two poor defenseless children to their fate. I held on to Chapa's arm and told him I couldn't spend the night alone, that I had an extra bed at my apartment for when friends or my mom came to visit, and could he please stay with me because I didn't know if I'd be capable of turning the boys away if they came knocking at my door. Because there'd been something hypnotic about them, too. They knew that, ultimately, death meant rest. Chapa agreed to come over. Like me, he looked both ways on Avenida Córdoba to see if the black-eyed boys were there. He called a car on an app even though it was more expensive than the bus or, obviously, walking: I lived nearby, on Almagro. Hell had opened up that night, and though he was less certain than I was, he knew it, too.

"Next time, we have to ask people if they've seen those kids," he said. "But let me do the talking—you're too direct and you might scare people off. They'll get superstitious, you know?"

We bought a pizza at the place across from my apartment, I took a bath, and we didn't go out again until the following Tuesday. It was a weekend of sobbing and breakfasts and watching TV and kissing until our lips were numb. There is a thing called "paranormal fatigue." I heard about it on a podcast about ghosts. Often, when people see ghosts or experience something supernatural, instead of getting scared, they'll go to bed, for example. Or they go on with their work as if nothing happened. Or, even if they get really scared, after a few hours they buy an ice cream cone and pretend nothing happened. I think that weekend we suffered a little of that fatigue, though we didn't set foot outside and we had everything delivered, even cigarettes. And we fell in love. I did, at least. Chapa was more mysterious than he seemed.

—

When we went back to the NGO to load up the food, Flora wasn't there. That night we'd be doing the rounds with a new guy, a hippie around twenty-five years old who wore an unbuttoned flowered shirt, a crystal pendant and a leather bracelet, curls falling over his forehead and a single pirate earring. Chapa snorted. He hated hippies. But the kid, who had the weird name of Humberto, was shy and a fast learner. Juan Pablo said Flora hadn't come in and wasn't answering her phone, but, considering her brother's situation, he wasn't surprised. He introduced Humberto as the cousin of an important person at the NGO, and before we left, he put his hands on my shoulders and told me: "This job is tough. Sometimes things happen—don't let it get you."

I didn't answer, just gave a faint smile. I was nervous. Infatuation had softened the edges of my fear, but the impulse to take off running at the slightest danger was still there: I felt poised and alert. I didn't know what those black-eyed children were, but I sensed what they were capable of. There are some feelings that don't have words, and the way they "looked" at me was exactly that: a mute message from a shadowy place. You know if your child has stopped breathing in bed. Someone's eyes on your body when you think you're alone is a very clear sensation. The danger in a man's smile when he realizes his bestial physical superiority. Fire burns. Snow is slippery, so you have to take short little steps. I could not have another encounter with those black-eyed beings. Period.

Chapa stood chatting with little groups when he made his rounds. Every once in a while he would look my way to check on how and where I was, and to let me know with slight gestures that no one had said anything relevant. I kept glancing over my shoulder, and one of the girls even said to me, "Damn, you're jumpy tonight." Later, Chapa seconded that opinion, when I sat in the passenger seat beside him as we left. I'd been fine doing the handouts, all told—I'd even cracked up laughing with Hippie Humberto when we almost dropped a mattress in the fountain. But I was fine because I didn't sense the black-eyed children's presence, which was like nothing else. I couldn't compare it to seeing a gun under a pillow, or to the rustle of a rat among the trash bags or some night bird's horrible screech. Not even

to the bark of a starving dog or the sobs of a child who has suffered something unnameable. It wasn't that sort of fear or revulsion. It was the terror that came from the cold of the grave, from finding blood soaked through an empty bed, from seeing madness in the eyes of someone about to hang. It was a glimpse beyond the wall of sleep.

The return, same as always. Saying goodbye, thanking Humberto. But Chapa was restless, guilty. He said we'd been mean to Flora. He didn't have doubts himself, but that was only because he'd seen those damn spiders, and ultimately she was a good kid. "What do you want to do, go to Burzaco?" I asked.

"Not at night, hell no, I'm no Conan. But tomorrow, we could go after breakfast. I have the address and I know the neighborhood, I was born in Longchamps and my folks still live there." It was the first personal thing he'd told me.

—

We had breakfast before heading out to Flora's, and Chapa noticed that I looked rough. I had slept badly, or rather not at all. I hadn't felt anything remotely like the fear those black eyes induced, but the cold night had seemed so still, so threatening, that I'd stayed in the living room watching TV with headphones on while Chapa slept. Not soundly, either. I heard him mumbling, and he tossed and turned.

"I was looking on YouTube for information about those kids—" he started to say.

"No." I kissed his hand. "Don't tell me anything. I'd rather think they never existed."

"I don't think you'll be able to forget."

"Don't underestimate me—I've forgotten a lot of horrible things."

"I hear you," he said, and we interlaced our fingers. Then we started for the south. I had never been, I'm from the west side, and Chapa told me, "It's boring. Straight down Hipólito Yrigoyen." Nothing to see, it was true. Supermarkets and pizzerias and grills and abandoned factories and the

occasional club, all gray and neglected and repetitive. Surely in the neighborhoods and slums there was life, but not on the avenue, which was a concrete wasteland; I decided not to look anymore and to find something on the radio. Silences with Chapa weren't uncomfortable. A good sign.

