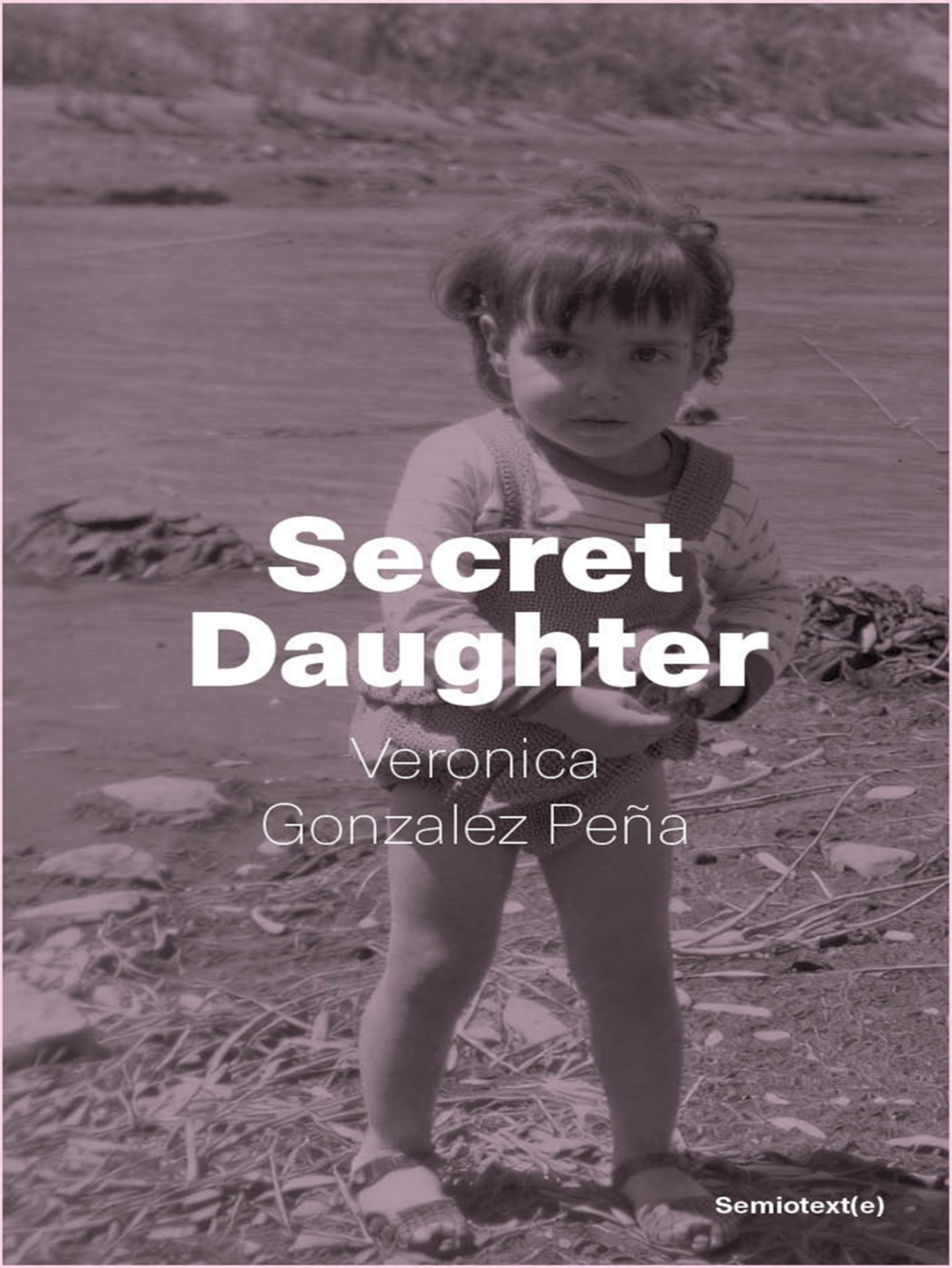


Secret Daughter

Veronica Gonzalez Peña

Semiotext(e)

Copyright © 2026 by Veronica Gonzalez Peña

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photo-copying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

Published by Semiotext(e)
PO BOX 629, South Pasadena, CA 91031
www.semiotexte.com

Cover Design: Lauren Mackler
Layout: Hedi El Kholti

ISBN: 978-1-63590-270-9

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, England

d_r0

OceanofPDF.com

Secret Daughter

Veronica Gonzalez Peña

Semiotext(e)

OceanofPDF.com

for Theodore Jacobs …

OceanofPDF.com

LOSS

When I was twelve years old my adoptive parents called out to me from inside the living room of our house in a suburb of Los Angeles. I had just come running in the back door and was headed toward the kitchen for some water. My adoptive father was a Latin American literature professor at a university not too far from the house and his wife was the girls' dean at Hollywood High School. We need to speak to you, one of them must have called out, probably her, probably sternly, and this, coupled with the fact that they were already seated in the formal living room, sent a sharp shard of fear rushing through my body as I tentatively stepped through the kitchen, into the dining room and toward the room they sat in. It was an uptight room, connected by an archway to the equally uptight dining room in the small Spanish-style house in the middle of a neighborhood full of other small houses on medium-sized lots. There was a grand piano—far too big for the space—that she played, not very well, on rare occasions, and a vitrine full of small Spanish porcelain statuary that she was very proud of, and stiff couches and chairs, all of it meant to give an air of something the house was not, of something she was not.

I am twelve years old; my hair is long and wild; my eyes sit big in my face, and I am doing much to avoid their gaze as they sit across from me in the living room, two against one. I awkwardly step towards the archway that leads into this room that is almost never used. She sits rigid, as befits the space, the picture window at her back. They tell me to come in. Enter. He looks apologetic already, which raises the pitch. She stares. Her eyes are small and black and piercing. With a minute, controlled nod of the head she signals for me to sit down. I comply.

And in this living room, just seconds after I'd sat down, they abruptly told me that Manolo was not my father.

I didn't understand. My face must have revealed my pained confusion, so they elaborated, piling on the facts, as if that would clarify that another man was my biological father.

Biological? Now there were three fathers?

My adoptive father, Ed, who sat across from me here, warm and caring but complicit. Manolo, his brother, whose biological child until this moment I had believed I was; and now this third, a man I did not even know?

My adoptive parents spoke and spoke and continued to speak.

Out the window a crow cawed, and I could hear the other children yelling. The low thud of a ball being kicked, and the joyous ringing shout that followed, triumphant, “You're out!”

You need to know the truth, she insisted.

Her mouth tight, severe, drawn into a line; it was that mouth doing the talking: Sebastian Manzo, it said.

I want to be outside now, running with the boys. I am older than them, an older sister, and fast, and so I lead my adoptive brothers and that pack of neighborhood boys with my commands, shouting back toward them as I run ahead fast fast fast.

I did not remember meeting him, Sebastian Manzo, and here my father, my adoptive father, took over. But you do know him, he insisted, substituting his relationship, his knowledge of this man, for my own. Ed looked at me kindly, openly, his blue eyes warm and eager. His smile working hard to convince me. He made large and generous gestures with his arms as he again insisted that I did know him, though I continued to shake my head no. He added that Seba, he called him Seba, was often at my grandmother Rita's pink house in Mexico City. Grandmother Rita was Ed and Manolo's mother, and Sebastian, who was Ed and Manolo's best friend, would come to their mother's boisterous birthday parties without fail, every year. I would certainly have seen him there, Ed said. But also, he would go to my maternal grandmother's, sometimes, for her weekly card games, poker for pennies, singing, joking about and with the women, strumming the guitar and belting out the lyrics in a loud and beautiful voice. Sebastian was handsome and well-dressed and easy; he flirted nonstop. He, like Manolo, travelled always in packs of male friends, at least three or four at a time, so that it was an event when they arrived, in the room a flutter of feathers, while a toss of nicknames I don't remember flew about the front door.

It was easy to see that my adoptive father liked him; Ed spoke warmly of Sebastian, with something I could identify as pride. He'd named his own son, my adoptive brother, three years younger than myself, Sebastian. He's

a great soccer player, Ed told me. Like you, he stressed, smiling at me. He's a marvelous singer too, Ed said. My chest tightened and my eyes began to well. I couldn't sing at all. I don't remember the tears; they must have been restrained. I was not allowed to cry. She would not allow it.

She told me to stop, What are you crying about? she asked.

And so I stopped.

They'd finished talking now and told me I could go. Confused and disconcerted, surrounded by a dull feeling of threat, I walked out to the front porch. I don't remember rising or how I got outside; but I must have stood, walked to the door, turned the knob, opened and stepped through that threshold, because I remember that I was on the porch when I did, finally, let myself openly cry.

How did I get there?

What was I crying about?

OceanofPDF.com

BELLHOP BOY

One of the things Ed eventually told me was that he and his brother Manolo and their friend Sebastian had, for a period, been a clan. My three fathers were best friends.

Ed rarely spoke about his early life, though once I'd learned about Sebastian, the stories he did tell were populated with these other two. They had all been beautiful, and as teens they had moved through the neighborhood as a unit, egging each other on. The most decent of the three, the hardest working, Ed had been a boy baker. He rose early, and, while the other two roamed the streets, he worked; he'd join them later, after the bread and cakes were done.

When Ed was sixteen they all went to Acapulco. An older friend had been working there as a bellhop in a hotel, and on one of his trips home to Mexico City he bragged to Ed about the money, and the women. They call you up into their room! he told Ed, shrieking in delight.

Oh shit, man! *¡No chingues!* Ed responded, as he slapped at his own thigh while his friend pumped his hips in his direction.

Ed was excited by the talk, but more so by the idea of going; leaving home was the objective; his mother was too much. She had sent him away, to live with his grandmother, yet she was constantly calling him back, and when she did it was always to do something for her, to do one of the interminable list of things which his father would not do; he'd have to fix things for her, *adjust the lights*; *change out the pipes—the toilet's leaking, the sink is clogged*; *clean the soot from the stove*; *hook up the new gas*; *take out the trash*; *sweep up the yard*; *replace the bricks in the patio wall* … since he was twelve he'd had to work and give her most of his money to help support the other children; his mother was unrelenting in her need of him—she could devour—and then there was the beach.

The older bellhop boy got Ed a job at the hotel. Manolo and Sebastian were not up for working but they were good at hanging lazily about and cruising for girls, and the sand and the sun provided the perfect backdrop for that. Was Ed supporting them all? There is a photo of Ed, at sixteen, standing at the edge of La Quebrada, his legs long, chest broad, his blue

eyes shining through the frame, out at me; Ed, a teenager still, looks directly at me from inside that photo; it is me he smiles at, in the moments before leaping off that famous Acapulco cliff.

There was such a sweetness to Ed. But he was vague too. When he did talk about his childhood it was all very indirect, lots of circling and back tracking and after the fact denial, so that you had to follow the various threads, and stitch it all into something that maybe made some sense. It was as if the memories would spring upon him as he spoke about this or that. He'd be cheerfully talking along, about some book he was reading, his chit-chat full of the slang that made everything he said feel so direct and casual. Man, he would say, slap at his knee, and fall into an easy laugh. He would call everyone Man. He'd be chattering away, usually after a couple of drinks, laughing and talking, when he'd suddenly catch himself, bewilderingly confronted with this younger, wilder version of himself, mid story.

Once, at the dinner table—it must have been a holiday dinner, because we were in the stiff and formal dining room; it was toward the end of the meal; his wine had been flowing for a while, china and crystal and multiple glasses now dirty lay on the table in front of us—he began to talk about the three of them, laughing as he spoke; they had been so crazy! Before long he had led himself down a complicated story, with Manolo at the center of the tale. It was when they lived in Acapulco, on a steamy but glorious night. It was so hot and beautiful there, languid, the moon huge. They were on a boat in a lagoon and though it was night they could see each other clearly because of that blue full moon; they were swimming and drinking, having such a great time, laughing and joking, batting each other about; Sebastian almost fell off the boat once or twice, which was surprising because although he was drunk he was the real athlete; the woman Manolo was with that night was older and impossibly beautiful, tall with long flowing hair and long long legs. Manolo was the most boyishly handsome, so he always got the best girls. But how had he managed to get this particularly gorgeous woman to agree to come on that boat with three crazy kids? He was now shaking his head, a bit incredulous still, and then, as if to break his own wonder he yelled, She was a man! and slapped the table and began to laugh loudly.

¡Ay, Eduardo! his wife angrily scolded.

And his face crumbled into confusion, his mouth dropping. He shook his head a bit and stopped the tale, rapidly changing the subject. My adoptive brothers were young, ten and twelve at the time, and probably did not hear the change in tone; maybe they had not even been listening, but I, at fifteen, wanted to hear more; I was excited and wanted the details. Had Manolo stayed on the boat with the beautiful woman when Ed and Sebastian discovered her and decided to swim back to shore? There was no way Manolo hadn't known all along. And then I thought of another possibility: had they all, perhaps, stayed on that boat together?

Like this Ed would talk at times, mostly abstractly, about the man who was my father, Sebastian, whom I didn't remember in the least, and about the other one, Manolo, whom I had recently found out was not my father at all, and who was a confusing, shifting mass inside me. Because at that point I did not have any memory of what had happened with Manolo. In fact, I didn't remember anything about it at all.

OceanofPDF.com

MANOLO

What I did remember was that up until I was ten, I lit up at his approach as much as the other children, my sisters and our friends. My sisters and I would run to him and then hover around him when he'd appear; Pilar, who was three years older than me, tall and gorgeous with big green eyes and dark shoulder-length hair, would hug his arm to her body, and shyly greet him, *Hola Papi*, while Marta, who was a year younger than me, bossy and rude, jumped up and down, thrilling with excitement, working her way onto his back, calling out, *Bend down, get me, get me, pick me up!* until he did bend down while reaching one arm out behind himself to hoist her leg so she could clamber up his torso. He would ride her around, neighing like a wild pony, tossing his head and arching his back so that she had to really hang on to keep from falling, while screeching out her laughter, *Again, again!* I was in the middle, the quiet middle sister, and I always hung back a little, watched with widened eyes, not quite clear on my role in any of it, because unless he was taunting me his attention was rarely directed toward me.

It is true there was always something scary about him. The unpredictability, perhaps. He was cruel. He would mock us to each other, and to others, even as little tiny kids, without any sign of discomfort or regret if we looked hurt by it. As we got older he would mock our bodies, make fun of the way my breasts bounced when I ran, would stutter along with one of the boys, a pack of whom always hung around him, Miguel, as he struggled to get his words out, *¿Que te pasa Mi … Mi … Mi … Mi … MiMiguelito?* before smacking him hard on the back of the head, *Spit it out!* Manolo would give people nicknames that stuck, La Gorda he christened one of Marta's friends, Bubbles' sister, and that was it for her. *Ay, no, Paapaaaaa*, he made his voice high pitched and girly and mocked Pilar when she was embarrassed by him, *Paapaaaaa*! He acted like us kids, got down in there with us, pitted us against each other, and poisoned our dynamics. His ridicule would come out of nowhere so that there was a constant sense of danger that was fully merged with the exciting parts of him. The ease. The incredible charm. He was so good-looking. The

twinkling blue eyes and the deep joyous laugh. And I never had the clarity to separate those things out, the thrill from the danger.

He had the electricity of a missing father. There he comes! We would quicken at his arrival. He would appear when he was flush (he was a gambler too, of course), doling out the cash, small bills that he held up just beyond our reach so that we had to jump, jump, jump and grab at them, just as he yanked them away with a derisive laugh, a cat and mouse game, though if we succeeded in connecting we pulled those bills to our sides and shoved them deep into our pockets, greedy, and then he would call out, *¡Vamonos escuincles¡* before taking all of us out for ice cream—paletas from the central square—and because of this our friends would thrill as he approached too, for he might pick one or two of them to join. He'd promise huge gifts as he mussed with our hair, shoved us forward by the head or shoulder to hasten, gifts which mostly didn't materialize, and animals, a monkey he said once. His friend in Veracruz had one, he told us, and it wore a diaper and lived in his house. And it was almost as if with those words he had actually given us that spider monkey already for I thought about it so much, how it might dart about our house, swinging madly from the chandeliers, vaulting the tall shelves—naughty screeching and bounding leaps— before finally settling into my arms to sleep when it grew tired, while I cuddled and caressed its tiny furry face and whispered to it; a toucan he promised another time.

His horn would honk out his arrival with a ridiculous tune, claxon music, and the whole mass of us would go rushing down the street to meet his car, jumping up and down with the joy of it. We would squeal, Me, me, me!!

I was more cautious, less eager than the rest and because of this, and for other reasons I did not yet understand, was never chosen first.

He'd wear his t-shirts rolled up at the sleeves like James Dean, and show off his big muscles … Watch this! he'd say, and he'd make them dance to make us laugh, and then he'd have us hang off of his arms, or hold us upside down before letting go of our ankles for just one second, pretend to really drop us, while we screeched out in terror.

He wore his hair slicked back, a bit of a rockabilly pompadour, his pants crisp, his shirts white, and he played the guitar, and sang with his blue eyes shining, an affected though quick easy grin; his eyes would soften and grow romantic when the song demanded it of him, and his lips would purse into

soft accents as he raised his head to the tune, *coo coo roo coo coo*, *Paloma*; he was our handsome wild father.

Manolo would let us ride on the running boards of his VW Bug, two of us on each side, hanging off the half-open windows, and he'd zig zag us down the Mexico City street, driving crazy as can be, back and forth, back and forth, as we hung on for our lives … we could fly off, we knew, and that was part of the excitement, so we wailed with the fear and the joy of it.

When he'd stop I was secretly relieved, but my sister Marta and all the older children yelled, More More More!

What I did remember was this: I was five, maybe six and was sitting at a window in my beloved grandmother's house, my mother's mother, my abue. It was early evening and raindrops streaked the darkening glass. My aunt Sofia looked worried, begged me to come away from the window. Sofia was my mother's sister, two years younger than her, glamorous and serious, with mounds of dark curls framing her face—she lived with us at my abue's, and I knew I was her favorite; like her I was cautious and quiet and watchful. *¿Que pasa?* my aunt asked softly. She was practical and unsentimental. She simply wanted to make it better, to make it better for me. *It's okay, Verito, vamos*, she said, as she tried to pry me away from that window. She wanted to divert my attention, take me to sit with my abue. She wanted me to stop thinking about them. But I missed them; I could not get ahold of myself, could not contain this feeling inside me; I didn't yet know how to contain; all I knew was that I wanted to be with them; the pain of it bunched in my throat and also in my chest; and there was nothing my aunt could say to make me feel better. Manolo had come to fetch them, my mother and my sisters; he'd arrived at my abue's with my brother, Oscar, in tow, Oscar who was one year younger than Pilar, which made him two years older than me, and who was loud and somewhat feral and at seven years old still sucked his thumb with a violence. Because of this constant sucking he had big buck teeth. And he mostly didn't live with us. He mostly lived with Manolo's mother.

Maybe we hadn't seen our father, Manolo, for a couple of months when he and Oscar appeared at my abue's, and while Oscar ran into the patio to chase our old dog into a corner, Manolo sat himself down on the big couch with ease, right next to my mother; he lowered himself down with a big open smile and put his arms around her shoulders, shook her a little as if to

wake her out of a dream, and teased her. We hadn't seen our father, Manolo, for a couple of months yet he tried to make our mother smile as he worked hard to convince her to go with him. He nuzzled his face into her neck and pretended to be a wild animal there, snorting loudly and tickling her until my mother finally laughed, exposing her crooked teeth, which I found very pretty, though their unevenness embarrassed her. She covered them up by sealing her lips into a tight smile around them, though she continued laughing; she slapped at Manolo to stop it, loosely swinging her hand at him. My mother was flirty in her black knit skirt and tight sweater. Playing at resisting, she moved her upper body to the side, away from his animal mouth, though her dark eyes danced around the room, *¡Parale, Loco!*

Come on, he begged, sitting up now, straightening his shirt with a mock-injured expression. He was doing well, he told her, brushing his slickened hair back into position with three graceful swoops. He'd been working as a salesman for Pfizer for four months; and didn't it make sense? Of course he was a good salesman! He patted at his chest proudly. And they wanted to move him out of the city; they wanted to move him to Torreón, in the Coahuila desert. He had found a little house there, and had put some money down. He would rent it and they could all move there together, he told her, beaming. It's beautiful there, he said, surrounded by lagoons that we can visit. And maybe in a year or two he could buy that little house. His boss was talking about putting him in charge of the pharmacies and hospitals in the whole region.

He wanted to try again, he said more softly, more seriously, to be a family. We're supposed to live together, aren't we? he asked, as if he really wanted to know the answer, and then he nuzzled her again, blindly.

Although his mother, Mama Rita, indulged him, calling him her beautiful boy always, *Manolito*, she would say, *Mi niño bello, mi amor*, while stroking his hair and kissing him right on the mouth, she was also able to coax him; *Eres el mas bello*, she would say again and again, yet she was the one who instructed him on what he should be doing to make things look better. It was the right thing, she had persuaded, and so he'd picked Oscar up from her house.

We girls had been living with our other grandmother, our abue, for as long as I could remember, but now Manolo descended on us from out of the blue and only three days after that visit he took my older sister Pilar and my younger sister Marta and our mother. It was only me who got left behind.

I watched as they piled into the car with him. I watched them as they drove off together. And then I sat at the window calling through tears for my sister Pilar. *Pilar*, I repeated. Even then, though I found my parents exciting, they scared me, so that it was only my sister whom I could admit to missing.

And after a month of this inconsolable longing, this repeated *Pilar*, though my aunt did not like my mother, had never liked my mother, Sofia decided she had to take me to them.

What I remember is that by the time I arrived in Torreón, Manolo was mostly not there. Medical samples piled into the trunk at the front of the VW, he'd tell our mother he'd be out working for a few days; but he would not come home. He would be gone for weeks. The absences would both infuriate and frighten our mother, who on his return cried and screamed and yelled at him that she knew he hadn't been working. Where was he going? Where was the money? Who had he been with? And why had he brought her here to begin with? To this infernal town where she knew no one? He was hiding her here so he could do what he wanted! Manolo would mock her, the derision spilled out of him so easily, or else he'd ignore her for as long as he could, a day or two maybe. She would lunge at him. And he would grab her hands and hold them tight in his fist and laugh into her face. He would laugh at our mother. And then he'd leave again. Pretty soon after I got to Torreón he was mostly not there. And our mother started pacing the house.

What I remember is that my sisters and brother and I would play in the garden all day, watched over by our big dog Diana. We would run and run, like we had to get somewhere. Sometimes we would wander the few blocks away to the public pool where we swam for hours on end with the other neighborhood children. Our bodies were always moving. We would play in the garden and Marta and I would knead the dirt, adding water to make mud pies, our hands busy, laboring, like it was our job. At five years old Marta was already bossy, yelling out her commands. Play was like work to Marta. She always made up the rules and made sure they were strictly followed: *No, first we have to dig a deep hole, and then we can build up the walls.* If we were at a park or the pool and other children joined in she would tell them what to do too, where to dig, how to pile things, what to put on or to

take away. She would yell at them, always confident, never concerned with whether they would like her, even when she was younger than them.

There was a wall partially separating our house from the next. It was a low wall, a little shorter than me, and rosemary grew all up it. The wall was topped by poured-concrete bricks with decorative holes in them so that two bricks together formed the shape of a flower. Fat spiders built webs in most of the petals of these concrete flowers, and as she entered the house one day our mother told us those spiders were poisonous. Her eyes were blank as she spoke it, not focusing on either one of us. They're poison, she said, her voice flat. The spiders. She turned her body slowly, and walked into the house.

Marta started feeding the little black and yellow grasshoppers that lived in the garden to the spiders. She would sneak up on them, cup both of her hands around the pretty little grasshoppers so that they couldn't jump away, and then she would maneuver them around to grip them by a leg, holding them out like this, by one struggling limb so that they squirmed the rest of their body about before she thrust them into the webs. *This is how you have to hold the grasshoppers so they can't get away,* Marta told me, *by the leg*. She held it up to show me. Try it, she said.

I wouldn't do it.

Sometimes, after Marta had thrown it in, the grasshopper was able to pull free of the web and other times the spider would crawl slowly towards it as it struggled to get free, spider finally reaching out with its thick arms to quickly pull its feed back into the dark recesses of the brick. We would groan and Marta would squeal with delight: *Did you see that?*

I was both disgusted and thrilled by this game. I never told Marta to stop it. I never told Marta that was enough. She frightened me, and so I never told Marta what to do.

What I cannot recall is what it felt like when our mother was falling apart. Manolo was gone now. Pilar, who was nine, must have figured out how to feed us; who else would have fed us? Pilar who defended me from our mother's rages. Pilar who was quiet like me, and told me stories, and read to me from her books, and held me. One day our mother took all of my hair in her fisted hand; angrily she pulled the whole bunch of it hard, high above my head so it hurt, though I kept silent. She then aimed the big scissors she held in her other hand toward me, and she chopped it all off in two swoops.

Our mother was growing more and more furious. Doing things we did not understand. Smelling things we did not smell; talking to herself, having violently erratic arguments with herself. She was pacing, always pacing. She began to lock us inside the house. Somehow Pilar snuck out one day and made her way to one of the neighbors' from where she called my grandmother. Abue sent our uncle Felix to fetch us. And then our mother was gone from our abue's for several months.

Then, not too long after she returned, I was the one who was gone …

OceanofPDF.com

AN ORGANIZING MEMORY

I was four or five or six, and the sun was bright above us. The air was different here than in Mexico City, crisp and sharp and already carrying something of the ocean light. It was hot, the sky a deep, clear blue. The children's pool had a small resting ledge at the deeper end and I was pulling onto it, my arms working me out of the water as I dripped onto the crowded cement seat. With one knee already up I was awkwardly adjusting myself into a sitting position, my hand reaching out to grab the pool's edge, when I noticed a boy who sat extremely close to where my body was twisting to reach, his face above where my hand was about to land, and his proximity unsettled me; I was so timid.

He looked at me with an intense urgency and then, his face dipping even closer to mine, he exclaimed, "*Cuida* …," as, confused, I met his eyes; did he like me? My stomach clinched as it always did when I thought a boy might like me, even at that young age, shy but excited too, and then I felt the burning sting as my hand landed, before he finished "… *do!*" I hadn't seen it; how could I have, so focused on that boy's eyes, their charge as they caught mine. The burning sting.

I feel it sharp and raw in my hand, is it my left hand? What hand is this? The boy had been trying to warn me. Did I cry out, or did he?

Whose voice was that now screaming?

Lunging my arm back into myself, the sharp dark pain, I twisted my body dripping around it. I rarely cried. But I did then. How did she find me? Had someone run to her, one of the other children? I'd been in the water for what seemed like hours; in the water, submerged amorphous, surrounded liquid, my face, my eyes, slick in wet … squirming from my sisters, lunging toward the ledge, the resting place, splashing and faltering and laughing, as one of them grabbed at my leg, yanked me back into the depths before I was able to kick free and reach forward, pulling myself, gasping up to sit, rapidly blinking to see while drip dripping in that awkward cement seat.

Because he lived there I believed it was my grandfather's pool, that the motel in which it sat was his too, and my sisters, Pilar and Marta, and I would spend all day playing inside it. There was a bigger pool across the way, the adult pool, with gardens all around, the hot damp air, and their bodies hot and damp too, surrounding its edges; why didn't they just jump in, like we did? On that side of the motel were dense tropical walk-ways that vanished into leafy green jungle before opening onto small clearings with all around the lush density of palms and flowering bromeliads and brightly colored vines. But this little pool was ours, the children's pool. In Iguala. My maternal grandfather, Abue's husband, a good business man, owned the gas station near the motel on the perimeter of this small town that sits half way between Mexico City and Acapulco. It was 1969, or ’70 and in those days we would pile into our car, like every other middle class Mexican family from the city, and drive to Acapulco where we stayed on the beach in hotels that had even more magical gardens than our grandfather's, with criss-crossing paths that lay winding under the thickness of climbing creeping vines, and giant fan palms that sat between dangling papaya, passion fruit and mango and lime, all of it surrounded by tree-like aloe that flowered orange and red, the thick succulent leaves of which my aunt would break in half to then rub the sinewy liquid sap onto my sunburned arms. There were talking parrots and Toucans who stood staring at you from inside their big cages that sat in the small sand clearings, and you could flirt nuts or fruit into those cages but pulled your fingers back with wild screeches when their beaks got dangerously close to your inching hands. There were signs, you were scolded, that warned against this feeding, but you ignored your aunts and their scolding for the thrill of the birds’ proximity. Beyond all of this, we knew, lay the vastness of the beach we all loved, though the waves could be wild, so you stayed at the edges of the water, feet lodged in the sand, unless an aunt or an uncle went in with you and helped you to bob on the surface of those undulating caps. But before you could get there, to that beach, you'd have to stop to refuel in Iguala. Everyone would. And we, because of our grandfather and this motel with our pool, would sometimes stay the night.

Who ran and got her? Were they screaming out, Hurry, hurry! as they grabbed and pulled at her arm? She was bikini-clad, and like this she ran over and swept me up. Had she heard me crying? Who was she, this woman

who picked me up and carried me now, as I wept, quietly, in her arms. My mother ran to him with me limply drifting in and out in her arms, to the man I believed was my father where he sat drinking with his friends.

Urgent. She approached them as she yelled out that they had to take me to the hospital, now, a scorpion had stung me. Now!

No. My father refused. Manolo said no.

He sat in that clearing, low chairs, framed in garden lushness, the fruit from the papayas hanging bulbous all around, with his friends, laughing and cajoling in unison, a big manly mass. They were singing and playing guitar, drinking beer and having a great time, didn't she see that? He looked straight at her, that wry smile of his, No, he repeated more sternly, as he cinched his blue eyes at her. And then, without lifting his hand to grasp it, he took a hit of his cigarette which sat dangling limply in his mouth. He turned from her and toward the men, and she turned too, away, no time for this man.

Were they shocked, these men he drank with? Were they men I knew, and would see again, maybe at a card game at my grandmother's house? Coming in boisterous to eat her food and have a drink and tease the young girls and middle-aged women? Or were they a group he'd picked up at the motel? He was always surrounded. And we mostly knew to hide from them.

Panicking desperate, she carried me to the road, still draped in her arms. Where was she headed?

She is hobbling; I am weighing in her arms; the gravel pierces her feet. And then she spots it there, blurry in the shivering sunlight, coming toward her, from in the distance.

She sees it approaching and rushes now, into the road to intercept it, and with her gesturing body she makes the bus stop. My beautiful mother, still dripping in her bikini, stands before the creaking bus.

The driver pulls to the side of the road and opens the door with his big lever. She yells out to him, and he calls us up before she is done speaking. I

can see them staring, the other people on that bus, not unkindly. She rushes in now. We are inside. The driver will divert and take us to the hospital door.

I don't remember arriving at or entering the hospital. The next thing I recall is my favorite uncle, my mother's youngest brother, Martin, who is seventeen, at my side. He must have come with someone, my grandmother, perhaps, though he is the only one I remember being there. Sitting at the side of the bed Martin makes me laugh. And because I am laughing now, my eyes still heavy with sleep, I know I did not die.

Martin jokes as he reaches over to me where I lie on the hospital bed, It got you, huh? And then his eyes sparkle and he pecks at my arm with his fingers and I shriek and yank my arm back and he laughs. He plays rough, but I love him. Martin was eleven or twelve when I was born. He's my funny teenage uncle, thick black hair and shining smiling eyes.

My grandfather owned the gas station but not the motel, my aunt Sofia told me forty years later. He managed it, and expanded it even, yes, and brought it back to life, but he did not own it. Yet, even after she told me this, in my mind he owned it. He was distant and powerful. The grandfather who appeared at our home in Mexico City and disappeared the same night. He didn't ever stay over, though he was our grandfather. He rarely sat to have a meal with us, either. Sometimes he'd eat at the table alone, served by an aunt or the woman who cooked for us. Who was he to my grandmother now? Did Abue still love him? *Hola Abuelito*. Their emotions restrained, we didn't see what there was between them. A sometimes visitor, with his formal suits and white hair and temperate smile. My beloved grandmother's husband. He bred dogs, beautiful German Shepherds. We had one, Diana, and she was nearly human, watching my sisters and me play in the garden in Torreón, our unruly games, herding us when necessary, as our mad mother paced the insides of the house …

This mother who in a lucid moment scooped me up and rushed me to my father Manolo and when he refused, ran me to the side of the road, her feet burning, so that the bus stopped there and all of the passengers looked forward as she, panicked, called out to the driver when he opened the door with his lever, and as he heard what she had yelled he urged us on though

she was already lunging up onto the bus barefoot, with me in her arms, silently crying, Scorpion, and all the other people—mostly indigenous men and women, many dressed in their formal white linen— looked up at us as she climbed in, at the beautiful young woman ascending in a bikini with a little girl who may possibly soon die, weeping in her arms.

Is my mother crying too now? The bus stares and doesn't say a word, until an old man in the front stands and quietly offers her his seat. I am listless in her arms and the entire bus is silent.

I don't remember my mother being there then, at the hospital with my uncle as he teased me. Was she back to struggling with the terrors that haunted her? The urgency of the reality outside her head having subsided to be replaced by that other, darker urgency she always carried inside.

OceanofPDF.com

IGUALA

Did we ever enter Iguala on our bi-yearly visits? In my mind it is tiny, a pueblito, but maybe I believed this because we always stayed on its outskirts, arriving only to refuel and visit our grandfather at that pit-stop motel, sometimes spending the night there. I don't recall ever going into Iguala proper, before continuing on to our destination: the beaches of Acapulco where we bobbed the waves in packs.

In fact, in my mind the whole town was just this motel and our grandfather's gas station; that was all I knew of Iguala. Though now I know that Iguala has a beautiful church, as all Mexican towns do, and a giant statue of Saint Francis, for whom the church is named, and a lovely central square with a bandstand and a promenade, and that in those days there was strong civic pride there, a flag museum and countless public statues celebrating it as the site of Mexican independence; the statue of Saint Francis reaches forward to feed forty-three mourning doves from his outstretched hand.

Did I already like the boy at my grandfather's swimming pool? Had I been swimming toward him, that boy the destination? Had I seen him crouched there as I pulled up to the ledge? No, I don't think so; I was too busy squirming away from my sisters. In fact, I think that if I'd seen him I would never have approached; I may have swum the other way instead. I was too cautious to swim toward desire, and when I landed dripping there the awkwardness took over, a self-conscious pause because his body was so close, though I did feel something when he stared at me like that … had I liked that boy already, or was I merely responding in the moment, to his gaze, the charge of it?

And was it because of this that it took me a moment too long to react, to disengage from his eyes, to hear his warning; was I suddenly so caught up in questioning what I was feeling that I could not see what lay just beyond my reach, what he was gesturing towards? I can lose myself in the electricity of other people's bodies, their eyes, the intimacy there, forget that there is a reality beyond them that must be heeded. The outside world

matters too, I must remind myself. That transition between inside and outside can feel like a violence. Is this because of my mother? An intimacy with her I never had?

I have tried to build a life that negates the essential truth at the center of it, this central fact instead capturing me and trapping me in the spiral of its concentric wake—the fact: I had a mad mother. Her gaze was turned inward. It was stuck there, compelled by the dark fantasies that drove her, and in regard to me, aside from the day of the scorpion, it was indifferent. She did not want me. She gave me up. I was six, almost seven, when this severance occurred, and thus my confusion in regard to my age in my organizing memory, *four or five or six* when the scorpion stung, because the only thing I know for certain is that it occurred before Torreón, before I went to live in the States, with Ed and the cruelty of his wife.

On the day of the scorpion I almost died, but it also gave me something to hang on to, something else to organize myself around, in regard to her, my mother. She saw me and in that moment knew what must be done. It is there, in my mind's eye now, in my personal ever present, my hand reaches up and out of the water, stretches to grasp at that ledge, every desire that lives inside me mirrored there in his eyes, in that boy's gaze. I am small. I am five, I believe, because she has not yet sent me away. Am I five? He looks at me with urgency. We are in the pool in Iguala. I am dripping, my left hand about to land on the little cement ledge. My eyes pause, suddenly caught on that boy's gaze as he calls out, "*Cuida* …."

We are in Iguala.

My hand lands, and we scream out in unison.

OceanofPDF.com

SOFIA

I would go to Mexico City to stay with my biological family for extended visits after I was sent to live away from them; Ed and his wife would send me there during my summer vacations; it was that kind of adoption; Ed was my uncle, after all; he was Manolo's brother, and so I always knew my biological family was there—though, except for during these summer visits, they lived on only inside me, in slow motion flickers, in hopelessly fragmented images, powerful still in their influence, though they were out of my actual reach. Like my memories of them are now, mostly beyond my reach. There, though not there, my family was far away in the depths of Mexico, living full lives without me, while I inhabited a much lonelier life in Ohio first, then in Los Angeles. It was the ’70s and ’80s, before cheap international calls and flights, and all of the other mechanical contraptions that have made our lives so fluid; my family was impossibly distant, in fact, though somehow, stealthily, driving my emotions, my choices, and my ways of seeing.

My aunt Sofia was my reality principle. After many years of living away from my family, she was the one I'd ask about those things that sat at the edges of my consciousness, that flickered and faltered there. She *was* there to make them concrete, including many of the more difficult things that Ed and his wife, my adoptive parents, had told me, but that I simply could not believe until I heard them confirmed by her, because I didn't fully trust them either.

While in Mexico, during those long summer visits when Ed and, mostly, his wife—who wanted to be rid of me—would send me back to my family, I would ask Sofia, Did this really happen? Oh, yes, she'd say. Or, No, I don't remember that.

By the time I was sixteen, the questions had become more probing.

She understood my need and so she was always clear, and direct, and honest with me.

My aunt Sofia was the first person to confirm that Manolo was not my father.

And just as Ed had told me, she said, when I was very young Sebastian Manzo would come to play cards at my maternal grandmother's, my abue's, from time to time.

I didn't then know who he was, just another in the long string of relatives and family friends, so that those visits weren't memorable; there was no reason why they would stand out. But he came again several times during one of my teenage summer stays in Mexico City. I was sixteen. I would come one more time, at seventeen, and then not see my family again for almost fourteen years, and by then everything would have changed.

But at sixteen I had been living in the states with Ed and his family for almost ten years. It had been four years since he and his wife had told me about Sebastian. So, though I was not yet fully convinced, one summer evening I sat in a corner of the living room in my grandmother's house in Mexico, dressed all in white, petting the big black cat, Paco, who lay in my lap, stroking his long black fur, while I observed the man I was beginning to believe was my father as he moved around the room.

The house had many large windows and travertine floors; it was open and light and airy, and had a lovely courtyard. There were several bedrooms, one with a private balcony that sat separate and secluded off my aunt Sofia's room; that balcony is where she clarified our family secrets for me, as we'd sit together, sipping tea or sweet liqueur.

My family had moved into that house in a pretty tree-lined neighborhood, or *colonia*—in Mexico neighborhoods are called *colonias*—the winter before. During my two previous visits, when I was fourteen and fifteen, they had been living in the modernist towers of Tlatelolco, but when my favorite uncle Martin and his wife decided to move back in with my abue, they got this house instead. Everyone was happy there. Both Pilar and my aunt Sofia's boyfriends lived in this colonia, Pilar's around the corner, my aunt Sofia's three or four blocks away. There was a nice market where on Sunday mornings Pilar and I would go eat quesadillas, and a picturesque park where Marta and I would roam, on the hunt for other teenagers, and across which her best friend Bubbles lived in the neighboring colonia, so that we were often crossing this park to go see her.

And, as it turned out, our new house was not far from Sebastian Manzo's own house. Perhaps this is why he came to call that summer.

It was as I watched Sebastian greet my grandmother, her hand in his, the way they then sat and whispered and sipped at drinks, that I recalled that

when I was very young, he had occasionally sent gifts for me. Manolo was always the one to deliver them. My sisters never received anything from Sebastian, and this fact now worked to further convince me. Earlier that year, at the beginning of the summer, he'd sent a ring, white gold with three sapphires. It was square and seemed quite cool because of this detail, and beautiful too. As usual, he'd sent it to me via Manolo, and as Manolo handed it to me he told me it was from Sebastian. I'd accepted it with no comment and afterward my sister, Marta, had called me names over it, and then tried to take it, and now, a month or so later, I looked at Sebastian more intently. He was about six feet tall, slender, and wore a dark suit, no tie. His eyes were deep and he had a straight nose. Thin lips. He came with two friends and after the initial loud greeting, he joked with my grandmother who seemed to like him, before they sat down for the quieter exchange. My abue asked after his mother and sisters and aunts, for he was a family friend. My aunts had been friends with his sisters when they were adolescents. Sebastian then moved to the table where a group was already playing cards. He was funny, massaged several shoulders as he smiled and told jokes and leaned over people, then laughed as he pretended to cheat for them, telling them which cards to put down as the whole table yelled out at him to mind his own business, while he continued to laugh; at one point he sat on the couch, picked up the guitar and sang. They would do this, the fathers and uncles, and friends of uncles, pick up the guitar and sing into the room, crooning toward no one specific, and then another one of them would sit down to join and pretty soon there would be a crowd of them singing together and the tones would become more boisterous.

He had a beautiful voice, much nicer than Manolo's.

That whole night he never directly addressed me. He barely looked at me, in fact. He may well have been nervous; all that activity, all that moving around; I was certainly nervous watching him, though I kept my cool, surprisingly, for I was rapt. His friends, with a false and stiff cheeriness, anxiously followed his lead, laughing a bit too rambunctiously, singing softly first then loudly. One of them, the shorter of the two, wore his curly hair greased back, a throwback to their youth.

Sebastian came two other times that summer. And each time I watched my father from a safe distance, unblinkingly.

After the last visit from Sebastian Manzo, I asked my aunt Sofia. I wanted to know if what I'd been told was the truth, because how could it be true? We were in her room; her room, which seemed not a part of that house, it was so stylish. The air was different there, hazy, sexy, adult. She was tall and wore green eyeliner and gorgeous flowing clothes, and she was clear and no nonsense. Her long loose curls framed her beautiful face. I was sixteen, and we were in her room; my aunt treated me as if I were her equal and so she'd just poured both of us a glass of something sweet, amaretto perhaps, and she took a sip of hers, and I took a sip of mine, and then I looked out the high glass doors that gave onto her balcony. The light was misty yellow, a dreamy glow from the streetlight down the road silhouetting the trees. My gaze turned back to her room where under a gilded mirror there were three or four lit candles burning in a cluster on her dresser. I focused on Sofia through the mirror, and in the calmest voice I could muster I asked my glamorous aunt's reflection, Is Sebastian Manzo my father?

Sofia choked on her drink at my frankness, coughed a bit, then turned to stare at me directly and swallowed hard, giving herself a moment.

And then she didn't lie to me.

Yes, she said. A beat, and then, How long have you known?

I trusted her. I trust her still.

OceanofPDF.com

JULY, 2022

I lay in bed at Sharon's house in Los Angeles, the house I was then subletting, and looked out the big picture window directly across from where I lay, out at the sky beyond, the lone palm tree silhouetted dark in the distance. From the middle of that bed I listened to the owl who seemed to live in the oak tree next door. He called out early in the evening and then again late, deep into the night. I evened out my breathing. If I began to doze I was repeatedly startled awake by the clank of nuts and branches that fell hard and abrupt, rumbling loud on the tin roof above me, the scurrying squirrels that ran quick quick across it.

In my sleeplessness I tried to force my thoughts toward Manolo.

I'd begun this book the previous year, while I was in Mérida, in the Yucatán. I had thought that being in Mexico would awaken things in me and so I spent six months there. Initially I tried writing by hand, as I felt the physicality of this would help me more easily access my earliest memories. I believed that being in Mexico, immersing myself in the language, and writing by hand would all work together to make things flow.

But my mind would go blank. I'd find myself staring straight, into the distance, for whole minutes at a time. I'd try to re-center myself, move things around on my desk, or move myself around, pace and pace the room. After many days of this, weeks of it, I decided that in order to proceed with the book I would need to make some rules. I decided I would need to write two pages a day. If I could just write two pages a day for half a year, I'd have a book. And I'd be done with it. The thought of being done with it in six months provided a surge of energy that lasted a while, and so I was able to be strict with myself for about four days.

Then it became impossible. I have never consistently written two pages a day.

One morning, somehow, I started recording myself. I was laying on the bed in the blue courtyard room in the house in Mérida, staring out at the tall whitewashed walls. Immobile, I looked up at the square of clear sky framed by that interior courtyard, at the pair of mourning doves sitting on the high wall across from where I lay. The church bells rang directly behind the

house, ancient sounds, the old bells ringing out from their sixteenth-century tower which stands a few narrow blocks behind my street; the heavy ropes in that faded yellow cupola being pulled, a pause, then pulled again. I was feeling especially desolate that morning because I had repeatedly attempted to, but could not write, and so I was simply laying there, prone and defeated, in the middle of the day. We were in the midst of another COVID surge, and I was seeing very few people. I was laying alone in this courtyard house with the doves and the bats and the ancient church sounds when I started thinking about the book more directly, thoughts coming at me quickly, and, though I was suddenly excited, I didn't know if I could write it all down in the way that it was coming at me; the rhythm, the pacing, finally felt right. And I didn't want to continue to lose these memories that rose up, didn't want to pause them at all, so I pulled out my phone and started recording myself as I lay there, propped up now, on my bed. I repeated this again later that same day. And then the next day, a few more times, and I was happy with the flow of it, the relief that recording myself provided too. It felt somehow disconnected from my body, my hands not having to wring out my past.

A few days later, and to my great surprise, I saw that the phone itself had transcribed my recordings. I wasn't needed at all. These are the tools that alarm us, of course. But on this occasion, and for the purpose of writing this book, I saw the automatic transcription as a brilliant possibility, a great pragmatic aid, as well as a way of providing much needed emotional relief.

If I lay down and loosened up and allowed the phone to transcribe my voice—and as it became more familiar with my voice, its rhythms, I knew it would become increasingly accurate in its transcription—if I allowed the phone to transcribe my wandering voice, then I wouldn't have to actively involve my body at all, or at least very minimally. I would enter a sort of dream state and wouldn't have to physically form the words on the page to get the story out, or to immediately see it there before me, coming together. It would only be at the point of looking back over everything that had spilled out of me that I would have to begin the writing, the shaping, the making of those recordings into a book. But at that point it would all be externalized. All the shit would be out of me. It would now be material, instead of an impossibility of jumbled up impressions, and repressions, and avoidances and pain.

When I looked more closely at the transcripts, having decided that this was the way forward, I realized that a couple of them had incredible mis-transcriptions. I was delighted. In one of them, as I was talking about Manolo the phone itself glitched and spontaneously repeatedly transcribed: Cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut, many more times than I've written here. Cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut cut …

Another remarkable thing occurred as I was walking my dog. On that morning I had just begun talking into my phone about Manolo, and was feeling a bit woozy. I get dizzy and hazy-eyed when I think about him. The world spins a bit, and my breathing becomes shallow. Things blur. I've been working on training my little dog Ziggy, and though she tries, she can't control her instincts: she darts after squirrels, yanking my arm as she goes; she lunges at other dogs, though she is small and could easily be thrashed by them. I am constantly having to refocus her attention, heel, heel, as I pull on her leash, and bring her back to my side, and on this day it was a complicated walk through the long and stately main boulevard near the house in Mérida, Paseo Montejo. We had just passed the archeological museum. There were squirrels and dogs and many people and countless food stalls and roaming bands of musicians and much distraction.

When I looked back at the transcription in the app, once back in the blue room, I saw that in the middle of one of my sentences I had suddenly started commanding Ziggy, my voice shifting from speaking about Manolo, as if it were a secret, to strongly commanding my dog: Heel. Ziggy. Heel, heel.

Perhaps I had momentarily forgotten that I was recording when I shifted from whispering into my phone about Manolo to pulling my little dog back into attention, as I simultaneously commanded myself too:

Heal. Heal. Heal.

OceanofPDF.com

EMILIO

Not wanting to sit down to write, that day, as on most days, I circled my computer in the blue room in Mérida. I cleaned the outdoor kitchen; I went on a long walk. I'd adopted a tiny pregnant cat I tended to; I cooked, swam, circled the computer again. I talked on the phone. I went for another walk.

When I chose Mérida as the place my fiancée, Jorge, and I should go on our honeymoon, I had never been there. I wanted to go to Mexico with him, I told him. I wanted something that was both new and familiar as I started this life with him, I told him. I'd found a hacienda that had been converted into a hotel; it had beautiful tropical gardens and was only a half hour outside of town. And Mérida was close to Cuba, I told him. They shared the same air, so it would be both new and familiar for him too. I knew he would like it, I said.

I didn't then realize that I was putting us both back near, but not in, the sites of our childhoods. I would be near, but not in, Mexico City. He would be near, but not in, Havana. I didn't think about it then, perhaps I had not yet realized it, but both he and I had been forced to leave our childhood homes at six years old. He was exiled with his family at six, sent from Cuba to a new life in Chicago. And I was sent away by my family at six, sent from Mexico City to a new life in Lawrence, Kansas, and then Ohio. We didn't talk about this at all in the years we were together. We didn't talk about how we must have understood something about ourselves through each other, and about each other through ourselves, without having to speak it. It wasn't until after our divorce that we spoke about it at all, as a way to understand things, because at that point the uglier effects of those uprootings had reared themselves in our lives together.

Nineteen years after that first honeymoon visit, I went to Mérida at the beginning of the pandemic, as soon as I could take my daughter out of school in early March of 2020. The following month she would turn eighteen, and at that point we had no idea she would not be going back to finish her final year of high school. It simply seemed safer than New York

City. And Jorge, by then my ex-husband, was living in Mérida, so that in this way she could be with both of us. Plus, New York felt like the worst possible place to be then, and so Penelope and I flew south right before things fell apart there. In Mérida things were orderly. Everyone wore masks. There were basic parameters of behavior that everybody followed for safety. There was a communal sense of responsibility that I appreciated. And Penelope could go back and forth between our houses.

A year later I was back in Mérida to work on my book. And on that particular morning I was trying to recall what it had felt like the summer I turned fourteen, when I went to visit my family in Mexico and found that they had moved out of my grandmother's house and into an apartment near the center of town. I was laying on the bed in the blue room, unable to see or to feel it, unable to get myself there. My aunt Sofia called and to get things moving, I asked her a series of questions. I told her I'd been wondering about things and hoped she could help me. I wanted to try to understand the reasons for some of what had happened while I was away, I said. For instance, why had they left my abue's house, the one Sofia herself had grown up in and in which I had lived too, before I was sent away. I had loved that house, it's terraces that gave onto the interior courtyard, and had thought it would always be ours. Why had they moved from it to the apartment in Tlatelolco? I asked.

Your grandfather stopped sending Abue money, she said. He'd never given her much to begin with, she added, with her low, mildly ironic laugh. And then I moved out, she said, and so Abue didn't have enough for the monthly expenses.

Until that moment I had never considered that my adult aunts and uncles might be giving my abue money to help run the house.