We got to Flora's in a little over an hour. The house was pretty, very suburban middle-class, with a big front yard, flowerpots, a high fence (surely it used to be low, like on my west side, but now the break-ins made it necessary to take precautions), Mar del Plata stone, tiles, a wooden door. A house from the '70s inherited from the dead parents, it had a sad look. They hadn't put in much effort outside, just a few withered plants in the flower beds. I wouldn't have expected otherwise. Chapa got out to ring the bell, and stopped short: the gate was open, but it was a narrow opening. A crack. It was a deliberate invitation, a signal. I knew what he felt. I didn't get out of the car because I felt it, too. It was how I imagine radiation must be. Silent and cancerous, breaking everything inside, its vibrations inaudible to a human. Would the black-eyed children scream? I looked at the wooden front door, and it was also open a crack.

I rolled my window down. "Don't go in," I called to Chapa. I didn't want to yell or make a scene. He didn't listen. I was not going to follow him or go in to look for him if he didn't come back out. That was very clear to both of us. I'm no heroine. And love, well, not unto death, either. He waved a hand at me and left both doors wide open, I guess so he could get out fast.

Something—my own fear—made me get out of the car. I didn't know how to drive and I was terrified of being locked in there, of the boys with black eyes coming and knocking on the window. Better to be on the sidewalk, where I could run. I looked at the house's lowered shutters and noticed another sign: one of them was just barely open, tilted to one side. Like it had broken and fallen and been propped up with something to keep a small opening so it's not impossible to raise it again. I shouldn't have looked, but I did. The children were also a magnet, and that was part of the problem.

What was holding the shutter up were toes. Maybe a foot, but all I could see were the toes, gray with red-painted nails. Five human toes, with long

nails, but not claws: toenails. The foot was gray, I don't know why. Dead, dirty, I don't know. I screamed and the foot withdrew: the sound of the heavy shutter falling was like a bomb going off on the quiet block. The open door showed no sign of Chapa, but something came out of the house, rolling like a ball: it was a sachet of milk. How weird, I thought, and as soon as I stepped back the sachet exploded and the milk was pink—not blood, maybe innards, I don't know. After that, Chapa came running out, and he picked me up and carried me to the car. His steps sounded sticky, like he'd walked on spilled Coke. He got into the car all agitated, his neck red, veins throbbing and eyes crazed, his voice a low rumble. We started driving and I was still draped over his lap, that's how determined he was. The engine was the only sound in the neighborhood, which, I realized, was totally silent. All the houses had their shutters down and doors closed; there wasn't a single dog, not a bird on the power lines, no sound of a bus in the distance, no shops open: from where we were we could see supermarket signs and a kiosk all closed up.

"Flora let them in," I said. "They came for her and she let them in."

I didn't ask what he had seen. I understood that if he was crying with me there beside him, it was because what he felt was unbearable. He drove so fast that I was scared the car would break down, that a tire would fall off. I was scared of anything that would leave us stranded near that sad house in the southern suburbs, with the desolation that the black-eyed children had left behind, with what remained of Flora and her dying brother dripping down the walls of their house.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I wrote this book with certain songs and certain albums that kept me company. Rights issues make it impossible to quote them as epigraphs, but they were: “Troy,” by Sinéad O’Connor; “Lonely Girls,” by Lucinda Williams; “Black Beauty,” by Lana del Rey, along with her albums *Ultraviolence* and *Blue Banisters*; *America’s Sweetheart,* by Courtney Love; *Skeleton Tree* and *Ghosteen* by Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, especially the song “Hollywood”; Caleb Landry Jones, especially the song “Touchdown Yolk”; Lingua Ignota, and Mayhem; *Folklore,* by Taylor Swift; “Carrion Flowers,” by Chelsea Wolfe; “In the Shadow of the Horns,” by Darkthrone; “Because the Night,” version by the Patti Smith Group; “Breakdown,” by Suede; “Corona de caranchos,” by Gabo Ferro and Sergio Ch.” “All Tomorrow’s Parties” and “Venus in Furs,” by the Velvet Underground.

Thanks to Paul, Ariel, María, and Silvia. Thanks to Megan, David, and Jason for making this English edition possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARIANA ENRIQUEZ is a writer based in Buenos Aires. In English, she has published the novel *Our Share of Night* and two story collections, *Things We Lost in the Fire* and *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed,* which was a finalist for the International Booker Prize, the Kirkus Prize, the Ray Bradbury Prize for Science Fiction, Fantasy & Speculative Fiction, and the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize in Fiction.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

MEGAN MCDOWELL has translated many of the most important Latin American writers working today. Her translations have won numerous prizes, including the National Book Award, and have been nominated for the International Booker Prize four times. She is from Richmond, Kentucky, and lives in Santiago, Chile.

Penguin
Random
House

What's next on your reading list?

Discover your next great read!

Get personalized book picks and up-to-date news about this author.

Sign up now.