In reality, Sofia had moved out because she couldn't take my mother barging in with all of her problems every couple of months, she said, stirring things up and making her own needs everyone else's concern. Demanding all of Abue's attention. Abue always making excuses for her. And, Sofia said, she finally just got fed up with having to help support my mother. Plus, she was thirty-one then and wanted to live on her own.

As she spoke I realized that, yes, this made sense. It all made sense. And it explained why Sofia was mostly absent from my memories of Tlatelolco.

During the summer visits when I was fourteen and fifteen, my family lived in an apartment in the Tlatelolco towers, the blocks of tall buildings that sat at the center of the city. Though I missed the house, I came to love living there—those high towers with their countless apartments created a charged proximity: my sisters and I surrounded by the many other teenagers who lived there, big groups of them, of us, because we became a part of them. Ed's strict and punishing wife was 2000 miles away, our mad mother was nowhere to be seen, Sofia was in her own apartment, and none of the other adults really tended to us, so my teenage sisters and I could run wild in the streets, free and untethered, as much as we wanted.

Our apartment sat near La Plaza de las Tres Culturas which is called so because it's visible there, Mexican time, its history, the colonial cobblestone streets leading to the seventeenth century Spanish church, Templo de Santiago under which lie the partially excavated Aztec pyramids of Tlatelolco, the site of the Aztec's defeat, after which the very stones of those sacred pyramids were used by the Spanish to build that church—and surrounding all this rose the tall modernist towers. And these high buildings housed the thousands of apartments where, during those two summer visits, all of these teenagers lived.

By the time I was sixteen, my family had moved away from Tlatelolco and into the pretty house with many windows in the tree-lined neighborhood that sat some twenty minutes away, yet Marta and I missed Tlatelolco, and so we went there often to hang out with our friends. And on this day I was running late as I rushed between those towering buildings, wondering whom I might bump into, mostly on the lookout for David, the boy we were all madly in love with, as I moved past the church and the Aztec temples, racing to join my wild younger sister Marta and her friends who were sitting in a café scheming about how they were going to get the boy that Marta liked to believe that she was still a virgin, my long hair whipping behind me as I ran to get there in time.

You hold your legs real tight before he enters, her friend was saying as I sat down, my coffee in hand. And then, when he does, you yell out in mock pain and turn your head and make yourself cry. Pinch yourself if you have to!

They all shrieked in laughter, and I knew I couldn't hide my expression, the shock written there, because my fifteen-year-old sister Marta caught my

eyes, glared at my blush, and whispered, Idiot, under her breath, before she turned away in disgust to ignore me again.

Tlatelolco was about running in packs, the rush of other young bodies when yours was just starting to surge, eyeing the other especially thrilling ones from across a plaza, wondering how you might approach them; sometimes it just took a cruising past, on some casual fake errand, sodas from the corner shop for Auntie right when you knew they'd be hanging around; you'd do this once or twice, your sister haughtily swinging her arms, before there'd be a calling out to you by one brave boy, and your sister's quick and clever response; Marta could be hilariously biting; the boy would approach where she now stood scowling, teasingly scold her for her rudeness, and suddenly, you knew them all.

We had big packed parties in the communal spaces, various large halls and common rooms in Tlatelolco, that we filled with dancing and laughing and shrieking, cruising, while we eyed each other in the flashing disco lights before leaning in and pulling our intimates close to whisper confidences in ears about the other boys, the other girls, whom we were only occasionally brave enough to approach. Sometimes we were invited and sometimes we weren't although we went to those parties too because they were more exciting than the ones where my sisters and I already knew everyone, and though I was still shy, my sister Marta certainly wasn't and so at one of those parties to which we were not invited, when I was sixteen years old I met a beautiful boy, one year older than me, tall with black hair and blue eyes, from the Sonoran desert. He was standing with his friends, near the back wall of the room, people dancing all around them while they stood oblivious in a loose circle and talked and joked and laughed together. I eyed him there and could not stop looking, and Marta caught my eyes in their intense engagement, and after rudely asking what I was looking at *¿Que ves, Idiota?* Marta told me to go and talk to him. I nodded no, and she called me stupid and pathetic; she had no patience for this, and so went right up to that boy, pointed at me from the distance, and then pulled him over to me by the arm. And though my heart was beating wildly, in that moment I was happy at her lack of restraint.

Aquí tienes, Mensa, she said, shoving him toward me before turning to huddle with her friends a few feet away.

Many magical things happened to us together, me and that boy, actual magic, and he was there alongside me when my mother tumbled into an especially dark place the following summer. I left him soon after her breakdown for another boy I didn't like nearly as much, a fact that has always tortured me, for though we were only teenagers, that boy, Emilio, felt real, clear and compassionate and unsentimental. And by then I had seen that he was interested too, both in me and in the wider world around us; he took me to museums and to plays and other performances put on by activists, and I was only seventeen, though I had been with him for a full year by then and had never had a love like that. Of course, I understand why I did it now, left him for that other meaningless boy; Emilio was there as my mother broke down, and the shame that I felt regarding this fact festered inside me and grew so large that it swallowed my adolescent love for him.

But now, I was sixteen; I was there for the summer and I had just met him and his parents were visiting their own parents in Sonora the whole time I was there, that first summer together, and he was seventeen, a year older than me, and they'd trusted him to stay alone in their beautiful modernist apartment and so we were always at his parentless home, loads of us, just hanging around.

The week after I met him, he came for the midday meal at my abue's house. When he'd asked what building we lived in, I told him we no longer lived in Tlatelolco, and invited him to our house as we parted that night. Excited and hopeful, I'd written the address on his hand. I told him at what time he should show up, and, to my amazement, he came! I was nervous at first, because Ed's wife in Los Angeles would never have allowed a boy to visit, and my fear of her was so deeply embedded inside me that my heart raced when he arrived at our front gate. But my mother went out into the courtyard and greeted him and his friends in the garden and then went into the kitchen to make us all lunch. My mother never cooked; what was going on? He'd appeared with two of his friends, two of the boys he'd been with at the party the week before. And on this day my mother was in a good and easy mood, and in only forty-five minutes or so she'd made a mound of spaghetti for all of us. We sat at the big table in the dining room together, and Emilio teased me about being an American girl, sweet little sixteen, he sang in his bad English, and I teased him about his norteño accent, the long

cowboy drawl of it, and Marta flirted with one of the friends and my mother flirted with the other and we all laughed with and at each other together.

I began dating Emilio. And soon we were inseparable.

OceanofPDF.com

TO RECORD

After months of not being able to write, the memories began to take hold and so on that morning in Mérida I had turned my recording app on. It made sense that things came to me more easily in Mexico, more strongly; if I additionally spoke into the phone in Spanish, that in itself took me there more quickly, and I didn't want to continue to lose these memories that rose up; they had kept slipping from me as I was about to write them down, these thoughts and images that would flit through my mind in such a tangled string that when I tried to grasp at them, to fish them up and put them on the page they stuttered and wavered and were gone from my mind. But, that morning, laying in the blue room with my phone beside me, I realized that I could simply raise it to my mouth and record myself. This would provide me both with the immediacy of my thoughts and the physical distance that I needed so that I could write about things more directly, if that was what I was after.

After recording myself I had instructed my phone to transcribe what I had spoken by choosing an option that appeared on my screen; and only moments later, as I looked back over the transcription I saw that there were many mistakes in it. Rather than being annoyed I grew excited, as the chance involved in these mistakes was immediately interesting to me.

Relieved that I had found a way forward, excited that I could accomplish all of the initial work in this way—with the help of that mechanical distance—I continued to work in this manner, and after looking at the growing list of the recordings there on my phone a few months later, I told myself to remember to send the transcriptions to myself so that I could begin to play with them on the page. At some point, I knew, I would have to begin to mold and shape it all, would have to begin to work to turn it into something vaguely poetic, rather than the deep pain and dread I'd felt inside when I'd tried to write about it all directly, bodily, my hand on the page.

Across from the bed in the downstairs room at the house in Mérida sat the little blue desk I worked at, and before it the tall windows which had just been cleaned so that I could clearly see the sky, bright with big white clouds racing very quickly across it. It was now October and the season of

the wind and tropical storms. The rain came down in angry waves, flooded the house, seeped into its rooms. I began to think about my daughter's infancy, and the months in which I'd begun to avoid speaking Spanish to her. Even though before she was born I had told myself I would teach Penelope Spanish by exclusively speaking to her in my mother tongue, once she was there it was too emotionally difficult. The tone of my voice shifted slightly when I spoke Spanish and this dissonance would make her cry. I began to believe that perhaps the tone carried some of the weight of my early life; I became convinced of this, and I needed some distance from all that with my new baby. The language itself was a conduit to my past, and I felt an urgency to offer her something new by giving her some space from what I'd experienced, or what my voice could carry of it to her. I believed I could write a whole new way of being a family with her. I believed I could write it all anew. Perhaps this was what she had meant when she angrily stated that I did not deal with things as they really were; perhaps she was accusing me of not dealing with my past, things as they had been, rather than as I wanted them to be now. I had believed I could control things so that my past would not inject itself into our lives. Avoiding speaking Spanish directly to her was only the beginning.

For me Spanish was electric with the charge of all the loss I'd experienced in my childhood. A language of sorrow. It sat heavy in the room as I spoke it. And so, I was deemed irresponsible by many people around me, How can you not actively teach your daughter Spanish?

I didn't have the words to explain it to them.

I was constantly avoiding.

It was also difficult to explain to my daughter that I had been adopted. I didn't want her to know that a mother could give her child away. I didn't want her to know that I'd been given away because my mother was sick. I didn't want her to know that a person can be so sick that they have to give their child away. I didn't want her to fear being sick, or to fear when I was sick, or her father. I didn't want her to fear my mother. Though I feared my mother.

I didn't want my daughter to fear.

So I was constantly avoiding.

The scorpion is inside me still, of course. It connected. It stung me, its poison penetrating and spreading deep within me. I did not die, but I carry it in me, some small part of it fully merged with my insides. I am constantly trying to outrun it.

My mother's birthday is November 16. She is a Scorpio, a scorpion, her illness penetrating inside me too, merged with my insides, and stealthily affecting all of my decisions.

OceanofPDF.com

JULY 23, 2022

I'd been at Sharon's house in Los Angeles for a week when I discovered that the app I'd been using to record myself for this book on Manolo had been deleted. I woke up, reached for the phone to turn the sound machine off—when I am having trouble sleeping I calm myself with the consistent low hum of the sound machine— and started scrolling. The voice app wasn't there. My heart raced. I sat up and stared at the phone more intently, scrolled and scrolled. No other apps, from what I could see, had been deleted.

I wrestled myself out of bed and paced and paced, reading geek blogs to see what might have happened. It seemed the app may have been deleted when my phone updated itself in the middle of the night. I hadn't asked it to do this, to update, the technology determining its own needs without any confirmation from the human. I'm such a hostage to all this! It's an app I got in 2013, so it was old. The oldest on my phone, in fact. Perhaps the new system hadn't recognized it?

Regardless of its weird robot reasons, that app had all of my work since I'd made the decision to move to recording myself for this book, over a years' worth of work.

I got up from the table where I now sat with my tea, the computer open to help me. I paced around a bit more, then sat back down. I was beside myself and began to look everywhere, including in my email, searching for any recordings I may have already sent myself. For any sign of where they may have gone. Why hadn't I sent them as soon as they were transcribed? Why had I left them stored on my phone after reading them? I had told myself to send them. Why hadn't I followed through? I saw this as a major flaw in my character, the inability to follow through. The inability to just finish things, to do things right. I continued to look everywhere on my desktop, searching folders I may have copied things into, so many folders, such disarray. My computer is an incredible mess. Another flaw. I looked in other apps, for any sign of the recordings or any notes that I may have sent to myself prior to the app's disappearance.

Because I did remember sending myself transcriptions. Hadn't I done this at least once or twice? But as I continued searching I saw that it was fruitless. I couldn't find any emails with recordings attached anywhere on my computer either; maybe I really had just thought about sending them and then never followed through, never actually hit send?

It suddenly felt as if everything to do with this book, with the exception of the notes that I'd actually written into my computer, or in notebooks when I had attempted that form of physical writing, had disappeared.

I was in the bathroom now, looking at myself in the mirror. My eyes blinking rapidly. I didn't really know what to do. This meant I would have to start all over again. Did I want to start all over again? It meant I would have to narrate these things about my life once more. I would again have to feel it all as it moved through me. I would have to speak about Manolo.

It was agonizing to think that all of the work I'd done the past year and a half had been deleted. That everything was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

JULY 24, 2022

I needed help.

I went to the Apple store in Pasadena, just a few miles from Sharon's house, and the handsome young jock assigned to assist me stared at me like I was an idiot as I explained my predicament. He addressed me in his cool-boy monotone, and as he vacuously stated that there was nothing he could do, nothing I could do, I became increasingly upset that I hadn't gotten one of the nice science kids instead, the ones I usually get, the ones who smile at me with concern written on their foreheads as they offer various reparative options. Instead, I explained, then I explained again in a slightly different way, even altering my intonation, attempting to sound calmer, more knowledgeable and in control than I felt, while he stared at me blankly and shook his head no. I left the store just as I had entered it: lost. Back home, I called the app developers. After waiting on the phone for an hour or so they too said my recordings were gone. Had I saved them to the Cloud? they asked as I hung up on them while they continued to lecture me about these indeterminate and inaccessible controlling spaces.

I stared at the palm tree in the far distance.

I thought about what I'd lost.

OceanofPDF.com

DISAPPEARED

The transcriptions had begun to pile up in my phone. I had liked looking at them there from time to time, the list of them growing. And then one day I had an unexpected and disquieting phone conversation with a friend. B called as I was on a long walk with my dog. B is a therapist; she is serious and smart, and we have known each other a long time. On this day she began to speak about a difference she sees between fiction and memoir, the ways that she feels fiction can get at emotional truth, can bring the reader very close to a sense of things, or feelings that might be too overwhelming to share otherwise, in memoir, for instance. I told her I thought a lot about these lines, between fiction and nonfiction, and that I see it as a very porous boundary. Our memories seep into everything, I said.

B then told me about a film she had seen that was based on a true story but had been produced and then presented as fiction; she felt it must have been because the subject matter, a series of terrible things that had happened to a young girl, might have been too difficult to tell as memoir. She spoke in halting tones, as if trying to understand something. I listened, sensing, but not asking what this terrible subject matter might have been.

When she paused I told my very close friend of nearly thirty years that as a child I had been sexually molested by Manolo.

Ziggy and I were walking in Pasadena, but now, as I continued to speak to my friend, I was simultaneously thinking about a walk I'd taken in Roanoke a year prior, on a similar street full of lovely homes with blooming gardens, much like this street I was now on in Pasadena while speaking to B on my phone. The phone I use for my recordings.

It was while on that walk in Roanoke the previous year, the first stop on my cross-country drive from New York to Los Angeles to sublet my friend Sharon's house for the first time, that I initially told my analyst that I had begun working on a book about my early childhood and that through it I wanted to begin to think about Manolo more deeply, or more complexly. Told him that I also wanted to allow myself to think about what had happened to me, and thus begin to consider the different ways in which my life had been affected by the molestation.

I wanted to begin to examine how my life had been shaped by the fact that Manolo was a pedophile.

I had started seeing my analyst nine years prior, soon after I'd moved to New York. In his ground floor office on the Upper East Side, I sat in a chair across from him that first session. I didn't know then that soon I would be lying on the couch which was positioned across from me on his other side.

I told him about my life. I had been divorced for two years, I said. Things had still felt messy with my ex-husband, Jorge, when suddenly I'd found Los Angeles impossible to live in. So I'd moved to New York to get away from it all. I'd completely disrupted my life and, much worse, my daughter's life. I couldn't keep moving around like that, I said, now that I had a daughter.

He asked me how long I'd been depressed. I was offended, though I didn't say as much. I hadn't said I was depressed.

And now, in this conversation I was having with my friend B, almost exactly a year later, while walking my dog in Pasadena, I repeated what I had said to my analyst the previous year, told my friend that I didn't want to simply vilify Manolo, told her that I was writing a book through which I wanted to try to understand who he was. And what had made him what he was.

Was there a *what* that he was? Was there a *something that had made him thus* that had made him thus?

What was he?

I then told her that I wanted, also, to try to understand something about the intensely male-dominated macho culture of my childhood. I wanted to understand something about all the ways this machismo affects the girls who get discounted and disappeared, all the girls who are grabbed at and molested, all the girls who are silenced, fouled up, blanked out, vanished, detested, who become women who are mauled and chewed up and fully digested. All of the ways that this system allows for discounted and disappeared women and girls. But I wanted to think about what it does to the boys too, and mostly I wanted to think about what it does to the boys who do not fit into that male model. Are there boys who actually fit into that male model?

My friend became upset. “I don't understand why you would want to tell his story,” she said. Or something like that. “Telling it is a form of forgiveness,” she said. “And it makes me wonder about you, wonder what kind of person would want to place themselves in the middle of all that? Why would you do that to yourself?”

And in that moment, though my intention was not to in any way absolve him, I agreed with her. What was it in me that felt compelled to inhabit this story? What was it in me that wanted to suffer through it? What was it in me that for so many years had diminished what had happened, and until recently could not directly say what it had been? That doubted the plain facts. What was it in me that had been vanished from myself, that had been disappeared?

That night I barely slept. Until then I had only really spoken about Manolo with my analyst. Talking about him, about the book, with another person had upset me. It had fully externalized things that I had rarely dared to speak about. And the things that B had said had unnerved me. It all disturbed and distressed me. I had now put this terrible thing with Manolo out into the world and this had put everything in play; I had released it. All of this unsettled me. And so I could not sleep.

I stretched out my arm, grabbed for the phone, and turned on the sound machine to try to calm myself. I listened to the owl call from its tree, heard the squirrels chase back and forth on the tin roof. I dozed and was awoken by the sharp bang of nuts and branches clanking upon it. I dozed and woke, dozed and woke.

And then, when I got out of bed the next morning all of the recordings, over a years’ worth of work, were gone.

OceanofPDF.com

TO BEGIN AGAIN AFTER THE LOSS OF THE RECORDINGS

I re-installed the updated version of the app, the update itself the reason I'd lost all my work, and, with less rancor than might be expected, I decided to begin recording again.

I was sitting in the dining room of Sharon's house, the house I was once again subletting that summer. Sharon was in Maine, and I was in her home, struggling with this book. I pressed the red record button, looking intently, a bit sternly even, at the machine, as I watched the waves of my own voice pattern themselves on the screen as I spoke.

OK, let's try this again, I said. Audio Memos, you really fucked me. But I'm going to trust you and jump back in and see if it's possible to continue with you.

I paused and had the machine transcribe what I'd just said before I again spoke to it, or to myself, rather: It seems transcription is working a bit more accurately in this new version, which is good, I said. This improvement might allow the work to flow more smoothly. It also helps me feel a tad better about your having lost all of those previous recordings. And, lesson learned, this time I'll actually send the transcriptions to myself as soon as they're completed, before you can delete them.

I frowned at the thing in my hand before continuing in an unbroken line, for some reason feeling I had to explain myself to it: What happened with you was really awful. I'm afraid I couldn't just jump right back in. For weeks now, I've been living in the regret of having lost those recordings. The loss of all that work really messed with me. I simply had to take some time off to collect myself.

After a pause, I began narrating my process: As a way to re-orient myself, I'll attempt to re-capture something of the final recording I made which was about the conversation I had with my friend, B, in which she had spoken to me about the effectiveness of using the tropes of fiction in non-fiction. It was then, because of my work on this book, that I told my friend I had been molested.

My thoughts began to wander. Though parts of my conversation with B had been good, clearly for me it was also piercingly emotional. It was the day before I lost the recordings. I hadn't recorded the actual conversation, I don't go that far, but I had made a recording immediately after the conversation in which I spoke about what we'd discussed. And by talking it through, into my phone, I found that what had been most meaningful for me in that conversation was her inability to understand why I would want to write with any sort of curiosity, or openness, about the person who had molested me, Manolo.

What I'd heard as B spoke was that there was something deeply wrong with me. I defended myself by telling her that I was trying to investigate things, to move away from a simplistic view that flattened my lived experience. My friend then said that everything is taken away from you when you are sexually abused. But that is not how I'd experienced it. For me things were so much more confusing, more mixed up, more internally twisted, perhaps. Certainly more complex. After we hung up I spoke into my recorder about my ambivalence in regard to the trip I'd made with Manolo and my sister and a thirteen-year-old boy, because I'd had such a good time as we voyaged down the Mexican coast and up again. I was thousands of miles from the stifling rule-ridden home in which I lived in the US with Ed and his sadistic wife and was here now, miraculously free and untethered, wandering unbound, voyaging wild the beaches of Mexico with my dangerous, unruly father, my pushy little sister, Marta, and the gentle and beautiful curly-haired older boy who traveled with us, Pablo. I have such fond memories of my sister and myself floating endlessly in water, of zigzagging our way from warm ocean beach to warm ocean beach in Manolo's VW, of swimming for what seemed like whole days, from morning to night, in natural springs, *ojos de agua*, and then too in the dreaminess of the undulating salty ocean, our backs turning dark brown from the sun of it. Of running alongside boats with the children from the seaside villages as the fishermen pulled in their catch, and then watching the women in their embroidered white cotton dresses and beautiful shawls grill on the open flame, while another woman sat to the side of them and pat patted the masa into tortillas with which we ate that fish, grilled crispy skin, while we sat under the shade of the pretty straw shacks that peppered the sand, my long hair dripping as I hungrily grabbed at that fish just off the flame while it was still much too hot, burning my fingers, then licking the

heat and lemon and salt while blowing on the tips of them in rapid little bursts. I think often of the boy with the long soft curls, Pablo, who would swim out further than we dared, his head just visible there—in the perilous distance; I'd grow scared for him, anxiously searching the bright surging surface, the sun's reflection dancing on the waves, teasing my eyes, there he is; no, he is there … before I clearly made out his head as he swam his way back to play with us, joking and floating and bobbing the water together for long stretches of time.

Did he know? Because one time he …

I stopped myself, suddenly incapable of letting my memory roam free, of following my thoughts, because this was when it happened. Is this what B meant when she said that things are taken from you? Because, even now, I stopped myself mid-memory. Our own memories are taken from us? Was the effect so unambiguously devastating?

It was confounding that I could hold on to what was good at all on that trip, that everything didn't come crashing down on me that night, that two things can be so fully true at once. That those two things can be present inside me together. That likely the very next day I was back in the water after yielding to my bossy little sister, who for minutes now had been yelling out commands, Come on! Hurry up! Let's go! as I sat on the low woven palm frond chair and sipped at my orange juice in tiny rhythmic inhales, pursing my lips like a straw, counting each sip, one, two, three, four, five … while she marched grumpily ahead, flat-footed, down the sand and toward the salty sea. This way! Marta yelled, pinwheeling her arm as I woke from my mental wanderings, my necessary counting, and set my glass down before slowly tapping at the table, tap tap tap, three times, was it really there? tapping at my leg, before I ran toward my sister, briefly stopping to look back for Pablo, my foot playing in the already scorching sand as I did so, toes digging. Stop that! she barked as she stomped back up to grab at and pull me down and into the sea by the arm. And then many hours later there we were, laying in the sand under the fiery sun, my angry little sister laying on her belly, finally letting go and settling into a snore-filled nap. Where was Pablo? I remember in the evening looking up at the sky, marveling at the thousands of stars that existed outside of Mexico City, at the constellations that he pointed out to me, as I listened very closely and tried

to memorize the stories Pablo whispered about them—I had never known that stars had stories—while my sister scowled in our direction.

Manolo was off drinking with whatever friends he'd made that day; but he didn't matter at all anymore anyway.

And then the next day we were back in the car again, my sister snoring in the backseat. Talking in her sleep. *¡Sacate de aquí, Cabrón!* Marta was not quite nine years old, and the rest of us laughed at her fierceness as she cursed from deep inside her dreams. Pablo rode in front with Manolo. We didn't question this. He was a boy, and besides, he was older, a teenager, and so my sister and I lay on top of each other in the back seat, she always taking most of the space, though I was a year older. When we'd begin to climb the curvy mountains I would get car sick and have to beg Pablo to roll down his window; I'd push my face up toward the back of his seat, near his neck, to take in the fresh air, my eyes closed against the sharp wind, my long hair whipping my face as my hands inched cautiously closer toward him, stopping just shy of touch as I breathed in the clear clean air deep, deep.

Manolo drove wild as we came back down those mountains, violently swerving the car from side to side like an overgrown teenager—he thrilled at our fear, seemed to grow larger through feeding on it, our shrieks fueling him as they filled the insides of our car, then wafted up into the heavens flowing through those mountain roads while he laughed like the devil from behind that wheel as his heavy hoofs played simultaneous with the gas and the clutch and his sharp jerking claws on the wheel danced us this way and that, flinging our bodies from side to side.

On our first night outside of Mexico City, near the border with Guerrero, we pulled up at a restaurant. We walked up the two or three steps to the large thatched-roofed wooden deck where the rustic tables were set far apart, and, as a woman approached to take our order, Manolo called out to us because down below, in the open yard, there was a doe tied to a tree by a long length of rope that hung from her neck. She stood there passively but looked our way with a sudden jerk of the head when we yelled out and, while the others ordered their cokes, Marta sitting up on her shins so as to better reach the table, I tip-toed down and carefully approached with outstretched hand.

¿La quieres? a man's voice asked from out of the wooded shadows.

I nodded yes very slowly, as I got closer to her, but pulled my arm back quickly when she shuddered in terror.

It's okay, I whispered over and over as I cautiously retreated, It's okay, as the shadow man behind me laughed a jagged laugh.

There were chickens and dogs roaming that yard too, but of course she was the only thing that mattered in this town, which he'd taken us to because he knew some people there.

We'd roll into a pueblo with him, some tiny village, sometimes just a series of little thatched roof houses, late at night, and the first thing you would do was find a place to eat. If he'd been there before everyone would run out, The doctor is here! He acted the part of a doctor, handing out the Pfizer free samples as if he were a real medical man, rather than what he was, an exsalesman with pretty-boy charm. The old women in their sarapes and white cotton dresses, the little barefoot kids, they all rushed toward us. They would kill a chicken for you, make you mole, give you everything they had, they were so happy to see you. And I knew it was likely he had saved some of them. I knew that it could have been as simple as the fizzy vitamin C tablets that you were meant to dump into your water, but which my sisters and I just sucked like candies, laughing stupidly, overly excited, as they foamed in our mouths; I knew that those vitamins alone, which he'd hand out for free—for he loved to be adored, reveled in the joyful swarming around him, the sense of grandeur—had perhaps saved some of those kids' lives.

At the time of our trip, he was no longer working for Pfizer and mostly just stole samples and other medicine from our serious uncle Joaquin, my mother's brother, who had originally gotten him the sales job that he quickly lost. He gave people shots too. Penicillin in those small towns was a minor miracle. What else had he had in that bag of his? They'd encircle him like we did, his children, when he'd appear from out of nowhere, a thrill in that too, the out of nowhere of it, for his scarcity did make him more thrilling when he showed up; and he'd dole out that medicine in those pueblos like he doled out the pesos and ice cream with us, and in those magical moments our father was the doctor, The Doctor is here! through the power of his lie.

I saw this again at seventeen, the reverence he gained through his deception, when under the weight of a year spent with my mother, watching her as she descended into the depths of her depression and sleepless

paranoia, I made my way, slowly, back to the US, stopping a few days in the small village where he then lived, Chicontepec—where he'd declared himself the village doctor. He'd promised to get me a ticket home if only I came to visit, and so I went to see him. Home was LA, and I would arrive back in the city of my adolescence right after my eighteenth birthday, when, finally an adult, I was at long last legally in control of my own destiny, in control of my own life.

At six they had sent me away. At eighteen I recognized how dangerous they were and left of my own volition.

But now I was ten years old, and there was a budding sexuality, I know, because my sister and I flirted with the boy; it was me, really, who flirted with Pablo, sitting over him as he lay propped on his pillow on the bed he slept in with our father, asking him questions about my older sister, who was sweet-tempered and beautiful and kind and was his age, while our father was out roaming the night, questions that Pablo answered in a low tone while looking deep into my eyes.

You like Pilar, I teased at him, a half question. Marta grew bored and left the side of the bed where we sat chatting. Everyone likes Pilar, I went on, she's sooo beautiful. And as I softly touched his chest he continued to stare into my eyes and didn't answer. I pulled my gaze away and diverted it out the window across from the bed and up toward the darkening sky.

And then, a few moments later, I rose to join my sister.

We didn't question this sleeping arrangement then; of course it made sense that my sister and I should sleep together, in the front room, on a blanket or an extra little mattress if there was one. And many years later when Pablo and I finally had sex, he admitted to me that he had liked me too, but that I was too young. He was only a few years older than me, thirteen at the time of our trip, but he knew; he saw that at ten years old he could not even kiss me because I was still a child. Of course, now I understand as I write this, the dark irony in that. That on that trip this thirteen-year-old boy knew I was too young to touch, but my father didn't.

My sister and I ran around in our bikini bottoms, open and joyful and in it, our bodies fully immersed in the sun and the sand and the water; we were a part of it all, expansive and flowing and coursing liquid. And then, a few

days into our voyage, in front of my sister and the boy, Manolo told me I couldn't do that anymore; I was too old and was drawing attention. I needed to wear a top. He said it in a way that was meant to be shaming; he took every chance to humiliate you in front of the others, in front of the others you loved. Had I been aware of my body as a site of shame before that? And was it that very night that he put his hand down my pants?

OceanofPDF.com

BETTER LIFE

When I was six I was given up by my mother. My siblings and I had all been sent to live with various relatives for extended periods of time. Manolo was never around; my mother couldn't handle us alone. Often she would go home to her mother's, but it was too much for my uncles and aunts, her siblings. There were four of us in tow, and though I didn't know it then, there was a fifth, Isabela, on the way. Pilar and Oscar had lived with Manolo's mother, Mama Rita, in Kansas City for most of the previous school year. Both of them were older than me, and while there they had learned English. But what was happening to me now felt different. It was different. My going away with Ed and his wife was presented as a permanent move. My life was going to change. It would be a better life, I was told. Of the four of us I bore the brunt of our mother's neglect, and of her cruelty. It would be different and better for me, I was told. Everyone was told. My aunt Sofia repeated it over and over again, as if she was trying to persuade herself. My sisters and I were convinced. My sisters, Pilar and Marta, were jealous each in their own way. My grandmother must have been convinced herself when she told me, must have believed it would be better for me away from my mother when they made the decision to change my life forever. And now, fifty years later, I can't stay in one place for too long. I leave, I leave, I leave.

My heart hurts as I write this.

OceanofPDF.com

LAWRENCE

I arrived in Lawrence, Kansas, as Ed was finishing his PhD. Soon, he would accept his first teaching position, and we would move to Athens, Ohio, where he would become a young professor. But for now, I had just arrived, and we were here in Lawrence, in the student housing where they still lived, Ed and his wife and their two young sons, a baby, with soft curls and open reaching arms, and a three-year-old, who did not seem to like me much. I would live here, in Lawrence, with them for several more months, until the beginning of August, when we would pile into the car, me and the boys in the backseat, and drive eastward, through St. Louis, where we children would be directed to marvel at Saarinen's Gateway Arch. I was small for my age, anxiously withdrawn, skinny, and scared. Ed spoke softly to me, coaxed, tried to tenderly tease me out of my shell. He sat next to me at the dinner table, bent toward me with a gentle smile. He reached over to feed me himself, leading the fork to my mouth, his wife glaring from across the room. What about their sons, her eyes seemed to demand, why wasn't he paying that kind of attention to them?

I remember Lawrence in sketches … the two-story apartment buildings that housed the students were blue, the downstairs units opened onto sloping grass, walkways that led to each apartment, dividing the slope into repeating patterns of green, like a graph. The apartments above had little balconies adorned with white rails; I played games in the grey driveway with the two little brown-haired boys who were instantly my brothers. I tried to teach them the games I had played with my sisters, whispering the rules in Spanish, white chalk hopscotch and colorful jacks, which they did not want to play. The older boy, Sebastian, was wild, flew his three-year-old body about, stomped and cried and rolled around on the floor, and was often angry with me—I was an intruder. The younger, Thomas, would soon turn two, and he looked always toward me, eagerly offered his hand, which I took in my own to then lead him onto our patch of green grass where he tumbled in his loose diaper. I'd drop myself down by his side, tumble there with him and mug my face close to his to make him laugh, his sweet baby laugh. Ed was inside at his overflowing wooden desk, working, tall piles of

large books all around him. He was indexing all of Mexican literature. Soon he would begin editing a book about contemporary Mexican women authors.

He was an intellectual. He addressed me softly and treated me kindly. I instantly loved him.

OceanofPDF.com

IN OHIO

On the night we arrive it rains frogs, pouring forth from the skies as Ed pulls our bags out of the trunk, his head bowing under the weight of it. A stay at a roadside motel, and on that humid early evening we've just pulled up in front of the drab room which opens, like all of the other drab rooms, onto the parking lot, horseshoeing around it, one night there before moving into our little house tomorrow; Ed is briskly pulling our bags out of the trunk; it is dusk, right before nightfall, when the army of tiny frogs rains down upon us from that thick mid-western sky and with a vigorous jumping up and down excitement at the miracle of it the boys and I run to grab flimsy plastic cups from inside our room, and after adding a little water to the bottom of each cup we then crouch down squatting low yelling out at each other to fill those cups with the little leaping things, actual tiny frogs, nothing more than whirling black spots they seem; we gather and then run them back into the room, back and forth back and forth, we will keep them! until we are ordered, firm and loud, to take every single one of them outside, Right Now, and my heart drops heavy at her hard voice with the thought of having to give them up, but slow and obedient we gather all the fugitive hiding ones; we must crawl under the beds to get them. And then the next morning the air is still a heavy and humid wet, but the sky is clear and blue now, and we are in the little house where we will live for two years before moving across the street to a slightly bigger one with an upstairs. Here in Ohio there are fields upon big open fields of tall grass and dandelion and clover, lazy rolling hills, and so much insect life humming, not another person around, child or adult, just these vast swaths of undulating green that are really other people's yards and gardens, not fenced in, so that you can wander all that landscape undisturbed, so unlike the walled-in gardens of Mexico City, where you walk on sidewalks only—unless you are my older brother, Oscar, who is defiant, and walks in the middle of the street to get a rise out of the adults—so many people always coming at you from every direction everywhere outside; here you can meander in the sweltering green never a sidewalk in sight, thick hazy air, so humid, and rolling flowing tall-grassed slopes, the long and lonely

roamings of a child confused by how I've ended up here in this place that is vastly different from where I've come, and where is this place anyway? How far away are my sisters and my abue who smokes cigarettes as she talks to you, nodding while agreeing with most of the things you say to her, and who is always humming, singing, laughing often, a lit cigarette in her hand as she plays cards and jokes with the other women, crushing it out into the ashtray with a quick swoop of the hand, never taking her eyes off her cards or her opponents whom she regards with a gaze both serious and playful? Without trying to, I imagine them throughout their days, my family, moving here and there, doing all the things I know they must be doing at that very moment; I see them. I see them on the subway going to or coming from work, to or from school, my older sister Pilar's eyes dipping shy as she looks coyly up with a soft smile and tilted head when a boy addresses her; he cannot help himself she is so very pretty; or my younger sister Marta staring at an uncle straight on confrontational, chin raised in defiance when she is caught stealing red-handed for she is not afraid of anyone or anything; or else Marta is walking between aisles of piled up food at the Mercado, sampling things from merchants' knives, or Pilar is in line for the tortillas, ½ a kilo please, the smell of the hot masa, and then Pilar receives them in the clean dishtowel which she holds open as the indigenous woman first weighs and then places them in its center before my sister carefully wraps them to keep them warm on her walk home, which used to be our walk home together, Pia holding my hand. At three o'clock they will be sitting down, eating together in a big group, or in little straggling smaller groups, the mid-day meal. It is night now, my grandmother sitting up in bed, reading by the light of the lamp that stands next to her on the side table where she keeps her most personal things … smiling to herself as she reads, fully in the plot. *Mi Amor*, she says with vowels so slow and long as one of my sisters enters the room and Abue drops her book to her waist to raise her gaze and make eye contact over her glasses, which she uses only to read. It is me she should be saying this to. Me for whom she should be extending her vowels. Me she should be looking at. I am her amor. Where am I? How far away is that house full of people and noise and music in the city that is full of people and noise and music? … here in this house the mood is mostly grey and angry, or silent, Ed and his wife at work much of the day, arguments when they are at home, me there to watch the boys and to pick up after them; and those fields full

of all of these small creatures, frogs that fall from the sky, and tadpoles that swim in ponds until I place them in a jar, and liquid-feeling salamanders that have spots and squirm slimy in my hands; there are many other moist-air thriving critters, amphibians, and little birds too, fledglings that fall tumbling out of trees as they learn to spread their wings, tiny birds that I must now try to save by tossing them back up into their branches, Up you go, and then a second time, Up! Back to your mama. And the neighbor's black cat who comes out to greet me, slow saunter, tail wagging. I walk through the fields and into the woods and sometimes I play with the neighborhood children, almost all of them boys except for the one little girl, a year or two younger than me who lives next door, and who almost bit off her own tongue learning to ride her first bike, training wheels just that morning taken off … Lori was pedaling hard with her tongue sticking out, in full concentration, before she fell and hit her chin on the ground with a whack, her teeth almost biting right through it, stitches for months and eating only through straws … and for a long time only able to communicate through tear-filled wordless grunts.

Only a few months later I fall off my bike too as I am flying fast; downhill I pedal, what are brakes? I do not want to glide, I am flying, fast, fast, away, away from here, I want to soar, I am soaring, I am plummeting downhill, what are brakes? They call out to me. Brakes! What are brakes? No one has shown me. The front wheel starts wobbling, I can feel it jiggle, the handle-bars are trying to shake loose of my hold, but I grasp, for I do not want to stop, and soon I have lost all control of the bike and I do fly now with a hard crash down onto my face and arms. Stop crying Ed's wife scolds, the neighbors will stare, and so I gaze into darkened windows, looking for these angry neighbors as I struggle to hold myself in. I end up in the hospital, and when Ed sees me there in the room he laughs, Oh no! You look like you have horns, he says. Those bumps! They're huge! but when my eyes well up he touches my arm and says softly, I'm just teasing.

In Ohio I become a country child. This is not even a suburb, the small college town where there are other children who live on the block and with whom I chase sometimes because here I have no sisters, and the brother of the tongue girl who is now my friend one day closes the door behind himself as he enters our bedroom and jumps on top of me and kisses my face all over, eager; he is so eager, and I do not stop him, though with his abrasive ways and freckled face, he is not my type.

The big fields, no fences separating the yards, I wander all of them, vibrating with all of that teeming animal life.

In Ohio I am seven years old and I go to school, a Catholic one first where they have so many rules and are always stern and serious and are often mean for no reason and have me do first and second grade in one year. I learn everything.

Where is my beautiful aunt? I miss my mother too, I think. Do I miss my mother?

And at night I cry silently and then I lie very very still in the bed without sleeping while trying to be completely quiet as my mind spins around my plans: how will I get back to all of them … how can I possibly make it all change back? I can write a letter. My abue. She will come get me. Or my aunt Sofia, one of them will come. Wait, I do not have an envelope. I can make an envelope.

But when I try the next day it is wonky and uneven and simply does not work. And how do you make an envelope stay shut when it is so crooked?

In Ohio I learn to pray like a job because Ed's wife is painfully strict, like the nuns at my school, and very religious. She grew up in a convent and she is rigid. And so I have learned to pray each night, kneeling at the side of the bed; but later when I am in that bed alone I close my eyes tight: *Dear god please make it all change back.* And then it is daytime and Ed sits close to me at the table; I am far too small for my age, and this worries him, but his wife does not want him spending so much time with his brother's daughter, or rather the daughter of their best friend, both her husband and his brother's best friend, all three of them, what a circuitous mess. The girl is a convoluted triangulated mess.

But Ed dotes on me, and when he does so he is doting on the child he has adopted but also on his brother's child and also, also, on his best friend's child, all rolled into one.

I did not know any of this then, and so at that time, mostly inside me there is loss and there is stifling confusion which sets my mind to wander, stifling because it is just a dark mass of suffocating not knowing. I want my family. There are tears that come at night. There are nightmares that don't stop; my dreams are only nightmares now. I wake from the same one, that one that repeats almost every night; in it my abue disappears, the floor slowly opening and swallowing her and her friends up as they sit at the long dining room table playing cards. I watch from the doorway aghast as all of

the old ladies fall into that widening chasm, one after the other in succession, into that interminable dark abyss. I wake up weeping. I do not yet understand that it is not my abue but me who has disappeared.

One morning Ed asks if he has heard me crying. Were you crying last night? he asks softly.

No, I say very quiet, and I shake my head, No, and I do not raise my eyes. I am terribly scared of his wife.

In Ohio there is nothing familiar except for Ed because he is my uncle, because he is Manolo's brother. But his wife is the boss of the whole place, and he is not supposed to dote on me.

In Ohio there is nothing familiar and I become a country girl. I change because there is nothing else that I can do and so the wish to write my family a letter starts to disappear like me and I listen to the Carpenters and John Denver and Seasons in the Sun; and sometimes when I walk I count the train cars as they pass in the distance and I less and less imagine where that train is going, less and less imagine other places, because now I know I must stay, and I lie in the big fields looking up at the sky with my adoptive little brother Thomas, or in a year, after I meet her, with my best friend Cathy … I wander for hours in the late afternoon though on Sundays Ed's wife insists we go to the church where all the hippies sing the Jesus hymns: Kumbaya, strumming hard on their acoustic guitars with all their spirit, their heads shaking full of it, all that hair, and I sing too with only a little bit of spirit, because that is all I have to give; still, maybe Jesus will save me, and I feel dizzy from the lack of air with all those crowded in people singing loudly, and maybe this dizziness I am feeling is Jesus; maybe this dizziness is his spirit entering my body; and I pinch at my own leg to keep myself from fainting.

In the winter there is snow that covers the fields and makes everything quiet but in spring and summer and early fall there is this heavy humid heat … loud with so many insects, crickets and cicadas, circling the thick air, and the low bass of the singing toads; and sometimes Ed and his wife take us to run around at the rest stops by the side of the road where we rush up the hills, rolling down them again, and again. Watch this! the boys and I yell at each other, with the cows munching grass in the distance, only occasionally lifting their big heads to stare at us as they chew their cud; what is a cud? … we eat tinned sardines and crackers, or boiled hot dogs

wrapped in bread, buns are so expensive; there is nothing like the food I would eat in Mexico, here it is hamburger helper and hot dogs and tinned sardines.

I learn English very quickly because Ed's wife gets angry when the student TA—who is so proud that she can use her Spanish for a good cause here in Athens, the Spanish she learned in Guatemala—speaks to me in her altruistic español; I am so withdrawn, she wants to help me come out of my shell, a kindness— but Ed's wife gets mad and tells her to stop. Tells the school to make her stop it, and then the TA doesn't speak to me anymore. And at home it is English only too, unless she and Ed are speaking between themselves. And so I learn English very quickly, just a few months. And then the next year they switch me to the public elementary school to which I can walk from our little house. Here I have a speech therapist who teaches me how to say *sh* and how it is different from *ch* and how to make the sound of *th*. I am still very hesitant and timid though I don't yet fully understand how dissimilar from the rest; everything is so different for me here, all of it, I am overrun by it, and so I cannot put myself in their position, the white folks' position in this town where I now live, cannot think very deeply at all about how I am the one who is different from them. So I wander the playground alone and collect pretty rocks, I have a collection, and stay at a distance from the other children … until one day at the public pool a girl comes up to me and says hi and then she brushes her long hair, as if nothing, so cool and easygoing, right there next to where I stand. Things change for me on this day because I have met my new best friend, a brilliant girl who I see again at school, the third grade now; she is considerate and wise (at eight!), and sees I am different and speaks to me softly. She lives with her mother, no father; I later find out her father has died and this mother with whom she lives talks to Cathy about things that she must learn; there are no punishments ever, just a series of long talks and discussions, and the mother lets Cathy talk back and tell her all her reasons why. There is conversation in their house, they talk about things, and they stay thoughtful and calm as they consider each other's position, and I have never seen anything like it. Cathy can ask for a late bedtime on special nights like when *Oliver Twist* plays on the TV. And there are solar panels on her roof and a hidden room inside that we fashion out of a small closet under the tall stairs where we go to read together and tell our secrets, the

boy everyone is in love with at the school, Howie, who we both pretend we do not pine for. Cathy has two brothers who are not handsome and are older and mostly just ignore us, they have their own lives, and only one time do we wrestle with the middle one. Instead, together we make sandwiches on bagels—I have never before seen a bagel—which we then take into the woods and eat alongside each other while lying back on the thick moss.

In Ohio you can walk along the big rain gutters that have an entrance a block beyond the school and in town are cemented gullies. But if you climb into and follow them for a bit soon you will be under a bridge where you must duck to get through it, and then if you follow this gulley for a little bit more beyond this bridge in a few minutes you will be out of town and walking in a proper stream in the middle of the woods, no more cement now, just woods and streams and rocks and moss and mounds of leaves that you can pile up high and even higher and leap into. In summer it is so very hot and muggy, it is steamy, and in the early evening there are fireflies which we gather and drop into little jars, holes in the tops of the lids for breathing.

Sometimes we go swim in the lake, my toes playing the muddy bottom … and to the boys, Thomas and Sebastian, I am an older sister. In Mexico I was in the middle, but here I am the oldest and I have to adjust to this new role. Ed is my father now and Ed's sons are my little brothers.

In school I like a boy who is quiet and I see him once at the Pizza Hut where we go to dinner sometimes. It is the ’70s and Pizza Hut is a place you go out to eat at because it has nice red booths and low red lamps and we like to eat with our hands. I drop my eyes so no one notices me staring at the quiet boy as my brothers squeal and grab for pepperoni.

All the kids at East Elementary are gifted, though none quite as brilliant as Cathy; it is a college town and they are mostly the children of academics, as I later reason. Sometimes the college students come to teach us lessons, math where we make designs with the numbers, and miraculously the designs help us solve the problem. There is one college student who tries to teach us to think outside the box. What box, I wonder. During one class he rips a dollar bill in half to solve a riddle. We shriek out as he does so. All the candy that would have bought! We all love these college students who come to teach us.

Ed is a professor too and is close to his students—they are not much younger than him; they are most of them hippies, and a couple of times he

has big parties and the students come for tacos. I like them. They are like my uncles and aunts, but different. One rides a motorcycle and people seem to be worried about him. He is dangerous and this puts him in danger. In Mexico I have an uncle, Felix, who is dangerous, so I get it. He, like my uncle Felix, is an artist. He, like my uncle, has long hair and is probably a Marxist. The tacos have store-bought hard shells, the only kind of tortillas Ed can find in Athens, Ohio.

For me everything has changed, even the tortillas.

Ed's wife hates my family and says many terrible things about them, focusing most of her hatred on my mother; she says horrid things, things that make me ashamed for her but also of myself and also that I am a part of my family, a part of my mother. Ed's wife is Cuban, not Mexican, which she stresses often because as a general rule she does not like Mexicans, she says. In fact, she mostly deeply dislikes them. In Ohio I learn to be disliked and constantly humiliated and ashamed. When I am around Ed's wife I am very often scared.

After the first year with them I get sent back to Mexico City during summer vacations. Ed's wife wants to show me what she has saved me from, she later tells me. But what she doesn't understand is that when I am there I am joyful. I am in it. I am a part of the people around me, however little she likes us. Whereas in Ohio I am ashamed, in Mexico I bask in the fact that she does not like us. These are my sisters. These are my uncles and aunts. This is my abue.

And then, back in Ohio a few months later, without knowing I know it, I now know that writing a letter will not matter. It will not make a difference. I was there with my family for two months and they did not offer to let me to stay. They did not look at me with concern, or ask me what I wanted. My going back to Ed's family was a given I could not question. And now, back in Ohio, it has worked its way deep inside my body, this knowledge. I just have to turn that Mexico City with my family part of me off. I have two parts, the deep inside my body now understands, and when I am here in Ohio, I have to turn the part of me that longs to be back in Mexico off. I have to shut the in Mexico part down. I do not know that I understand this now, but I understand it: I have two lives. And they are very different. They do seep into each other, of course. My family seeps in mostly at night. Or when I am daydreaming and my mind suddenly leads me right to them and I find myself seeing them on the subway, or walking in the park with a

paleta. Or when I wake up, sudden, from a nightmare, my abue and her friends tumbling deep into that gaping chasm. (And my mother? Did I ever dream about my mother?)

Or when I, in the middle of the night, suddenly begin to cry.

But once I have made friends, during the daytime I'm mostly ok. During the daytime I am in school or wandering the fields or playing with my brothers. And then, when I am almost eleven, Ed gets a job at a new University and we are done with Ohio.

We will live in Los Angeles next.

OceanofPDF.com

CONDENSATION & DISPLACEMENT

It was a starless winter night, dark and cold. I was sitting in my house in Los Angeles, a blanket pulled up to my neck; I'd be here a few more weeks. The new tenants would arrive the following month and I had to paint the walls and fix everything the previous tenants had damaged. This was the house I'd lived in with my husband and my daughter. Jorge had bought the empty hillside lot and built the house upon it himself. He had purposely not levelled the lot, an artistic conceit, so that the house followed the landscape's hilly form, and was thus made up of a series of ascending levels that encircled an interior courtyard; it reminded me of the houses in Mexico City, with their tall walls and gated entries that led to magical secret gardens. Four years after he finished the house, our daughter, Penelope, was born in it. And now, some twenty years later, we were divorced and Penelope lived on her own in New York, and I lived from the rental of this house, along with some adjunct teaching. That night I was alone in the living room that sits above the rest of the house, up a winding set of stairs from the dining room and kitchen. The TV was on in front of me, *L'Enfant Secret* on its screen. I had not seen the film for a decade or so but had recently remembered that the actress who plays the title character, Elie, looks just like my aunt Sofia, a fact that had been, that first time seeing the film, both pleasantly surprising and uncannily disturbing. I wanted to see the film again.

There are scenes where it is as if I am looking at my aunt walk into the room in her long trench-coat: that is my aunt turning her head slowly toward me now; she glances straight at me for a moment before averting her eyes, as she continues on with her scene. My aunt's cool acceptance of things is similar to the character's too, her contained emotion; though unlike Elie my aunt was stable, and serious; the madness surrounded her in the form of her sister, but it wasn't inside her.

In *L'Enfant Secret*, Elie is a woman who cannot take care of her child because she is unstable. She is a woman who gives her child away to a relative of the child's father.

In *L’Enfant Secret*, Elie, the mother who sends her son away, looks like my aunt Sofia, who in my life was a trusted confidante, and a caring person. But though she looks like Sofia, who was safe, Elie acts like my mother, who was dangerous. As when I wake from a particularly emotional dream, when the film ended and I woke from the magic of the screen, I was thrown into confusion.

I turned the TV off and looked away from the screen and out the tall window that gives onto the interior courtyard. I would be here only a few more weeks; it was winter and the heat was not working so it was cold inside the house. Everything that had stopped working, including the heater, had to be repaired before the new tenants arrived. The tall silk-tree at the center of the courtyard was silhouetted dark beyond my balcony. Its bark is covered in protective thorns, and in spring it gives off gigantic pink flowers. A push pull of sorts. Jorge had planted the tree twenty years before and it was now dying, most of its branches barren. In the distance I could spy my neighbor's shadowed figure as she moved inside her low-lit house. She was a woman like me, alone and with one daughter. Only she was not repeatedly leaving her home, not repeatedly leaving her life.

OceanofPDF.com

DURANGO

Before going to bed I called my aunt. I wanted to tell her about the film, about the uncanny resemblance, which I was excited about. It was like I was looking at you forty years ago, I said. I then told her about the subject of the film, which made the resemblance further disquieting. I asked her to send me a picture of herself as a young woman. I then sent her a photo I'd taken of the screen as the actress looked directly at the camera. I had rewound and paused the film when she did so, so I could take that photo.

My aunt Sofia sent me a picture of herself, but she also sent a photo of me as a very young girl.

Look at what I found a few days ago, she said.

That's me? How old am I there? I asked.

Two, she said.

I was puzzled. Where had she taken that photo? Though there was a river behind me, the landscape was rocky and barren. The place looked both odd and familiar, and after a moment I realized it must be Torreón. In the picture I stand alone in the riverbed; it is desolate and arid, with scrub that looks like the California chaparral, which is why I'd assumed it was the desert landscape near Torreón, but I am too young in the photo. I had been five or six when Sofia had taken me to them there after they'd left me in Mexico City.

Where were we? I asked.

Durango, she said. I took you to see them, your mother and Manolo and your siblings. I took you to meet Marta; she was only a few months old then.

I was perplexed, Durango?

You wanted to see them, she said. My aunt paused, and I sensed the hesitation. When she began to speak again her voice had shifted, was lower now, and slow, They left you at Abue's. With Abue and me, when they moved to Durango before Marta was born. You missed them. So I took you on a trip to meet the baby.

To meet Marta? So Torreón was not the first time they'd left me behind?

It was clear my aunt could hear the distress in my voice. No, Vero, she said, softly now. It was not the first time.

An hour before I called you the next morning, Dr. Jacobs, my daughter called me. Penelope was angry with me again. She could get so frustrated with me, infuriated by me, in fact. She was nineteen and seemed constantly upset with me lately. While we were arguing she told me I idealized things, that I didn't look at things as they really were, something I didn't see or agree with at all. Her statement confused me. Her anger confused me. Was she telling me that I avoided reality?

It's more that you don't see how your choices affect other people, she'd said.

I thought about my conversation with my aunt Sofia the previous night, about how true Penelope's statement was in regard to my mother and Manolo, in regard to them. But this was not how I was. I always thought about my daughter. There was never a moment in which Penelope was not in my thoughts.

All the moving around, she said. Why can't you just settle down? It makes my head spin.

I don't know, I said.

We were both quiet for a long time. It's hard on me too, she said, her tone softening. The things you do affect me, she added.

During our call that morning I told you all this, Dr. Jacobs, and you remained mostly silent.

I didn't know they'd left me behind as a baby, I said. I didn't know it was something that kept repeatedly happening.

I'm sorry, you said.

Hours later, I looked around myself; I focused on my computer, open on the desk in front of me, and at the blank screen before me, unsure of what had happened to my day. I just needed to stop now. I couldn't get a word on the page. Maybe I could work a bit extra tomorrow …

I called out to the dog, Ziggy! Come, girl! Come!

Where had she gone?

OceanofPDF.com

ELLA

In 2020 when I was in Mérida at the beginning of the pandemic, a little stray cat adopted Penelope and me. She ran toward us, crying out to us from the distance, begging as we arrived home; she then hissed at us as we approached more closely, and ran and hid under a car that was parked in front of our house. But then, after having retreated with that angry hiss, she eagerly rushed back toward us to ask for food and love. We stood and looked at her, laughing at her funny behavior, then Penelope ran into the house to see what she could find for her. After that, and on many subsequent nights, we'd sit very still on our stoop with some yummy thing or other placed before us while we patiently waited for her to come to us. The little cat would approach slowly, then rub her side against our legs, but if we reached down to pet her she'd hiss and pull away, run to hide under the car. We were patient. I understand those two conflicting drives, the protective hissing, even as all you want is love.

In 2021 when I went there to work on my book, though it was a whole year later, she came running to greet me at my doorstep on my second night back in Mérida, as I returned from dinner. She was hugely pregnant. Of course I immediately fed her, a tin of Spanish sardines, and that time, a year later, she let me pet her. The next night it was the same. The third night friends came over for dinner, and she was waiting on my stoop when I went to open the door for them. They were floored by her. How sweet she was, they exclaimed, though she repeatedly hissed at them too. They laughed at her advance and retreat as my daughter and I had. I told them that she'd adopted us the year before, the dirty little cat, white with grey blotches on her face and side, and lots of filth all over, so funny in her rejecting desire. My friends patiently lured her into the house. They pet and caressed her as I cooked us dinner.

My daughter and I had tried to bring her in the previous year; we did finally tempt her inside with food, but she was so uncomfortable she only made it into the front room before she quickly grew gravely anxious; feeling trapped she ran to the door and wailed; she wanted out. Now she came in

and ate, and rather than begging to leave, she walked into the courtyard on her own and patiently watched us from the distance as we ate the dinner I'd prepared in the patio garden.

She never left. My friends, who are real cat people, told me she'd chosen me and I knew I had to care for her while she was pregnant, but was at a loss too, as I was back in Mérida to work on my book. I had to return to New York in two weeks. How long was this going to take? How pregnant was she? But she stayed in the courtyard and I fed her and set up a litter box, which she mostly didn't use, being puzzled by it. She stopped hissing so much and cried for me to come out from the blue room and pet her. I'd scratch her head and she'd rub and rub on my legs. And even though she was pregnant, and so must have been deeply and perpetually hungry, this love was now more important to her than the food in the bowl in my hand, that I was waiting to place down for her.

Then one day she disappeared, and I thought she'd somehow managed to jump out over the tall wall, like a tom I'd found did the day before when I shooed him out, thinking of her, protective of her, of course. Maybe he'd chased her out? I worried about her.

That afternoon another friend and I heard a cat calling, a different, softer, more plaintive cry, which we followed until we found her behind some hollow stairs in the interior courtyard, with her little brood at her nipples. Four tiny cats. She looked up at me, bewildered by what was happening to her, but complacent too—she always seems to be feeling two things at once, and in this I understood her. I immediately brought her food and water, as I hadn't seen her for eighteen hours and knew she must be starving, placing the food next to her in the hollowed out back of the stairs. She pulled away from the kittens to eat and drink as they wailed.

I've never had newborn kittens. And I became obsessed with the new life. Though she remained more interesting to me. They'd wail loudly as she pulled away even a bit and I could see the exhaustion in her eyes. They would devour her. She began hissing at me more now, as I put her food down, but I knew what it was, that she was protecting her kittens, and she still let me pet her after the preliminary hissing, her feet kneading the towels I'd placed down for her and her babies as I scratched at her head.

I named her Ella, and my daughter, who would arrive the next day wanted to name all four kittens after herself. Penelope. She's so funny, my

daughter. I love that about her.

Penelope was angry with me then too. I was giving her space, because I knew that she needed to go through this. I was in Mérida and she was in NY and this was giving her the actual space to express her adolescent anger, to define her experience of her childhood, without my interpretation on it. I know I am relentless with my interpretations. I analyze and analyze and over-analyze. It's how I grew up, trying to understand the confounding adults around me. Maybe she did this because of that … maybe he did this because of that other thing. I always think I'll understand. I believe I'll make sense of it all, somehow. It's a false position of power, I know, that arises from confusion. If I could understand, well, that was something. Though you can never quite get to people or their reasons why.

Penelope needed some distance from it. I knew that.

She told me that my memories of us as happy were wrong; they were not her memories. I was sad all the time, she told me.

But that's not how I remember it, I said.

You're not listening to me. What did I just say? These are my memories, she clarified. You were horrible to me, she told me.

But I was kind, I said. And we had so much fun together.

Yes, but you were overly idealistic and guilted me, and kept me separate from everything that you thought might hurt me.

I don't remember any of this, I said.

Yes, that's because you idealize things, she said. And then she said, Also, you made me feel guilty for wanting to go live with my dad.

And I knew that she was right.

You wanted me all to yourself, she said.

And I knew that she was right again.

But my childhood was not some fairytale mommy daughter story, she said, like some ridiculous TV show we used to watch together … I wish my life had been that, she said, But it wasn't. And I'm smart enough to know it's a fantasy, she said. What you wanted was a fantasy, she said.

And I knew that she was right. I fantasized about living alone with my daughter, because it was what, in some deep part of myself that I keep mostly hidden, I wished I'd had with my mother. But I was not the one my mother had wanted. The one she had wanted was Marta, and though they could scare me when they were together, I'd observe them from a distance,

their legs touching as they sat on the couch near each other, no space for anybody else, laughing like best friends, mocking everyone they knew, and laughing more wickedly, on and on for hours, until they had angered each other and had begun to yell and scream one at the other with boundless fury.

And even though I had watched them from a distance, and seen this many many times, I believe I would partially ignore the reality of these scarier outbursts because at some profound level I wished I'd had my mother, and for a very long time this wish was stronger than the fear, or the self-preservation.

Before returning to New York three weeks later, Penelope and I transported the kittens to a shelter, where they would keep them with Ella until the kittens were old enough to be adopted out.

OceanofPDF.com

MY ANALYST SAID

My analyst said, You know, this is not everything. This is not everything that there was, not everything you are.

What? I asked.

This thing that happened to you. You are much more than that.

I'd been attempting to talk to him about the molestation for the first time since I began my analysis nine years before. I'd mentioned it in the past, of course, but only a few times, and then only very briefly, barely touching upon it before retreating, before returning to the safety of my usual subjects: work, my daughter, relationships, my restlessness. I mostly stayed on the day to day and rarely roamed into my past. He knew how much this recent work on Manolo had unnerved me. How it pained and rattled me. How terrible it was to look. Perhaps he was concerned for me. It is not everything, he assured me.

I considered what he said as I stared out the big window before me. I'd spent the last few years, since the beginning of the pandemic, moving from place to place. Mostly I sublet different friends' houses, mostly they were people who had left their homes and gone off to live somewhere else for a while themselves. Sometimes, in my wanderings, I'd return to one or another of those houses, six months, a year later. Now I was in the bedroom at Sharon's house in Los Angeles. I was laying on Sharon's bed.

I lie down to speak to my analyst in order to simulate the experience of being in his office, of lying on his couch. I speak into the phone. Sometimes I close my eyes. It is so intimate, his words entering my head like thoughts. Lying on his actual couch ended at the dawn of COVID. In those early days of mass confusion I urged him not to take the train into the city any longer; I worry about you, I'd said. He was almost ninety years old. I left for Mexico the day after I said this to him, and now I'd not seen him in person in over two years.

I adjusted the phone a bit before responding: Yes, I know this. But right now I need to think about the molestation. I need to at the moment. The book is forcing me to do this now. But, of course, I know I'm the one who chose the subject for the book. I'm both the one who led myself here, the

one insistently keeping myself here, and the one who avoids and wants to run from it all. It's like I'm at a door that has been firmly closed for so long that I almost didn't see it as a door any longer. It was a wall, in fact, plastered over, no access; though sometimes a chilling draft would escape through some hidden crevice. And now I'm finally able to see the seam and slowly try to pry it open. Very slowly, because I'm terrified. I open just a bit, and then I slam it shut. Again and again and again.

What are you afraid of? he asked.

I was indignant. He should know, I thought to myself. I'd been with him for nine years.

And then I realized he just wanted me to say it. To put language to it. This was the point of what I was doing with him, I was suddenly newly aware. So I said it.

Of falling apart, I said. Of not being able to handle it. My mother is mad after all. I'm afraid I could become her?

My heart was beating fast and I grew weepy. I haven't been sleeping, I told him. After my conversation with my friend B, I couldn't sleep at all, I told him. I never speak about what happened to me at all, I told him. I am agitated and anxious now that I am doing so. I don't know if I can do this, I said.

I swallowed hard before continuing, And yet I go on because I'm hoping that opening the door will allow me a vista into my own life. The door, I believe, leads to something larger than a room, it leads to a vista, a whole new way of seeing.

I paused again, wanting to get up from the bed, to walk around a bit, to get away, but this was analysis so I lay still; I forced myself to stay there. I struggled to continue.

I've never really been able to see myself there, I said. I feel somehow disconnected from it, from what happened. But I now feel that if I can come to see myself there, as a girl, in that room, then through this act of finally seeing I can begin to understand the woman I've become, through looking at the molestation and the ways it has affected me.

I turned on my side for a bit, then back again so that I was facing forward once more, straight on; my eyes darted about before I was able to calm them, to turn my gaze, fix it out the window again. The palm tree was silhouetted in the distance. Now, this is a vista, I thought to myself as I looked out. The owl called from behind me.

I ran my hand over my face; I was near tears as I went on, I can be indignant and critical and keep myself distant from things, I said. I didn't tell him that I was indignant toward him just a few minutes ago, when he'd asked a simple question; it comes on so quickly.

I paused again, and breathed deeply before continuing very slowly, And this finally wanting to see seems important right now, because I believe it is connected, because my inability to look at it—to open that door—has kept me that passive terrified child to some extent—defensive and guarded, anxious, and thus unable to be fully present much of the time. I now believe that if I can begin to think about myself as a girl in the room that night—my reaction to what was happening, in my body as well as in my mind, those two things together but also completely separated, severed there that night, because I know my body must have reacted as a stimulated body does, I know at some level it must have been aroused, by the man who I believed was my father, even as my mind, paralyzed in horror, separated itself.

But looking at it all brings me much pain, which often takes the form of paralyzing anxiety.

Dr. J breathed audibly. Hmmm, he added in affirmation. This small sound helped me to continue, Even though I have been working on this for well over a year—and avoiding it as much as working on it, I know—I still have very little memory of any of it. My mind goes completely black at the point when his hand entered my underwear. I know that this is what happens, we all know that this is what sometimes happens with trauma, but when it is you who it is happening to, it is deeply disturbing. How can it be? How can it be me who goes blank? Me who reads like a simple case history?

There was a long silent pause before I continued, I know I'm still nowhere near the vista I am in search of. I know I am only at the edges of a very heavy door.

When our session ended I noticed I had flattened myself into the mattress.

I unglued myself from it and made my way to the kitchen where I boiled water for tea. After it steeped for a bit I took my cup of tea to the table in the dining room. This room was beautiful too, as the bedroom was, with a wall of tall windows and a high, pitched roof, warm redwood walls, ’40s Los Angeles modernism, clean and simple, clear and unobstructed. A wooden deck outside the glass dining room door had a big pine tree

growing through it. The deck itself sat above a steeply sloped yard full of native plants, cactus and various kinds of desert shrubs, toyon, and palo verde and California wild rose.

I gazed out over the deck for a few minutes, recovering myself. Then, while sitting at the dining room table, sipping my tea slowly, looking out into the vista in the same direction though from a different angle than in the bedroom where I lay just a few minutes before, past the pine and toward the further tree in the distance, the tall palm, I remembered that a few days prior I told Dr. J that at twelve years old I suddenly became strong. I pretty much became a younger, messier version of the person I am now. I went from being scared and withdrawn and acquiescent, always striving to be simple and good, always wanting peace, to at twelve becoming someone who understood my own intelligence, who challenged mindless authority, who questioned my position in relation to others, and who pushed against what I was expected to do or be.

It was only today, after this difficult session with Dr. J, that I made the connection that it was at twelve years old that I was told Manolo was not my father. I was twelve when my adoptive parents dropped the news.

I was twelve when I escaped the weight of biological incest.

The man who abused me, I found out, was not actually my father.

Did that knowledge somehow liberate me? I did not at all recall being molested at the time that they told me, I don't think. I did not at all recall what Manolo had done to me just a few years earlier. It was fully locked away inside me then. And yet in some mysterious way the knowledge that he was not my father worked itself into those inaccessible depths we all have at our core, and freed me. Would the further knowledge I'd recently acquired, and my growing push for the ability to look at things more directly, this new vista I was in search of, somehow liberate me now?

From what? Dr. J asked the next time we spoke.

OceanofPDF.com

BREATHE

Sometimes, as I was checking a transcription against the recording, listening to myself in the middle of a memory while I made the necessary corrections to the text as transcribed by the machine, the me that was the analytical critic, the logical writing one, listening and editing and altering and fixing the me that was the messy wandering mind, the babbling one whom my phone captured so effectively—repeatedly pausing the device when my voice got further than my fingers could keep up with, got faster than my typing—I found I was not breathing. My chest was tight and my throat constricted, and by the time I consciously felt it, it was clear that I'd been holding my breath for many consecutive seconds. I'd remind myself to breathe as I paused the recording. I'd get up from the table and go look for the dog. I'd wash the dishes and wipe down the counters. Sometimes I'd step outside, onto the deck and through the garden of cactus and salvias and other desert plants, and out the front gate and into the hills, where I would take a long walk.

OceanofPDF.com

BEGINNING AGAIN, AGAIN

You are both brilliant and kind, Dr. Jacobs. Because you are kind you do not telescope your brilliance. It was your idea that I should be in psychoanalysis in the first place. I'd gone to you for therapy. I was lost, so lost that I had frightened myself. I had made a cross-country move, uprooting my life, my daughter's life, in a way that terrified me. There were reasons for the move, yes, but it is so extreme, moving across the country for reasons.

When I was feeling especially desolate in regard to this move, you'd remind me of those reasons. You'd list a few of them for me and explain why they made sense.

I count this form of absolution chief among your kindnesses.

On that first day I walked in and sat in the chair across from you in your office and told you about my recent move and discussed my coming plans in New York, told you about several projects I was working on, as if it all had a sense to it. After a pause I let you know that I felt lost and scared. I was working on a film too; and if things went as planned I was going to be involving other people. I didn't want to make a mess of it. I didn't want my tendency toward self-sabotage to ruin things for them.

I'd like to have you come for psychoanalysis, you said the second time I saw you.

Ok, I said.

I think it can be quite helpful for someone such as yourself; but it's a commitment, you said.

Ok, I said.

I kept from asking what kind of a someone I was.

It's a commitment you repeated. Bare minimum three times a week, you said.

I paused, overwhelmed by this fact, but then replied, Ok.

You then told the only joke you've told in the nine years I've been seeing you: Freud would see his patients six times a week. And Freud believed, you went on, that when he saw them again after that one day pause, a crust, or shell, would have built so thick that he'd have to begin the process of carefully cracking through it all once more. You laughed.

I smiled at you, Ok, I said.

Although I'd been primarily working on other things for a while, films mostly, I put all of that aside for a bit and began working on this book. We were eleven months into the pandemic; the forced isolation now gave me the space in which to finally do so. After torturing myself about it for a while I realized the book should be about my early childhood in Mexico. This would provide a good opportunity to incorporate the psycho-analysis into my writing, something I'd been wanting to do for a long time. Also, I'd spoken very little to you about my childhood before the adoption at six years old, Dr. Jacobs. Maybe this book would be a way to initiate that process as well. Everything else could flow out of these early years, both in the book, and in the analysis with you, Dr. J, as it does in our lives. Perhaps the book would help lead me to something that I hadn't yet been able to get to in the analysis alone, my defenses so strong.

Everything has been built upon the shaky foundation of a childhood so confusing, so painful, that after nine years I still rarely brought it in to you, Dr. Jacobs.

Ridiculously, I knew, almost as if I believed that our relationship could be built without it. That I could be built without it. Yet it was the very precarious nature of this foundation, my foundation, that made me fear that if I put too much attention to it, it would crumble. I would crumble. It was the shaky nature of it that made it impossible to look. A conundrum, as it was only through seeing that I could hope to shift.

All of this had me spinning.

And yet I began to write. The first thing that came up was a memory, probably the strongest memory of my early childhood, which was of us, my family in Mexico, my mother scooping me up from out of the water after I was stung by a scorpion. It was my only memory of her being maternal with me, and so it was a dominant one. Proof that she had loved me?

She carried me, stumbling, to Manolo and told him I had to be rushed to the hospital. Manolo refused to get up from where he sat drinking with friends.

We were at the motel in Iguala. My mother was sexy in her bikini. I was dripping wet. She ran out into the road in her bathing suit, holding me, carrying me, hobbling down the thoroughfare—where did she think she was

going?—when a bus approached. Somehow, she flagged it down. How, if she was holding me? How could she possibly wave her arms wildly if she was holding me? Perhaps she simply ran into the middle of the road so that the driver was forced to stop. The bus driver did pull over and my mother ran onto the bus with me in her arms, crying. (In that sentence which one of us is crying?) He rushed us to the hospital and my next memory is of my favorite uncle coming to visit me there as I was recovering days later.

My mother fades from my mind at this point. It is just me lying in the hospital bed and my young uncle there at my side, trying to make me laugh.

As I was writing this memory, in my house in Mérida, I realized that it was Manolo who most interested me now. It was the first time, in the countless times I'd recalled this scene, that Manolo came anywhere near the center. But now it was different … because for the first time I asked myself, who is it that can be told their child will surely die if they are not rushed to the hospital, and decides to keep drinking with his friends instead?

Who was he?

I bathed that day, after a long walk under the hot Yucatecan sun, and as the water ran down my face, my stomach suddenly twisted inside me.

I was instantly immobile under the cool shower and so I stood there fixed and unblinking, naked as I considered the fact, which came to me clearly now, that though it wasn't until many years later that I learned I was not his daughter, of course Manolo knew it then. I was not his child.

She was asking him to save another man's daughter.

He met her eyes as he spoke it.

No, he said.

OceanofPDF.com

CRACK

When I take time off from working on this book, upon returning to it, even if it has only been a week, it is as if I must begin again, as if anew, to crack through the crust of my resistance.

But, of course, much of the time when we pull away, even if it looks like something else—attending to important business, meetings and grant proposals and phone calls with collaborators, or other duty loudly calling—it is because we are in pain.

OceanofPDF.com

RUNNING

I stay logical and clear. I operate on the surface. I have friends with whom I share my time. I find joy in my days. I see my daughter often. I try to make my work. Though even in the clarity of work, the deep parts interrupt. The trip with Manolo and Marta and Pablo flashes through my mind. There is a switch, a before and after, as there was on that trip. The joy of it so all-encompassing, the horror I was able to block, so that it is mostly the before, the joy, I wakefully remember. The after, the horror, only comes on in the dark, only comes on as a vague underlying feeling that is always there beneath the surface, dormant but there, only rising in me from time to time; I can usually control it; though sometimes it rises so forcefully it stops me dead in my tracks. It intrudes into my more active wakeful life. It starts to take over. Projects come to a halt. I become disordered. I begin to doubt. I am lost and feel shame. What's happened, what is this before and after that both seem to exist in me at once?

I am awash in confusion.

And then I move again.

OceanofPDF.com

LACUNA

I lean down toward my mother where she sits in a corner of the room, staring, eyes blank, into the distance. I am seventeen, in my hand I hold a small gift that I bought for her on my way home from my work at the National Palace. I am always thinking of my mother, worrying, trying to make it all okay. In the Zocalo I'd stopped in front of a young Zapotecan woman; she was very pretty, her colorful clothes and long black braids, her baby wrapped onto her back with a bright sarape. She had a blanket laid out with bracelets and sage and dozens of pairs of little rose-shaped coral earrings. I bent down and picked out the nicest pair and after asking the price pulled out my coin purse to pay her.

I took the metro home. I ran up the stairs of our building. And now, back inside our apartment, I greet my mother softly, try to make my voice a warm caress, look at her there, where she sits in the corner of the room and I inch my way toward her. I gently place the earrings in my mother's hand. Look how sweet, I whisper, trying to catch her eyes. My mother continues to stare blankly in front of herself as she begins to roll my gift in her fingers without looking at it, back and forth, pressing down hard, back and forth. *¿Que haces, Mamí?* It's okay, I say, caressing her arm. She looks briefly at me, terror in her eyes. I look down at her hand to see that her fingers are bleeding. She has pressed down on the coral so hard that they have started to bleed. I take her hand then, which she offers with no resistance, remove the earrings, and hold it firmly in mine. I focus myself, and with a directed tender attention, I look into her eyes, try to make her look at me, while I tell her it will be okay. We will be okay, I say, begging my mother out of her depths.

OceanofPDF.com

THIS OR THAT

It was October, 2021 and my daughter and I flew into Austin for a visit to my youngest sister. We rented a car at the airport, loaded our bags into the trunk, and while I adjusted my seat and mirrors, Penelope reached over and typed Isabela's address into my phone. She put on some music and looked out the window while I followed the map to my sister's place, moving west through the city. After twenty or so minutes we pulled up at Isa's row house, in a lane of lots of similar row houses, sequentially laid out.

As we walked through Isa's front door the dogs barked wildly and then excitedly rushed us, tails wagging, tongues hanging out of big eager mouths, wet dog eyes questioning, curious: *Where have you been*? My daughter reached down and pet and pet them as they squirmed and wriggled all around her in response to her generous love; she scratched at their ears and their backs and told them sweet things about themselves, Oh, look at you, you're so pretty; Look at your big sweet eyes; You're a very good dog, yes you are … as Isabela, her black hair flowing thick behind her, came toward us too now, a bright smile on her face, *¡Hola, Vero!*

We hugged, and I felt it. My youngest sister.

Isabela is seven years younger than me. Isabela is the sister I only knew from my summer vacations. Because by the time she was born I was gone.

She turned and embraced Penelope, who was still quite involved with the dogs.

Hours later, as I sat in her dining room, watching her, I noted her agility in the kitchen; her food is my early childhood and she throws it together instinctively; it is muscle memory for her. She, my sister, was there with them, our family, the women at its center, while I was far away, in another sadder, more isolating world where we ate mostly tuna and hamburger helper, frozen dinners on TV trays in the den. But she, as a girl in the midst of it, learned without knowing she was learning all the things I don't know, that knowledge so deep in her that it looks like instinct, including in preparing these meals which she modifies a bit to our taste, a tad less spicy, olive instead of corn oil, organic broth instead of bouillon. Isa was born the year after I was given away. More than likely, my mother was already then

pregnant with her. I first met my sister when she was two years old. On that summer visit I was nine and I watched her weep more than once as our mother left the house. She would leave, our mother, dressed up for a night out, gorgeous, and eager and erratic; the main trouble was you never knew when she'd be back. Nobody did. The next day. A month later. Two months. And Isa protested each of these departures, wailing, shrilling at our mother as she pushed her way to the door. My baby sister was not going to take her leaving quietly. She was not going to take it scared and silent and passive as I had.

On one particularly painful summer evening Isa grabbed at her mother's leg, our mother's leg, screaming, crying, refusing to let go, grasping my mother's calf with all her might, glued to it. She pulled away, our mother, ridding herself of her child, my sister, with a violent shake of her kitten heel, at which Isa rose to her feet, balled her small hands down at her sides, and consumed with the fury of it, slightly spread her little legs and peed in protest while my mother ran out of the door without a glance back at her daughter.

Isa has an important job at a TV station. She is quick and clever and funny with her clients, gently guiding their decisions without acting like she knows better, though of course she does; you can hear the smile in her voice as she speaks; she laughs often, cajoles them with her humor, and they laugh along with her, happy to be brought in, to be part of the joke, to in this way be at the center of her liveliness. She has a good-natured husband and two lovely daughters.

Isa is the most well-adjusted of all of us.

She did not grow up with Manolo.

And, of course, I know it is more complicated than this, that there are many other factors, that she is who she is for many— countless—reasons, her strong essential character first and foremost. But the fact is that Isa was born long after Manolo and my mother had finally split up for good. He was still around at the edges, with his sudden, erratic appearances, his big daddy ways, yes, but Isa had no attachment to him; in fact, she avoided him as much as she could, avoided his entire family; even as a tiny thing she sensed, or knew, that there was something wrong with him, with them, and so she stayed away, far away.

How had she acquired that life tool, I've often wondered. How did my sister, the youngest of all of us, know when and how to keep her distance?

I see danger and I run straight to it. Or believe it's not what it is, though the red lights are flashing. But it simply can't be, I convince myself through the sirens. Or else, when I do see clearly enough to acknowledge danger's presence, I tell myself that it will be all right. It's okay, I say. I'll know how to manage him / her / it / them. How to change and transform him / her / it / them into what I want, or need, him / her / it / them to be.

Isa is different. No nonsense, she knows when to simply turn and walk in the other direction.

Isa was largely raised by my aunt Sofia, who after the heart-break of allowing my mother to send me away, clung to my little sister as if she were her own. My grandmother too held on more tightly. This sure love, perhaps, gave my sister the clarity I lack. Plus, my aunt Sofia despised Manolo, maybe this had something to do with it as well; Sofia must have clearly communicated her disdain and her mistrust to my sister.

In the months before the rest of them moved to Tlatelolco, Sofia had moved out of my grandmother's house. So much would happen in the nine or ten months I'd be in Ohio or Los Angeles, living my school-year life. I'd come back to Mexico City and all sorts of reconfigurations would have occurred in my absence, new living situations for some of my family, or jockeyed emotional relations would have emerged between them; those two aunts or uncles would have become closer, this one would have stopped talking to that one; maybe my favorite uncle and his placid wife had now moved in to my grandmother's house with their two funny little boys, one of whom, at three years old was often Superman, my aunt having to run out and grab him from the middle of the street where he held his arm extended to stop the cars in their approach, He *was* strong enough to stop them! he'd wail as she pulled him back into the house. At three years old my chubby little cousin wore a cape everywhere he went, and on several occasions his mother had to snatch him off the terrace from where he was ready to leap into the garden down below—He *could* fly! He'd been practicing off the back of the couch for days! (Years later he would become a wrestler.) And his beautiful older brother, already somber at five years old, who became very attached to me that summer they lived with my grandmother. While the younger boy was leaping off the furniture, the serious older one would quietly approach me, eyes focused on the ground, and in a whisper ask to sit close to me where I sat on the couch or in an armchair, the arm of which he

was already cautiously touching, and within which, after he climbed in, I would tell him stories. I was the cousin who mostly lived elsewhere, they'd been told all about me before I arrived, and the fact that I had another family puzzled them. Concerned, my young cousin would turn his deep sad eyes toward me and ask me about them sometimes, but I would quickly divert the question to children and bears, Hansel and Gretel, Winnie or Baloo.

Some summers a boyfriend would have been gained or lost by one of my aunts, Enrique, my youngest aunt's addition, who instantly became part of the family and let Isabela and me join them on their dates sometimes, to the movies or tacos al pastor by the park on Sunday nights. Or else Enrique would take us for long rides in his car, to Coyoacán or some other beautiful part of the city, and he always treated us. One summer I openly dated my aunt Sofia's fiancée's very handsome younger brother. Ed's wife would never let me date a boy, so this—not having to hide it—felt very adult. I was fifteen and he was eighteen and he was dashing; everywhere we'd go women would turn to openly stare at him. I could barely keep up.

There were so many people with very full lives coming and going at all times, and I was the sometimes-visitor in my family's busy home. And yet mostly I flowed right into it, mostly it only took one or two glances from one of my sisters and I was fully in it, a part of them.

But there were these other moments, these other occasional moments in which I could feel a vast distance; I was outside it all. I was not one of them. Though fleeting, it was all devastatingly clear in these dislocating moments in which I could feel the chasm, could feel that their life was not actually my life, could see it all as a difference. For instance, the summer I turned fifteen. That year when I arrived I found that my aunt Sofia was more seriously dating the man she would later marry, the fiancée with the handsome younger brother whom I would soon start dating. The year before she had moved out of my grandmother's house. That was when she got her own apartment. Isa mostly lived with her then. And on this trip—Isa must have been eight because I was fifteen—I went to visit them there. I knocked on my aunt Sofia's door, and after a few moments Isa opened it with a prickly pear in her hand. Adorable in her black bob and embroidered white linen dress, she took a bite of the bright green fruit as I stood there. They had just gotten back from the mercado, she told me, and then took another bite. Her ease in my aunt's house, the way they flowed together with such

comfort, struck me. My aunt floated toward me and gave me a kiss on the cheek; she made some joke about the state of my long hair and caressed it out of my face so she could see my eyes, and then laughed warmly as she turned toward the kitchen, where she was emptying their bags.

For a moment more I stood near the doorway without moving. I was a traveler there. It was their home and their love was firm and relaxed, and ongoing, solid and clear and plain for me to see.

Because of this sure love, my sister did not at all need a fake father. And owing to Isa's distance from him I can speak more openly about Manolo with her than with my other siblings. She is the only one I've told about the molestation.

At her table that evening, after the delicious meal I'd watched her prepare—pork in a green tomatillo sauce with purslane and corn and Mexican squash—we sat with our daughters and her husband and our talk was light and easy. Until we began to speak about Manolo.

Things shift, darken, when he enters the room; he is a line of poison that plunges us through time. His venom collapses time.

She began to talk and the talk was about the last time he'd been in the hospital for one of the many ailments that began to pile up in his old age.

Isa pursed her lips, paused as if unsure whether to continue, then began to laugh, her head shaking back and forth, no, no, no, it shook as she asked if I'd heard what our mother and Marta had gotten into with him.

I looked at Isa more closely, her lovely black eyes, and thought about a time I had tried to speak to my mother. At eighteen I had attempted to speak to her, had begged her to explain my childhood to me, to make some sense of it with me, and in return she'd said hard and spiteful things, and then she'd laughed at me, Who do you think you are? she had asked with clear disdain in her eyes. A few days later I told my abue I was leaving, going back to Los Angeles, my beloved grandmother lying in bed, crying, begging me to forgive my mother when I told her, “She is sick,” she said. “She doesn't know what she says. She doesn't know what she does. She cannot control it.” She paused and covered her eyes to stop them from crying. And then, as if to convince, she said, “She used to wander the halls looking for you. Every two or three years, this would happen. Night after miserable night for weeks on end she would run up and down the halls weeping, looking for you as if she had really forgotten. Each night the same thing as

if she'd forgotten we'd gone through it all the night before. She'd start getting dressed, in the middle of the night, to go out and search for you. I'd have to grab her shoes from her hands, caress her and convince her that you were at your grandmother Margarita's. Don't you remember? I'd say. You let her go to Rita's for a few days. I'd lead her back to bed, tuck her in and calm her. She is not right," my grandmother said. "She does not know what she says, doesn't know what she does. Forgive her."

I looked around Isabela's kitchen, lifted my glass to my mouth, took a sip of my wine, focused on Isabela while I played my fingers on the table. No, I said. I hadn't heard anything about it, what had Marta and my mother done?

With a more pronounced shake of the head and a big weighty sigh released through her somehow-still-grinning mouth, Isa said, *Ay no, Vero,* it's too much.

And now I grew eager to hear, though I tried not to show it; I wanted to hear about them, I did, my mother and my sister Marta, the favorite, whose side my mother rarely left and who had in turn rarely willingly left my mother's side, their need for each other so deep and hard, because Marta resented my mother too. They terrified me with their erratic viciousness, the way they could suddenly strike out at you, the extremes to which they could go, and now, after countless miserable conflicts, my mother and Marta having openly threatened me when they became angry with me, I mostly avoided them, but their behavior was so outrageous, so far out and thus compelling, that it was impossible for me to feign indifference … plus, somehow these tales of their misadventures—though I relished them for their perversity— also helped to further justify my apprehension in regard to them, and all of this worked together in a cautionary way that I still somehow needed, reminded me to maintain my distance, underlining my continued need to take care of myself in regard to them. With my mother I was polite and at arm's length. I completely avoided my sister.

Still, I wanted to hear about them.

I thought they couldn't stand Manolo? I asked, taking another sip of my wine, prodding Isa forward. All Mama does at the mention of him is talk about how detestable he was. She blames him for everything, I added. For the things she did too. And here I don't mean her illness, the things she couldn't control; I'm talking about her cruelty. She can be so mean.

Yeah, I don't know, Isa said, reaching for her own wine. Maybe those two things are the same? Isa seemed to consider this as she took a slow sip. She turned toward me and sighed, as she considered her next thought too, Hmmm, maybe her attitude toward Manolo changed when he got sick?

Manolo had been entering our conversations more often in the few years prior to my beginning this book because of his mounting health problems, heart, liver, lungs, the usual end of life stuff. And when I'd come to visit, Isa would occasionally fill me in on what she'd heard about his comings and goings. And though I never quite understood what was happening with him, where he now roamed or why, I didn't care enough to ask follow-up questions. But now, she said, he was spending a lot of time in the town in Texas where our mother, Claudia, and Marta lived because his sister, Mina, lived there too, and he had decent insurance, and since he was getting sick all of the time it was better for him to be treated there than in Chicontepec, the pueblo in Veracruz to which he had moved long ago, and where he had many years before, with his Pfizer handouts, declared himself the village doctor.

And my mother and my sister, Marta, began getting involved in some pretty nutty shenanigans around his sudden recurring visits, his many hospital stays, which clearly had stimulated much emotion, many feelings, some of them seemingly newly constructed and having to do more with idealized general conceptions of fathers and husbands, rather than being clearly related to him.

Where was this love coming from? This duty?

During his last extended visit—Isa finally broke down and told me—they'd snuck him out of the hospital before a major heart surgery because he'd gotten scared and had changed his mind. He'd decided he didn't want to go through with the procedure after all. What if something went wrong? What if they killed him? Or maimed him? Or?

Fish mouthed, he had appealed to Claudia and Marta from his hospital bed, where he lay attached to various contraptions, and—I could imagine his face graphically contorting, his eyes softening—he begged them to please get him out of there. People died in hospitals, he said.

Their emotions, always easily going to extreme, rose for him. So my thin and elderly mother and my middle-aged sister conspired, and after a night of manic planning, furiously talking over each other with gesticulating

gestures, they snuck him out in a rush—tubes and wires hanging off of his bowed frame— hurriedly dragging him down long halls, yanking him by the arms, angrily shushing each other, rushing each other, shushing and rushing and shushing each other as they pulled Manolo through those blue-lit corridors.

They shoved him into the car, pushed his frame down low so he wouldn't be seen, and after a breakneck drive, landed in Claudia's driveway. Triumphant, they installed Manolo in my mother's house, where they laid him up in her bed.

She *took him home*? I asked, baffled. But she hates him!

Penelope started laughing, They broke him out?!

Yeah, and now there he was laying in her house, in her bed, and she was supposed to take care of him? my sister's eyes widened as she grabbed her glass again. Soooo, they pretty quickly realized they had to take him back. Just two days later, Isa said with a shrug. They had to sneak him right back in without anyone noticing, because Mom didn't actually want to take care of him. *¿Imaginate?* Can you imagine her spoon-feeding him?

I could not.

Also, he'd begun declining pretty fast, Isa added, I'm sure that scared them too.

I want to go back, he said after a couple of days in Claudia's care. Take me back!

When had they decided he needed saving? When had they begun speaking about him as if he had been a decent husband and good father for whom they should put themselves at risk? Poor Manolo, they'd say when Isa questioned them. He's so sad! *Pobrecito*.

A few months prior, my mother—who had spent our entire lives dragging him through the mud, blaming him for all of her bad actions, because, already vilified, he was an easy scapegoat— had suddenly switched her Facebook profile-picture to their wedding photo. I was shocked and confused when I saw this; I hadn't known what to make of it, but now Isa was telling me how much this had disturbed her too, how grotesque and baffling the image switch to their wedding picture had been for her as well. Claudia's entire attitude toward Manolo seemed to have mysteriously shifted. Marta's too. Marta had never cared for him or had

much of a relationship with him at all. Now they were breaking him out of the hospital as if it were a jail, and they his heroic saviors?

Isa then told me that Marta had been banned from the hospital altogether. On her final visit she'd exchanged furious words with Manolo's sister, Mina, over paternity, Marta and his sister yelling at each other in front of the team of doctors and nurses who watched them aghast. Though Manolo knew that Marta and Isabela and I were not his, in order to maintain his macho demeanor, to negate his cuckold position, he had publicly acted as if we were, thus Marta's confusion. In the hospital she had yelled at our aunt Mina, called her a liar, said she *was* his daughter, *¡Vieja mentirosa, vieja mugrosa! ¡Me das asco!* Marta yelled at Mina.

“Really?” my aunt had said with mock-calm reasonableness, the sarcasm of which the nurses didn't catch, “Let's do a DNA,” to which Marta lunged at her. What those nurses caught was my sister's quick rise to physical violence.

So, despite her angry protests, Marta was thrown out of the hospital room for her disruption, and then, Mina having gotten the last word with the administration, my sister was not allowed back in again for lack of that blood relation.

But what were they fighting about? Manolo? He was a sicko. He was a pedophile.

Isabela and I were appalled and confused both by the outlandish antics and the alternate reality past my mother and Marta were conjuring, and so we began speaking about all this, and him, more directly ourselves. And during these discussions often we would break into sudden fits of incredulous laughter at everyone's behavior, laughter that could become maniacal and thus sometimes scare our daughters.

On more than one occasion our daughters left the table together after telling us to stop. Got up and walked out after yelling at us to quit talking about him, *It's so horrible! Can't you just talk about something else?*

But I couldn't stop. I'd just recently told my sister what had happened to me, and for those few years after I had done so, I needed to speak. I had to talk it through with someone who knew him.

You can feel it in your bones. You can feel it release and move something through you, this laughter that was born out of sickness, and so

you keep laughing, even if it scares your daughter.

People knew, Isabela's husband, Louie, said after our daughters had left the table for the safety of my niece's bedroom. Louie is tall and handsome and affable and well-liked. Once, when he was visiting the town, five hours from Austin, where my mother and Marta and several of our uncles live, he went to a mechanic that our uncle Joaquin referred him to. Louie needed the engine belt on his jeep replaced before driving back to Austin, and Joaquin had told him he was the best mechanic around. When Louie arrived at the shop and told him who he was, the mechanic, surrounded by a group of other men, looked squarely at him and said, Manolo likes boys?

Louie shrugged, I don't know.

The mechanic looked away. After a pause he turned back toward Louie, and Louie handed him the keys.

While the mechanic was inspecting his car, Louie hopped in an Uber and went to the apartment Manolo was then temporarily renting. Manolo had been holing up there for a couple of months, recovering from one of his medical procedures, and Louie wanted to pick up a prescription for his daughter's asthma, that he could drive across the border to fill.

A teenage boy answered the door, Louie said.

Manolo isn't home, the boy told him, without fully opening the door.

Louie peeked over the boy's head, through that cracked open doorway, into the darkened space. Okay, he said, without thinking. Until he was in the Uber, headed back to the mechanic. Then he thought. A chill ran through him. That boy.

Louie soon found out that another boy, the mechanic's younger brother, had been molested by Manolo too.

I promised myself not to have anything to do with him, the mechanic told Louie. Or anybody connected to him. They're just boys, the mechanic said. It's not right, he added as he turned his head away with a shake. After some silence he shrugged at my brother-in-law, But I like you Louie, the mechanic said as he handed him the keys to the Jeep. I can see you're a decent guy. Bring the Jeep whenever you need to.

He was a really good mechanic, Louie said. And cheap! But, damn, I never went back.

Isa and I stared at him. My sister had heard this story before, but not in front of me. Not with me sitting there, thinking about Pablo, the boy who

had traveled the Mexican beaches with Manolo and Marta and Me.

The next evening, huddled together on her big couch, everyone else safely in bed, the two of us with mounds of pillows between us, began to talk. She voiced questions I'd also had; troubling thoughts that had for many years plagued me. She turned to me and asked, How did Abue allow him around us?

I don't know, I said.

Until well into my adulthood our grandmother had seemed irreproachable. She was gentle and showered us with love, compliments, and caresses, a tenderness of voice when she said our names. *Verito. Mi Amor*, she would say, and as she looked into my eyes and said those words I felt how deeply she meant them, I was her love. She would lean forward and brush her lips on my forehead, put her arms around me.

Some part of me knew, without fully understanding it then, that she had worked hard to keep everything going, my grandmother, after she had divorced our grandfather. The story was that she had shown him the door when he told her he had another woman in Oaxaca, a sign of pride and strength that was not common in 1950s middle-class Mexico. Women were powerless; it was nearly impossible for a woman to leave a husband, no matter what he did. And yet our grandmother had done so. And then she'd gotten a job in order to support her family. The once spoiled, beautiful young woman had become a diligent worker at the National Palace in the Zocalo for over thirty years. She worked in the department of public relations, and she rarely missed a day.

At home our grandmother was generous. She was fair. And she was kind.

I'd never before allowed myself to voice my unease, because in my family she was revered, but now my sister had opened up, and so I felt I could share some of my own troubling concerns.

Abue was so vague, I said. I loved her completely, as we all did, so I've only recently allowed myself to question things, I said. But I'm confused about so much in regard to her. In many ways she acted like she didn't deserve anything. She seemed almost proud that she didn't ask our grandfather for anything, I said. Because of this she wasn't able to keep the house. So I wonder if maybe she just didn't think any of us deserved anything either.

I looked around my sister's living room, her dogs asleep on the couch near us. Since my divorce, I've thought a lot about this, I said. I think I

would have walked away too if it wasn't for Penelope, I added. And I know that in Mexico, especially in those times, in that macho culture, it was hard. But the way she tells it, she didn't push him for anything at all.

And here, though I did not say it, I thought, *Also, she allowed our mother to send me away.*

I don't know how she let him leave, Isa said. Just like that. She just let him go.

In the version Abue most often related, when my grandfather said he had a woman in Oaxaca, she told him she was not going to compete with another woman. And that was that. She told him to go.

I've often wondered, Isa added, if maybe she actually had no say in whether he left or not, if her prideful rejection of him was just a story she'd tell. Maybe the truth was that he just left her. Maybe she was no different than any of the other women whose husbands left them. One of Isa's dogs stirred at her feet, and she pet it, calming it back into slumber, as she continued, And this led me to wonder if maybe she'd been rejected by her father's family too. If maybe that had set the stage. You know, that might help explain her lack of a fight.

But she wasn't rejected by her father, I said, confused, thinking of how these colonial stories can go: a European marries a Mexican, the colonial family feels disgraced and refuses to acknowledge the child. But I didn't think that was how it had been for our abue. She was his acknowledged daughter, I added. She had his name, I said.

Yeah, but he died when she was a little girl. I mean after he died. I don't think she saw his family much after his death. Her mother took her to live in Mexico City. Why would she leave her home if they'd accepted her or treated her well? Why would they leave Veracruz? I just don't think they liked that her mother was Mexican. I know they didn't like that she was an employee at their store. They thought she was below them. They hadn't wanted him to marry her in the first place. They'd said no.

I'd never heard any of this so I simply stared as she continued.

In marrying her he went against his parents' wishes, Isa added.

I realized I just didn't know the family story. The few things I'd heard were all so muddled. What I knew was that my grandmother's paternal family, the Courcelles, had come from France to help set up the Mexican railroad in the 1860's during Maximillian's reign. They were respected mathematicians and engineers who were sent to Mexico to help expand the

empire. This branch had landed in Veracruz. Among their many other ventures, the Courcelles had a large general store where they sold everything “from a hammer and nails to a formal wedding dress,” Abue had repeated many times. Her mother was very beautiful, and had worked in that store, where she met her husband, Charles Courcelle. But I had never heard that when he died his wife and child had been banished from his family. I had not previously heard that Abue's paternal grandparents had refused to accept her as their own, or that they had forcefully rejected her mother. I had never understood that this was perhaps why her mother had taken her to live in Mexico City. I did know that soon after her father died Abue's mother took her to the capital, but I had never imagined that it was their rejection of her that had prompted Abue's mother to leave her home in Veracruz.

Yet as I listened to Isa, and conjectured with her, I found that it all suddenly made sense. Why would her mother have left her home otherwise?

Had she been pushed to do so? Had the truth been that Abue had been disowned by her father's family when he died? My grandmother was just a girl. Six at the time of his death …

Isa touched my arm, Why else would Abue just allow herself to be sidelined by her husband? Why else would she just let our grandfather go?

I looked into her eyes, which are big and dark and long lashed, but didn't say anything as I wondered if maybe she was right, if perhaps it had been because Abue's mother, our great-grandmother had been treated similarly by her husband's family when she was regarded as a colonial mistake and thus easily rejected. Had my grandmother been a disregarded girl, an erased girl because her mother was a non-European? Is this how it had been for my abue? Had she grown up in the midst of her own familial rejection? And had she repeated the pain of that rejection with our grandfather? And then with me as well? Like my abue at her father's death, I was six when they sent me away.

And this is when Isa told me that Manolo was jailed once.

It was Abue who got him out, she told me. He'd been arrested for drugging and then molesting a boy, but because of her connections in the government Abue was able to get him out. After a pause Isabela added, You heard Louie. That mechanic knew. People knew. Abue must have known.

Over and over again, during my increasingly frequent visits with my sister, we had questioned how it was that the adults in our lives had allowed Manolo around us. Our grandmother, our uncles and aunts. For though we were children and couldn't know what he was capable of, they did know, or must have. And now I understood that Isa was right, if she had freed him from jail for that crime our grandmother certainly knew what he had done.

What was she thinking? Isa asked in sadness, her head shaking, her brow furrowed as she gazed at me. Why did she get him out? And why would she let him anywhere near us?

I don't know, I whispered.

Sitting across from each other, still hugging those pillows, our legs almost touching now, she looked at me, and I back at her; I noticed my sister's eyes were cinched toward me, her brow furrowed, questioning me. I am her older sister. But I didn't have anything to give her. I didn't know anything at all.

OceanofPDF.com

TWICE

It suddenly comes to me that Manolo, when I still believed he was my father, blackened two of my childhood trips with his sick compulsions, blackened my ideas about fathers but also about daughters, about myself; he stole me from myself, disappeared me from me, on the only two trips I ever took with him, the one toward Acapulco through Iguala when he was willing to let me die, and the other when he killed something in me as we traveled up and down those steamy Mexican beaches with the boy I loved when I was ten years old.

CUT CUT CUT. HEAL HEAL HEAL.

OceanofPDF.com

MEMORY

There are two kinds of memory, you say after I tell you that I can't remember anything after Manolo's hand went into my underwear. I blank out. This is usual for me. It's impossible for me to access much of my childhood. Perhaps I get overwhelmed, or I instinctively pull away, without noticing I am doing so; suddenly I am thinking about my dog, or what I will make for dinner; or the sounds outside my window distract me; even as I am actively searching, I cannot get there. And I do not understand this as deliberate. The pulling back, the forgetting. The murkiness of it lies somewhere below conscious choice, in the inaccessible nether reaches. It is not purposeful avoidance, is just what happens. My mind goes elsewhere, or goes blank completely, and, at least in this instance, this particular (lack of a) memory, there seems to be no access, no way to go any deeper at all. There is no choice. The screen goes to black.

I recall how astounding, how bodily shocking, it was when in a session years ago—after describing a dread that descended upon me as I went into a particular clothing store—you said, Yes, our memories can overwhelm us sometimes.

I was stupefied. Memory? I was describing a feeling. A dread that had descended upon me. And even though I understood that the dread must have had something to do with my adolescence—with memories of shopping for school clothes with Ed's wife and the special torture of that, the humiliating because derisive focus on my body, in the dressing stall of some mid-level department store, the disgust on her face as I tried on a brown bathing suit for my swim class—at that point I still understood memory as a recollection of a particular scene, sometimes with a feeling attached, but that feeling only activated through the reliving of the scene. Yet here you were making it clear that the body remembers too, that it remembers differently, through sensations and feelings, sometimes overwhelmingly strong, dark moods descending, emotions that never morph into a scene. A feeling as a memory. Other times as an air, a subtle but undeniable shift in tenor and perception.

We don't actually know how it happens, you said when I asked you to explain.

Another time I told you that my first relationship, though it was loving, only lasted five years. Steve was funny and smart and clever, an artist whom I admired, and he had been my best friend. I had re-made myself with him after I'd returned from my difficult year in Mexico when I was eighteen. His family embraced me, and I loved them too, his mother especially, but I eventually left him. I was given up by my family at six years old, I said.

That is a kind of memory, you replied, in your careful tone. Dates, and anniversaries can control us, control our choices, or what seem like clear choices, if we are not careful. If we are not aware.

I was laying on the couch in your office on 87th Street on the Upper East Side. You were sitting behind me, and a bit to the left. If I had turned my body I could have seen you, could have seen your head bowed forward, toward me, could have tried to look up into your eyes; but I did not do this. Instead I lay where I lay and I glanced only slightly toward my left, past your legs and out the window that gave to the front of the building. My second relationship, which was loving too—Mark was a writer like me, childlike, but affectionate and thoughtful, and we had worked on our first books together, sitting back to back in our living room, each at our own desk in the narrow and cramped apartment in New York's Chinatown—also only lasted five years, I told you then. I left him as well, I added. Both of these relationships were happy for five years, but I left each of them before we got to the sixth.

I was horrified as I spoke it.

After a stunned pause, during which I attempted to focus on the tree just outside that window, I managed to ask, Do we not have any control over our own lives?

Yes, you said softly, in your gentle tone. Of course, we do. Awareness helps, you said. If one can pull things up, and see them, and then see the relation as things are happening in the present, recognize it there, one can make the effort to make different choices, so as not to be controlled by the kinds of subconscious memories that rise up as impulses.

OceanofPDF.com

BLIND

I recently had a dream about Manolo. It came to me strongly the morning I awoke from it. Throughout that whole day bits of it kept presenting themselves to me. And I've thought about it since, again and again.

Regarding the loss of the early recordings: I don't recall what was in them because part of the point of recording was that I could be a bit floaty and unfocussed, associative, in a loose stream of consciousness way, on the outside edges of my self-protective layers. The loose, unfiltered, free association of the recordings is what analysis is meant to be, what is supposed to happen as one lies in a room with a doctor, as another method (secondary to dreams) of drawing light to the forms of thinking that control us. And because of the unconscious nature of the recordings I didn't think about them too much as I made them, or afterward. I planned to do that kind of analytical thinking when I looked at all of the transcriptions together, and then edited them down.

All this to say that it's difficult to recall what I had done in that first batch of recordings. To know what it is that was lost. What I do recall is that in them I often led myself to thoughts of Manolo, my bitterness and rage there, which would lead me to the subsequent thought that I wanted to guard against letting this anger take me over. I was trying to move beyond the basic emotions of fury and hatred and the ways they can limit us, limit me; I was trying to move away from my habitually flat and simplistic way of thinking about Manolo, labeling him a monster, a sicko, a vile and loathsome creep and then leaving it at that; I was trying to dig a little deeper, to get at something more profound. I spoke, too, about the increasingly difficult feelings that had developed in relation to our other sisters, Pilar and Marta, because of their blindness as to who Manolo was. This took a different form with each of them. Whereas with Pilar this blindness stemmed from her extreme sweetness and emotional generosity, her soft innocence so all-encompassing that it drowned out the difficult reality of who her father was, with Marta it was driven by unbounded rivalrous fury. She wanted to claim “the father” as hers; and if she was

going to claim him, “the father” must be good. All of this I had spoken about in those first recordings, I believe; as well as my own tangled desire to confront the complexity of who this man had been. I wanted to share the memories as stories and through those stories show the charm. Because Manolo was, in many ways, a fascinating person, a *strange,* undeveloped and baffling boy-man. But telling the memories proved difficult, because they were hard for me to recall … as with a dream that is persistently trying to whisper something to us while simultaneously being impossible to grasp, when I tried to focus on them, those memories slipped right out of my sights …

I know I made a recording after Isabela shared that Manolo had once been jailed. The mother of one of the boys he gave drugs to, and then molested, reported him and Manolo was arrested. This woman was the mother of my older sister Pilar's best friend, so Pilar had known the boy, Ana's brother.

And our beloved grandmother, Abue, a strong and decent woman with some minor influence in Mexican politics at the time, my grandmother, got him out.

And because of this, our grandmother's ill-fated action, Manolo had the space, and the freedom, to roam, to skulk in shadows, to molest many other children, including me.

Last year, when Isa and I finally spoke about all this, we were baffled by our grandmother. Why? If she knew what he had done?

Isabela believed it had something to do with shame, the shame of having a son-in-law in jail, but I thought it was perhaps more complicated than that. I thought that was just one element among many. I thought my grandmother's relationship to Manolo was complex. I believed she'd loved him as my other siblings loved him too, love him still, in the way I must have done as well, once upon a time. But, of course, we were children; we did not know what he had done; what he was capable of, what he had at his core. We did not know how to read the signs. We were not in a position to protect those around us. To protect ourselves.

Our grandmother was. Why had she been incapable of taking care of us? Why had she put us in harm's way?

The boy he drugged and then molested never recovered himself. That boy had a psychotic break; that boy was institutionalized for life.

OceanofPDF.com

DOUBLING

Pilar and Marta were confused by Manolo, as I once was too. They wanted to be heroic in regard to him. Like my grandmother, they wanted to break him out of jail, which for them took the form of a hospital. They wanted to heal him in their homes. In lieu of the ability to heal him (for he was now dead) they wanted to be able to mourn him as if he'd been a real father. A present and responsible man. They wanted to celebrate this alternate reality, this unrecognizable fictive life.

Maybe my abue had thought she could heal him too. Maybe my abue had thought his crime had been a mistake; maybe she believed he wouldn't do it again.

My sisters were in deep relation to a lie. My abue had been too.

When my sisters' behavior confounded or embarrassed me, I consoled myself by telling myself I had not grown up with them. Manolo was not my father. They were my half-sisters. I had not grown up with them. Pilar's benign and gullible innocence, Marta's anger and fury-fueled cruelty, had nothing to do with me, I'd tell myself. Though of course I can be gullible; I can be angry and harsh, yet because I am not innocent and I am not cruel I work hard to move through and / or understand and contain the extremities of these difficult emotions.

There was a denial, on their part, of who Manolo was. (Who was he?) Or an inability to see and land on this terrifying aspect of him. This strange space of obfuscation, of confusion and blindness and self-deception, of not knowing what is known, of milky inarticulation, of my abue's vagueness, which so closely resembles Pilar's, is like smoke and mirrors that exists around many of these pedophiles. These men are everywhere; the people who refuse to see, who invite them into their homes, are everywhere, in fact. What drives the denial, the inability to see?

What drives the collusion?

When Isa told me that my abue had freed Manolo, in addition to feeling that my grandmother had actually loved him, had been charmed by him as so many people were, I began to believe that there might be a further

complicating factor that we will never get a confirmation for. Perhaps, I began to suspect, she had been molested herself. Maybe my grandmother had been living out her own trauma, had been operating out of her own blindness and forgetting, her own paralyzing inner conflicts, her own inaccessible depths. What was she hiding from herself with her vagueness? What occlusion was it in the service of? What was she keeping out with her constant humming and singing, filling herself with music instead, ancient lyrics she repeated all day long. (Did the humming serve the cocoonish atmosphere she created for herself; did it stop the thoughts from intruding and provide a muting soundtrack for that muffled interior life?)

My grandmother treated me as though I were her favorite—because my mother could not bear to see me, because she bullied me when she did, Abue loved me as if she were making something up to me; in return I was exceedingly obliging and well-behaved and receptive to her love. She took me on special outings with her friends, lunches at lovely sidewalk restaurants, or a horse-drawn carriage through Chapultepec park when I was five years old, just me and her and her then boyfriend, though at the time I did not understand that he was more than just a friend.

And yet, Abue had agreed to send me away. They all knew Ed's wife was hard, scary even. They were afraid of her too, in fact. And now, when I traveled to Mexico to spend time with my family during my summer vacations, my sisters and I were like feral children, a confounding neglect in that household; we ran wild in the streets with other feral children, upon whom people like Manolo easily preyed. Upon whom Manolo easily preyed.

Where was my loving grandmother? Where was my abue's benevolent care?

When my grandfather left her for Oaxaca, (or she told him to leave, if in fact that's what it had been), my mother, the oldest, was a teen; the uncle who came to visit me in the hospital after I was stung by the scorpion, my favorite uncle, was just a small boy, a toddler.

My grandmother became a discarded wife, a nearly closed chapter in the book of my grandfather.

I began to wonder if perhaps Isa was right and the ground had been laid for this desertion through her having been a cast aside girl as well. Perhaps it had not been pride, but something deeper, something darker; perhaps she

was being driven not by choice, but by an impulse masquerading as determination; perhaps, for her, it was a blind repetition.

And was I somehow a doubling for her in all of that? A cast away girl.

Does unacknowledged trauma, suffering that is not brought to the surface and looked at, fall like bad fate on the coming generations?

Is this what fate is? The suffering of our parents, the suffering of our grandparents, passed down to us through countless badly thought-through actions and decisions? The unspeakable and unspoken being passed down through unacknowledged repetition? Through an acting out of residual pain? Letting the girl go, as you were once let go yourself? My grandmother wept, Pilar told me, as at six years old I was taken away in the big black car that would deliver me to the airport from which Manolo's mother, Mama Rita, controlling everyone's actions, telling everyone how to be and what to do, Mama Rita, acting as Charon, the ferryman of Hades, would ferry me away to my new reality, to my separate and desolate life in the United States.

Many years later Pilar told me my abue had wept.

Were you weeping for us both, dear Abue? As in a dream where we inhabit every character, the shadow-girl you—the specter of you as a cast aside child, a girl rejected by your father's colonial family, your family, your father recently dead, you in your prettiest white dress and black leather shoes, holding onto your mother's hand as you wait together in joyless silence for the train which will take you away from them, away to Mexico City—the shadow-girl you, Abue, standing alongside the adult you who was my grandmother, the woman who was now weeping as I—the girl who was you too, your granddaughter who was your doubling—was being taken away in that car?

Of all of us children, I was the one who looked most like you, your soft curls and large dark eyes. Had the depth of our resemblance further fed the confluence of our lives?

Then, a few years later, you, my abue, set a pedophile free, and he went on to prey upon your family as you were perhaps once preyed upon too? You welcomed him into your home. A re-enactment of trauma on other people's bodies, on your daughters’ and granddaughters’ bodies; were you playing out your pain on your family's bodies, which in the midst of your defenses could seem indistinguishable from your own?

OceanofPDF.com

BREATHE

Remember to.

OceanofPDF.com

DEMENTIA

On the final day of that October visit to my sister, my niece and I had a moment alone together while Isabela, her mother, was at work. She was the older of my sister's two daughters—she was twenty-nine—and had been present during one of the long talks I'd had with my sister. During that conversation, sitting at my sister's table, with glasses repeatedly filled with red wine, I'd mentioned repetition compulsion, how it might help us to make sense of collusion, and I introduced the idea that maybe Abue had been abused herself. It had only recently come to me that this might be a possibility, I said, but my sister immediately rejected this idea; it was simply too horrible. She wanted to stop talking about things now, she said. And I understood this. So I worked hard to hold my tongue because I know that I can push and push and push. I always want to keep speaking, to try to understand from every angle, to decipher the unknowable, but I know that this tendency in me can be emotionally exhausting for others.

Sometimes I just have to stop.

But now that my niece and I were alone she told me that when she and her sister were young girls and would go visit my grandmother in the last two or three years of her life, my abue would sometimes call out in a way that scared them. My grandmother was in her mid-nineties then and had slowly fallen into an increasingly debilitating dementia, full of confusion and mental wanderings in which she often revisited, or became, her younger self. I was there one day as she fell into her childhood: she became a girl again and played in the garden with her favorite cousin, a boy a year older than herself, tag first and then they were climbing a tree. As she lay on the bed before me, my grandmother's breath became more rapid, as if she were actually running and climbing. Wait for me! she called out. I'm going to catch you, Carlos! she called, as her arms in the present reached for the boy in her past. On another occasion, she was a young woman now, she called out to the housekeeper's son, “Go and fetch some sodas from the corner store.” And she handed the conjured-up boy the money with her outstretched hand and then she counted out how many sodas she'd need for

the children's lunch, stroking the metal bars on her bed as she sounded each number, “1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and one for you,” she said to the boy as I watched.

On several occasions, when my niece and her little sister were young girls, eight or nine, or younger still, they'd been alone in the room with our abue, my niece told me, quietly playing at the foot of her bed, keeping their beloved great grandmother company while the adults busied themselves in the kitchen, when suddenly Abue called out, “*¡Quitate de mi¡ ¡Quitate Miguel!”* she yelled, as she pushed and pushed the memory of the man off of her body, “*¡Quitate! ¡Quitate de mi!*” and for many minutes she continued her struggle, a grimacing that turned into tears as she grunted with the effort to push him off of herself while the girls looked on in horror.

OceanofPDF.com

FAVORITE

As a teen a fear would inch inside me as I spotted Manolo's car driving from up the street toward my grandmother's house, the approach, and a dread, or something like terror growing in the pit of my stomach at the sight of him coming toward us from in the distance.

Though, before the tour of those Mexican beaches with Manolo and my sister and Pablo, this is not what it was like yet, this dread.

There were boys always, so many boys, who our aunts told us to stay away from, but that could be thrilling as well, our aunts' wariness. They were crass and unruly, and cackled and shoved at each other, and smoked cigarettes, even the really young ones, the whole mass of them moving as a unit, circling about him like a hive.

Pablo was different. He never came as part of a pack. He was quiet and serious, and this fed my secret love of him; and somehow, in a way we were not aware of at the time, it was scripted into his and my life by Manolo, this shy crush.

My older sister, Pilar, got married at twenty. Even then we knew it was a way to save herself from our parents; he was a tranquil and considerate boy, from a nice family. He was madly in love with my sweet-tempered, beautiful sister, and his decent family took Pilar in as their own. Manolo was at the wedding, of course, and he invited some of his boys to the party. The green-eyed twins who were often in his company in those days, and whom I secretly found handsome were there. They had smooth olive skin and aquiline noses and thick lashed eyes, dark shoulder length hair. They were beautiful and one of them was especially nice to talk to; he, like Pablo, was quieter than the other boys, more serious. I was sixteen then, and in my grown-up party dress I stood in the patio of our house, surrounded by flowering vines, talking to him in whispers, my eyes darting all about myself, patrolling, worried that my sisters might see me doing so. Marta especially, looking tough in her pink polka dotted halter dress, would have

let me have it. *Que asco,* she would have hissed with cinched up eyes, *Me das asco.*

Why do you hang around my father so much? I asked the quiet twin. The truth was starting to work itself into the edges of my understanding.

He shrugged before he began to speak, slowly, haltingly. He comes around the house a lot, he said, playing with the leaves on the bush that stood behind me. He brings bags of food and one time even a TV and my mom laughs at all his jokes and cooks for him, he added as he looked through the casement windows toward the party going on inside my house. He's pretty funny, the twin pursed his lips a bit and dropped his eyes, Cheers everybody up. Sometimes he brings his guitar. He sings. Last weekend he took me and my brother for barbacoa outside of Avandaro. The twin turned and looked at me then, Manolo joked with the women as they prepared our food. He made them laugh while he picked at the meat they were preparing, complimented their cooking as he took it, *Que rico, Mamácita*, he said; he called them all Mamácita, and teased about their fast hands, asked what else they did with them. And they laughed and teased him back.

Realizing that maybe he'd gone too far, the twin smiled softly at me as he shrugged, It worked. They gave us the best parts of the meat, and fed us till we couldn't eat anymore.

Plus, he buys us things, he said. He bought me this shirt for the wedding, he added then, touching the cloth near his chest.

He stopped talking, brushed his long hair away from his face, and looked at me more directly, a tentative flirt.

Its color matched the green of his eyes. It's nice, I said tersely, for though I still liked him, I was jealous. Manolo had never given me anything. I turned then, and walked inside where Manolo and the other men were playing guitar and singing loudly before my sisters could see me talking to that boy.

Manolo, on the other hand, was aggressive in his flirtation with women … he would howl out at them as they walked past him on the street. He would catcall, and then grab at them, drop his arm roughly around their shoulders, and get in their faces, *¿A donde vas, flaquita?* In front of us, his daughters. Once, as he drove by a very pretty young woman he swerved the car so fast he almost hit her while he called out indecently; she leapt back to avoid

being hit, with the three of us in the back seat. Pilar was mortified, while Marta just laughed at the sudden lurch of the car, and I squeezed myself into Pia's side as she tried to disappear right there before my eyes. *¡Ay, Paapaaaa!* she moaned and sank further into the seat, and whispered, *Que asco*, then added more loudly, *¡Me caes maaaal!* as I placed her arm around my shoulders and hid my head deep in her chest.

¡Idiota! The woman yelled as Pilar whined and Manolo laughed and then shouted, *¿Que traes, Cabrona? ¡Ni que fueras tan buena!*

It was like an act he felt compelled to perform. But for whom? It can't have been for us, his daughters. Was it himself he was trying to convince?

At twelve I found out that Pilar was the only one of us girls who was his biological daughter. Ed and his wife added that only she and my older brother Oscar were Manolo's biological children; Marta and I were definitively not. This helped explain why Manolo's mother, Mama Rita, would take only them to Kansas City, why only they would receive money and gifts from her, why Oscar spent most of his time at her house, rather than at my abue's with our mother and us. So, though I still don't understand why Ed and his wife felt the need to burden me with this additional information, it made sense. My two older siblings had his light-colored eyes, though theirs were green, and while our buck-toothed brother was not beautiful our sister was in a way we just were not. She was tall and willowy and had Manolo's almond shaped eyes. Manolo's sister, Aunt Mina, had married a Dutch man and lived in Holland with him. Mina never paid me any mind, but she was Pia's godmother and would bring whole suitcases full of presents from Europe for her, clothes and jewelry which I coveted and which made Pia look even more special, a pile of Lucite bracelets which I spun around my wrists in the hope that she might give me one. The one I wanted was thick, a striated amber, and had a watch embedded in the Lucite. Pia had turned fifteen eight months earlier, a quinceañera; I was twelve that summer, and none of her gorgeous new clothes fit me. I was much too short and was already beginning to get curves and breasts, and whereas her skin was smooth and lovely, soft to the touch, I had begun to sprout hair all over. In response to these unwelcome bodily transformations I was becoming an athlete, fierce and fast.

Pilar was Manolo's favorite, and though I had only recently begun to understand why, even as a small child, I had never questioned it. She was

bashful and modest and quiet and kind. She was my favorite too; she was so graceful and artistic, took modern dance classes near the Zocalo and painted with our cousin and could draw; she was patient, took her time with things, eating and dressing and brushing her hair slowly, poised always, and she had glamorous friends, like Ana, who was so sexy and cool I couldn't even address her and with whom she would go to all the best parties, the ones Marta and I were never invited to.

Manolo knew about favorites, for he was his mother's. Ed, his oldest brother, was diligent and worked hard for everything he accomplished, going off on his own to the States with a couple he'd met on the beach in Acapulco when he was a bellhop. They'd grown fond of him and wanted to help Ed out and so convinced him to attend high school in the town in which they lived in Florida. He then joined the air force as a path to becoming a U.S. citizen, after which he went to university under the GI Bill. While in school Ed worked all night as a hotel clerk—he had experience from his bellhop days in Acapulco. He earned his PhD in Latin American Studies, painstakingly indexed a history of Latin American literature through the 1960s for his thesis, and eventually, because of his meticulous work ethic, became a professor of Latin American literature and a translator, notably of Fernando del Passo's, *Notes From The Empire*, which chronicles Maximilian and Carlota's time in Mexico, his execution and her descent into madness; Mexico at about the time my abue's family arrived in the country.

Yet Manolo, who was a shiftless drifter, a gambler and pretty-boy grifter, was the one their mother doted on. People handed him things, Manolo. After losing his job at Pfizer, the job my maternal uncle Joaquin, had gotten him, his mother simply bought him a diploma, which she hung proudly in the center of her living room wall. And that was all it took: to her and to himself he was a doctor. This fact alone tortured Ed. Manolo's fake diploma sat prominently displayed on their mother's wall, with Ed's to the left and a bit below it. This infuriated Ed's wife.

Manolo's mother, Mama Rita (she refused to be called grandmother and insisted we call her Mama), did not love me. She was heavyset, had red hair which she dyed to her youthful shade, and huge bulging blue eyes. She was a great cook, Mama Rita, and loved a good party, especially when she was the one hosting it, because this put her fully in charge; she'd play the piano and throw back the drinks and share some of the gossip she'd learned that

week. Her maiden name was Maldonado, the Mexicanized McDonald, and her children's European looks came from her; in Mexico at that time this counted for something, I'm sure it still does, and I, with my olive skin, dark hair and eyes, did not benefit from this special colonial privilege. She had four sons and one daughter and when Manolo came into the house yelling, *¡Mamá!* she would call out loudly from the kitchen, *¡Aquí estoy, mi niño!* No one yelled in my abue's house, not even my mother, so this change in tone was jarring. Manolo would stroll into the kitchen with his chest puffed and pick at her food with his fingers, licking as he went and ignoring her while she kissed at his face; meanwhile whichever one of his young friends was with him that day—all of them obsequious toward my grandmother—waited in the dining room, not daring to enter her kitchen; she would have risen at 5:30, as she did every morning to start banging pots around; she would begin to chop and grind and mix and boil and whip and sauté: chicken mole, or chiles rellenos, or albondigas with hard-boiled egg in the middle, and beautiful Spanish rice, calabazitas, coliflor capeada, sopa de fideos, her big body dancing from pot to pot, hands lifting, arms reaching, something always on the stove. He'd raise the lids and peer inside and poke a bit while she continued to kiss him, beaming. *¡Te adoro!* she'd exclaim and he would grab a beer for himself and one or two for his friends, squeeze a lime into his and sit himself down at the table, from where he would start bossing us around while his friends looked on and my grandmother moved to and fro, her hands either patting Manolo or nervously playing at her sides.

Mama Rita was loud and vain and was constantly bragging to others that her favorite son was a doctor. *!Mi hijo es un doctor!* And though everyone knew the lie, no one ever called her on it … he'd been hawking drugs; that must have seemed close enough for her; and no one was going to contradict their very intimate personal truth, the sick bubble in which the two of them lived their fantasy.

OceanofPDF.com

THE TWO KINDS

There are two kinds of memory, you told me, Dr. Jacobs. These scenes of my childhood, things I can see and smell and feel, almost. Recollections, this is the first kind, the kind we are familiar with. The way the light fell in Mexico City, a bit brighter than in other places because the city itself is high in the heavens, in a lofty basin surrounded by mountains; the shadows darker too, sharper because of this light, the contrast of objects, and all the greenery that grows lush in the city because of the temperate climate and daily summer showers, bushes and shrubs and vines that envelop whole surfaces there, walls covered in green, the green that climbs and falls hanging from the trees, and lines the streets and grows densely in the little central squares that sit smack in the middle of each of the distinct neighborhoods, which are called colonias, the streets of the colonias radiating out of this multitude of interconnected verdant central squares as if the whole city itself is but a vast connection of gardens. We would get paletas at the colorful ice cream shops that sit at the edges of these pretty parks and then we'd roam through and around the dense foliage, leaving the paths, licking our popsicles while on the hunt for other children. If we wandered long enough the boys we liked might appear from one of the narrow streets that led to the square, and then we could spy on them from a distance, or else stealthily follow them all the way back to their houses and then we'd know where they lived, or Marta would insist that we make ourselves known, that we stroll by them so that one or the other might call out to us.

The fifties and sixties modernism of the bright houses we lived in, terrazzo floors and travertine walls, big casement windows and bright, plant-filled balconies and terraces, with birdsong constantly filling the courtyards, it has all left an indelible mark.

I am jumping rope in the enclosed garden of my grandmother's house, my house, for we mostly live here with our abue, and our mother's brothers and sisters, our uncles and aunts, Manolo nowhere to be found, my mother always and again disappearing and even when present incapable of much

that demands any of her attention; I am four or five, and our hound dog lives out here most of the time now; he is dying and does not want to be inside; his nose bleeds often as he paces back and forth through the courtyard. He knows he is dying, my abue said a few days ago as I watched him circle that courtyard, That's why he refuses to come in. I went to pet him then, feeling sorry for him; she watched me for a moment, then offered me a plum and we walked through the open door into the kitchen where the cook was busy preparing our meal. The pressure cooker had exploded on her a few weeks earlier; she was lucky not to have been in the room as the boiling hot beans projectiled all over the walls and windows and up to the ceiling so that the low hissing that then permeated the kitchen scared me and I rushed through the room quickly, pulling at my grandmother's hand to hurry.

But today I am in the courtyard alone. My brother is here at my abue's with us. I can hear him up on the balcony above me; he is playing brusquely with our slow grey turtle, teasing it, flirting his finger near its snapping snout; it is old and clearly wants to be left alone but my brother is rambunctious; he is loud and abrasive, never ever stops moving; he says things that hurt Pilar's feelings; though she is older she is so very nice, so very innocent, and he knows how to trick her. He once convinced Pilar to cut her favorite doll's stomach, told her that if she did so it would begin to talk, looked into her eyes and in a sincere conspiring voice said that his best friend's sister, You know, Magda? had done just that the week before. Believe me, he said in a dramatically low and serious tone; and in her deep wish for things to be different, her deep wish for a magic so strong it could save her, Pia believed him; and, as she stuck the sharp scissors he'd politely handed over to her into its belly he laughed a wicked laugh. Her tears were not enough to make him stop as he continued mocking, *¡Estupida!* he yelled laughing. *¡Eres una estupida, Mensa!*

He is simply too much. Now he is yelling out, ¡AHHH, AHHH! and whipping his hand about, trying to dislodge the turtle which has angrily clamped onto his teasing finger; in a moment the turtle releases and goes flying from the balcony to the ground, landing near where I stand alarmed as I hear my brother yelling out in agonizing pain, OWWWW OWWWW OWWWW! And as it lands with a thump, I wonder, Does our turtle still hold my brother's finger in its mouth?

On another occasion Oscar ran along that same balcony, moving quickly between my abue's potted geraniums, rushing at them with his arms out, systematically pushing each pot till it fell with a loud bang into the courtyard below. Bang! Bang! Bang! All six of them, destroyed, one after the other crashing down into a big mass of dirt and red flowers and exploded ceramic.

Manolo took me to Pablo's house once, where I met his mother, his sister too.

He came by my abue's, strutted in and got his samples from my uncle Joaquin (or whatever else he might have come for), walked through the metal frame door that led out to the driveway, and as he passed me in the side garden on his way out, he asked, Where are your sisters? without directly looking at me.

I don't know, I whispered, though I knew that Marta was with her friend Bubbles, and Pilar was with her boyfriend.

Come on, he said, come with me. I'm going to Pablo's house.

I nodded yes, and then walked through the red metal gate onto the street with him and hopped into his car.

I was thirteen, had been told he was not my father the previous year, but I was not yet fully convinced. And anyway, he acted as if he was, though he had never before asked me to go anywhere with him alone. I was not at ease with him and so sat in the front seat of the VW Bug and avoided looking at him, staring instead out the window as Mexico City flew by, the fruit stands and the brightly colored torta and juice shop that I loved so much, and now past the group of ladies making quesadillas on the street corner, their hands rapidly patting the masa around the fillings— squash flowers or huitlacoche, or pork and epazote in a green tomatillo sauce—pat patting the masa into shape while standing behind their big steel fryers, black from all the use, while their customers sat around them on simple wooden stools arranged into a horseshoe, some already eating, others waiting for their food, eagerly eyeing it, their glasses of hibiscus tea or brightly colored Fanta standing before them untouched, then past the corner shop where you could get a Coca-Cola and tamarindo candy, with or without chile, past groups of kids screaming, older boys kicking balls, juggling them with their feet right there in the middle of the street, kicking and passing to each other in controlled and joyous motions, yelling YES! or NOOO! depending on

which side they were on, the smaller boys and girls calling out to them from atop the parked cars, and now we were at a stop light and sad looking children approached our car selling cut up mango or gum or sarapes; *¡Oiga!* one yelled out at our dad, and Manolo reached into his pocket and then out the window went his hand as he passed that boy some pesos without fully meeting eyes; through all this he drove us to the colonia, twenty minutes away, where Pablo lived.

It was a poorer neighborhood than our own and the small apartment was up several flights of stairs, up a tight unkempt stairwell that led us to his door. Pablo's mother slowly opened at Manolo's seven knocks, a rhythm we all knew, and greeted my father with a nod and a smile. She was hunched and looked ancient, though I knew she was not, for she was Pablo's mother; she smiled toward me as Manolo patted her back and simultaneously said Veronica while still looking at her so that for a moment I thought her name was Veronica as well. It wasn't, and after nodding at me for another moment Pablo's mamá walked us into her tidy little place, Manolo shoving me forward in front of him; she turned left toward her kitchen as I sat down at the table and then Pablo's mother proceeded to finish cooking, moving about her stove, a lunch which was served to us at the small table. I sat there patiently, not saying a word, as Manolo talked. He acted like the man of the house, waiting for the woman to feed him while he held forth, bossy and loud.

The apartment had three rooms, the one we ate in which also housed the kitchen, a living room with a bed against the wall where the old woman slept with her daughter, and a third room I did not see where Pablo and his two brothers slept.

Pablo's mamá works as a housekeeper, Manolo had told me on the drive over. She raised the kids on her own, he said. They all love her very much and are smart and hard working. They work hard for *her*, he stressed. He was reverential as he spoke it.

You need to work hard, he lectured me then, as if he were my father.

In my memory everything in the apartment is white, though I know this cannot be …

Dressed in white, Pablo's sister, a few years older than him, helps her mamá serve and then sits and eats with us, though their mamá does not.

This sister moves calmly, is quiet, and nods toward Manolo as he speaks. She will help her mamá clean up when we are finished.

One of his brothers is studying in the states on a scholarship, the other is at la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, or UNAM, in the southern part of the city, and will soon also receive a travel fellowship. He'll be home later, his mamá says proudly. If you stay you can meet him, she smiles my way. Pablo will be joining him at the University next year.

Pablo and I sit across from each other and though we glance at each other a few times during that meal we do not speak, as if we share a secret.

I'm going to marry Veronica to Pablo, Manolo teases. Some day. Right, Pablo? Manolo looks at the boy.

Pablo averts his eyes, then looks down at his hands.

His mamá looks at me and smiles and nods her head.

My heart races with the humiliation; my face turns bright red; I can feel the heat rising up my neck, though it also makes sense to me: Someday I will marry Pablo.

Like some strange and twisted, emotionally overwrought arranged marriage, a sick wish into the future, Manolo thus once promised me to Pablo, the boy who had traveled the Mexican beaches with us three years earlier. We were in his mother's little apartment. Everything was white. His mother was humble, a housekeeper, she wore her hair in a tight bun and had four remarkable children, all brilliant, including Pablo, who deeply loved her. His sister was calm and gracious; she was at UNAM too, though no one mentioned it that day.

Until this morning I had not recalled Pablo being at that lunch; time periods get muddled for me and I'd thought that perhaps he'd already traveled to France, where he eventually went to study advanced mathematics, but this morning I clearly remembered that he had been there too, sitting across the table from me, self-consciously avoiding my eyes. He was sixteen and had not yet been to university.

And as I recalled that he had in fact been sitting there, across from me at that lunch, another memory washed over me too, of one of our long days together on the beach a few years prior, how after hours and hours of floating in water, we lay on the sand side by side, our bodies barely touching, our arms having landed very close to each other as we laughed, our legs too, just touching, but soon we ran back into the ocean to hop the

waves with Marta once more. In and out of the water we ran, and on one of these trips back into it, he having run ahead of me, I stared down at his footprint embedded in the sand. I was about to place my own foot inside his when a wave came and washed it flat. Manolo had decided it was time to move on, and appeared at the top of the cliff above us. *¡Vamonos!* he yelled, waving us out of the water, and we ran up, in response to his command, and while dripping there next to the car, all three of us dancing our feet on the hot ground, Manolo reached out his hand to Pablo. Give me the keys, he said. And Pablo looked confused for a moment, must have then remembered that, yes, Manolo had handed them to him and that he had plunged them deep into his pocket, before running down to the water after us, my sister and me, so in went his hand to search for them now. But his face contorted a little then grew full of terror as he realized they were no longer there. They must have fallen out in the ocean as we swam. He pulled his pocket inside out to prove it.

¡Idiota! Manolo yelled out at him as he smacked him on the side of the head.

But you just did not speak to Pablo in that way; it was just not done, and so my then father gazed over at him where Pablo stood staring down at his feet, and Manolo began to look annoyed, now, at his own growing sense of remorse. He screwed up his mouth into a frown which slowly gave way to a forgiving smile while he shoved the boy a bit more playfully and ruffled his hair as he barked, It's alright.

And then Manolo turned away from us and pushed the front seat all the way back and knelt in the car for ten or so minutes until he finally rose up, looking triumphant, and repeated, *¡Vamonos!* so that we looked into where he had been working near the steering wheel and realized that he had hot-wired the car. Marta and I jumped up and down in celebration, proud of our father, Look at what he'd done! and I was relieved that Pablo would be okay after all, and then we laughed at him together, Marta and I, and Manolo shoved him on the side of the head a bit more and Pablo looked down, sheepish, as he was doing now here at his mother's table, and we all hopped into the car and took off for our next stop.

I played around with the rice on my plate, making little piles of it all over its surface.

Pablo's mother asked me a few questions, Where did I live? How long was I here for? I answered politely and she smiled at me while I ate.

What had that mild-mannered woman thought when Manolo said, Pablo and Veronica will one day be married?

OceanofPDF.com

SECRET SISTER

In Mexico, aside from my aunt Sofia, my older brother, Oscar, was the person I could talk to as a teenager, for he too had been sent off for whole years at a time. He had lived with Manolo's mother and sister, our aunt Mina, on and off throughout the years. I don't recall him really living with our abue as we girls did most of the time. Maybe being sent away from our family had given the two of us the distance to be critical, the desire to know and understand things as outsiders, things that if we had been a part of them might not have come into question at all. Maybe being sent away from our family had given us both the heartache and the anger to search.

Soon after my aunt Sofia confirmed that he was my biological father, I told my brother, Oscar, about Sebastian Manzo.

Did you know he's my father? I asked my brother. We were sitting in the living room of Mama Rita's pink house. It was Sunday and as on most Sundays we had come in from the busy street outside to the big entryway on the first floor from which we called up, before climbing the spiral staircase that led into her large, triangle shaped front room, in the apartment which sat on the second floor of the corner building she owned. The rose-colored structure came to a point where the two streets met at an angle, and her tenant, Virgil, whom we all liked very much, ran the dry cleaner's downstairs, Virgilio's. It was open to the street on both sides, and he was often to be found leaning over the counter chatting with some neighbor or other. We'd exchanged cheerful greetings as we passed him, *¿Verito, como estas?* he called out on that day, *¡Hola*, *Virgilio*, *muy bien!* and then in and up the spiral staircase we went. Upstairs, in the living room, the walls of glass block met at a 45 degree angle, that thick wavy glass diffusing the light that poured into the pink tiled room my brother and I now sat talking in, while Mama Rita finished preparing the mid-day meal; you never knew who would show up to eat there with you on any given Sunday; not only was she an excellent cook but she always made plenty of food to go around.

Mama Rita was the opposite of my abue, sharp and harsh with us children when she thought no other adults were looking, though otherwise she continually wore a smile, a grimace it seemed at times, her nervous

fingers nonstop working at the napkin in her hand; her bulging blue eyes repeatedly blinking. It was clear she didn't love me; her daughter, Mina, didn't love me either, and though this had been painful when I was a small child, by the time I was a teenager it was fine with me, though they did pretend to like a person when they had an interest in embroiling them in their destructive gossip.

No, Oscar said. He had not known about Sebastian, but he immediately, conspiringly, believed me. He knew how our mother was. She'd given us up, so the two of us had a privileged position from which to speak. We talked about it. We were sitting close to each other on the plastic covered couch with the piano behind us, while everyone else had already sat down to chat at the dining room table. Though it was a feverishness I carried inside myself, I had not wanted to tell my sisters about Sebastian; I didn't believe I should be the one to disclose anything about our mother and father to them; even then I knew that my knowledge, my thoughts and my feelings did not have to be theirs, could not be theirs, in fact; my brother, on the other hand ….

Oscar silently played with his fingers a bit, touching the pads of them on his thumb in a rapid rhythm, looking down at them for a second more, and pursing his mouth before slowly turning my way and telling me that Sebastian lived near our abue's house, with his family, did I know?

Family?

The rest of that meal is a blur, but that day, and for many weeks after it, I fantasized about this, Sebastian *and his family*. What could they possibly be like? What would it be like to be a part of them? Could I ever be a part of them?

Then, while visiting my abue's one sunny afternoon a few weeks later, my brother offered to walk me by Sebastian's house.

I was nervous when he said it, became jittery with the anticipation; to Oscar it seemed weighty too, so that I was not ashamed to share that I was anxious. Drink a glass of water, he told me. And I did, while standing over the sink in our kitchen. And then we walked out the courtyard gate and down our tree lined street, past the mercado where Pia and I ate quesadillas on the weekends, then down a few more blocks, a turn to the right and down two or three more. We were closer to the central square of the colonia here, and the light fell clear and sharp.

On the walk we spoke about our mother, how there was nothing that we doubted when it came to her behavior. Nothing we would put past her. Then he told me that he knew Sebastian's sons.

This is it, he said without warning when we were directly in front of the house, facing it from the other side of the street.

There it sat. On the corner. It was covered in ivy and hidden behind tall shrubs so that the entrance to it beyond the gate was shaded dark with greenery. It was an older construction, not modern at all like the houses we were used to living in, and I knew that somewhere in those ancient gray depths my father lived with his family.

It's so close, I said, though what I felt in that moment was that it was immeasurably distant.

I asked my brother to cross the street with me, and together we approached the gate as I stared into the darkness. Directly in front of it now, I wanted to stand there, to wait until he came out, to see what would happen then, my father in front of me; but instead I didn't linger, for I didn't want to appear too eager, to myself or to my brother, and anyway, what was I eager for?

So after pausing for only a moment we walked on, past the house that belonged to my father, on its north side.

As we were walking home, a different way than we'd come so that now we were in front of the pizza parlor I liked to go to with my aunt Sofia and her boyfriend, a couple of boys his age came up to my brother and said hello. I hung back a bit so that I could feel what I was feeling as he joshed with them a while, in the distance their abrasive boy laughter. And it was strange to me that my brother could be easy and casual with other kids his age. Strange that he had friends at all, to my eyes he was so odd.

That's your sister? one of them asked Oscar. She's pretty good looking, the boy said within earshot of me. It interested me only mildly for I had just seen my father's house.

Guess who that was? my brother asked when the boys had walked off. And before I could venture a guess, Sebastian's son! he yelled, laughing. He's the one who said you were pretty!

Gross! I replied, and we shrieked with a mix of delight and disgust, for that boy was as much my brother as Oscar was. Then I regretted not having

looked at that boy more closely.

What had my brother looked like?

OceanofPDF.com

EPISODIC

When Manolo arrived to pick us up for our trip we were rushing through the streets with our friends. Marta and I had horny toad lizards our uncle Felix had bought for us at the weekly outdoor mercado; we had babied those lizards, fed them live ants and flies and countless other insects, thrilling at their fast sticky tongues; we played with them day and night; my sister even slept with hers. Marta was a heavy sleeper, instantly falling deep into it while I lay in bed with my thoughts spinning every night. And this morning she'd woken up to the lizard smashed dead underneath her. After a couple of sharp wails of loss and regret, and self-pity that quickly transformed into a fierce jealousy that mine was still alive, she convinced her friend Bubbles and me to run over and sneak her flattened out lizard under the annoyingly irate neighbors' doorway. That woman, though we had never actually seen her, was constantly threatening us, yelling out, *¡¡Callense Escuincles!!* as we played on the street below her window. She was a disembodied angry voice, bossy and hateful, and Bubbles swore she knew which apartment was hers in the building we'd now snuck into. She carefully pushed the carcass under the door, then Marta shoved it deep inside with a stick while we all held our breath; we hung around just long enough to hear the woman scream out, Ahhhhh! as we ran back to gather in front of our abue's house. And now Bubbles was showing a bunch of us how we could foretell how many children we would each have by dangling a gold chain above our outstretched hands. I'm not moving it! she yelled when she was accused of doing so by her older sister, La Gorda. If the chain stopped at your outspread index finger it was one, your middle finger two, ring finger three, and so on. If it circled the kid would be a girl; a straight line, a boy. Just shut up! Bubbles yelled when La Gorda accused her of moving it again. I'm standing perfectly still!

Maybe it's moving because … I don't know, maybe something to do with gravity? I said. Marta rolled her eyes, and as she mimicked my words back to me in a pinched and high pitched tone, *Maybe it has something to do with gravity*, my sister spotted Manolo's car approaching and called out, *¡Papi!* and with that all of our hearts raced. He let out a sing-song honk and

we dropped our game and ran to the VW Bug that he was just pulling up to the curb; and there, in the front passenger seat, sat Pablo. I glanced quickly toward him as Manolo, with his big proud smile, told us he'd made some extra money and so we were going to celebrate.

Even then we knew this meant he'd had a good night gambling and we were very proud of our father.

We're going to take a trip: Acapulco! he belted as he leaned his chest far out his window, one hand still on the wheel.

Yes, yes, yes! we squealed.

Go get your things, he told us, and without thinking twice we abandoned our friends, And find your sister! Tell her she's coming too, he said.

The other kids' heads dropped as we ran toward our house— they'd been expecting money and treats at the sight of him— yelling out for Pilar to hurry, Papi is here, come on!

Our mother's youngest sister, our aunt Lily, who lived with us at our abue's, called out and asked what we were doing.

We answered, yelling still, that we were leaving, as we quickly grabbed a few things from out of our drawers. Papi is taking us to Acapulco!

There was always music animating the house and right now it was Three Dog Night, their loony circus song—*Baby, I wish you'd help me escape / Help me get away / Leave me outside my address / Far away from this masquerade.*

Are you sure? Lily called back. There was concern in her voice.

Of course! He is our father! Marta yelled at her.

Maybe you should wait till your grandma gets home, our aunt insisted in her meek way, as she made her way into the front from her bedroom, holding a shirt, mid-fold, at her chest.

She was only six or seven years older than me, and so had no authority.

No, no, no! He told us to hurry, Marta argued back, raging. He is our father, Lily!

As Marta argued with our aunt I looked for Pilar; he'd said she needed to come too …

I looked, and my care in doing so angered Marta because though I adored Pilar, Marta couldn't stand her, called her an idiot every chance she got, yet I searched and searched, calling out to her, until I finally let Marta pull me along when she did not appear.

Let's go! He's going to leave us. She's ridiculous anyway! Seriously laaame …

Pilar was almost fourteen, three and a half years older than me, long limbed and so cool in her low-waisted bellbottoms, with a sweet smile, and loving caresses. Sometimes I slept in bed with her and I worked hard to make her laugh deep into the night, until she'd softly tell me to shush it was time to sleep. She'd turn her back to me to underline the point, but I would continue to lovingly caress her, playing with her long hair, writing my nickname for her, Pia, into her back with my finger, *Los pollitos dicen Pia Pia Pia*, I'd softly sing to her, *cuando tienen hambre y cuando tienen friaaa* … and insist that she keep listening to me as I talked and talked deep into the night.

Pilar later told me that she'd hidden under the bed when she'd heard us run in calling for her because she didn't want to leave her boyfriend …

Lame! I could hear Marta yell out from the other room as Pilar admitted this to me.

OceanofPDF.com

UNCERTAINTY

I have often wondered if it was something other than her boyfriend that had moved Pilar to hide under that bed. And if she had come with us, would my sister's presence have kept me safe?

OceanofPDF.com

COMPLICATION

There are things that confuse me, I said to Dr. Jacobs. I remember he once took me to visit the mother of one of the boys he hung around with, the boy who had travelled the beaches with us, and the way he spoke about her to me on the drive over was reverential. I could see that he genuinely respected her. It was not an act. It was only later that I understood he had been molesting that boy, and since then the side of him that had normal feelings, that could feel anything at all that was not perverse, has confused me. How could there be any recognition of another's goodness in him when he was pure despicable? How could he see that woman's sacrifice as noble as he was simultaneously demolishing her by harming her child?

OceanofPDF.com

AUGUST 26, 2021

I was writing about it on the 26th because I'd remembered it again that morning, and had held onto it since waking, and now it was evening and I did not want to lose it. It was a dream from a couple of days prior. It stood out because even though I was in analysis, it was rare, in those days, that a dream would come back to me that vividly in my waking life, and then would not let me be, and so I was writing it down because it seemed to be insisting.

In the dream I was asleep in a friend's bed; I was then subletting this friend's apartment in Brooklyn for a while; it was another one of those sublets in which I'd ended up while the owner of the place—a friend or acquaintance—had left for somewhere else; and in my dream I was in my friend's bed laying on my right side, facing away from the window and toward the door that opens to the hall that leads to the rest of the apartment. I woke up, inside the dream, and when my eyes opened and I blurrily looked about the room I saw Manolo standing in front of the bed. Except he was a statue, life-sized, stone or cement. He stared at me expressionless and inched forward. He squarely faced me as he approached me from in front, not from behind, and in my dream I thought, *This is not how it happened*.

He proceeded to inch toward me, indirectly, stiffly, propelling his body forward by forcefully swinging his lower torso, which functioned as a base, from side to side as he moved, inching along like this as if he really was a statue and having difficulty maneuvering himself. When he reached the bed he lay down on his left side, facing me in that bed in my dream which was exactly like my friend's actual bed, his back to the door, so that his body was blocking me from it; I was dreaming my friend's room while asleep in her room so that it felt like one of those lucid dreams I've had several times in my life. He lay on his left side, and I lay on my right, and as he faced me I noticed that his arms were extremely short. He reached his very short arms out directly in front of himself, toward me, and I noted again that he was dense, yes, like a statue, much thicker and denser than he actually was, more than any man actually is in waking life, and very stiff, a stone man? and I thought: I can just push him off the bed with my long arms, or kick

him off with my strong kicking legs. He was near the edge of the mattress, so I could have done so, used my force to shove him off that edge, but I did neither of these things and instead I merely turned away, gave him my back, and he was suddenly not there. And now I seemed to be in another room, though it was the same bed I was laying in, and there was a handsome young guy in it with me, facing me, much in the same position as the statue Manolo had been on the other side of the bed. Me on my left now, he on his right. The young man was curled up toward me, almost in a fetal position. He had longish dark hair and was smiling eagerly at me as he looked into my eyes. We lay facing each other and such love washed over me as he leaned further in, toward me. And I thought, Oh he's here! (*Who was he?*) My heart soared, I was so happy to see him. He tenderly brushed the hair from my face as he continued to stare into my eyes, his own eyes sad and searching; and though I was extremely happy to see him, as I lay there facing him, letting him play about my hair, looking back into his eyes too, it came to me that though he was magnetic—I felt such a draw—he was also child-like and ineffectual. He couldn't do what had to be done. I got up to go to the bathroom, and though the toilet was in a big open space—like a department store, where two older women very busily worked at folding things, white shirts and sweaters, before carefully placing them on display tables—I sat on that open toilet. The women looked over at the guy in the other room and in unison they said, He is darling. He loves you. You are lucky.

And I thought, He is, the way he looks into my eyes. I am lucky.

I continued sitting on the very high toilet, which seemed to be on a pedestal of some sort. The older of the two women, the one nearest to me, put her arm around my shoulder as I sat there, and when I got up from the seat she looked in and gestured in many different ways that it was grotesque.

It is so much, she managed to say, grimacing.

Who told you to look? I said.

The shit is inside me. Who told me to look?

OceanofPDF.com

ROCK

I thought about how rock-solid Manolo was in the dream, and that I couldn't, or wouldn't, kick him off, out of my bed. There were many reasons why this could be, I believed. My fear. My confusion. A terrifying ambivalence. Perhaps, like most girls, I was in rivalry with my absent, mad mother for my even-more-absent, bad father's love, etc. Perhaps, like many people, I had a strong attachment to my neuroses, or my symptoms, or my form of illness, and perhaps pushing him off would represent a level of growth, or an accomplishment I was nowhere near yet, etc.; perhaps it was not the young man in the dream, but me who was ineffectual, perhaps I *was* the young man, etc. etc. etc.

These ideas seemed so rote, yet I couldn't help but come back to the thought that even inside the dream, when I considered taking action to rid myself of him, I could not do it. He was heavy, a rock, but he was on the edge of that bed so that I could have done it, gathered my strength and pushed and shoved him off with my strong legs. Yet, even in a dream, even in the dream within the dream, I could not do it.

He had calcified. He had calcified in me.

It is only now, as I write this, that it hits me what else rock-solid might be referring to. Puns in dreams can be excruciatingly obvious.

OceanofPDF.com

LILY

The maternal aunt who called out to Marta and me from inside her room in my grandmother's house as we were preparing to go on that road trip with Manolo, the aunt who asked, Are you sure? with concern in her voice, as we rushed to shove things into a couple of bags to take with us—our arms flailing with the rush, me breaking only to go search for Pia—that aunt was my aunt Lily.

She came out of her room, tentative steps, holding a white shirt, which she was in the midst of folding, pulling it up to her mouth before speaking again, a worried look on her face, Don't you want to wait and ask your Grandma first? I'm not sure I can let you go.

She, like me, is small, and is incredibly timid; she is also calm and kind and has an easy smile and shy eyes that look down when she is laughing or when she is embarrassed. When she laughs she covers her mouth in bashful shrinking. Lily is the youngest of my grandmother's daughters, twelve years younger than my mother, and was so close to us in age that we didn't refer to her as aunt; we simply called her Lily. My sister, Marta, could easily bully her, and did.

He's our father, Lily! Marta dismissively yelled at her. Of course we can go! she furiously added.

The loony circus music played in the background as we rapidly shoved things into our bags … *But I must let the show go / I must let the show go / I must let the show go on …*

As my aunt stares at us, the worry written on her whole body now, the camera moves in and we cut to a close-up. She is pursing and pursing her lips, her right hand playing the cloth of the shirt she is holding as the scene goes to black.

At the time of our trip, this aunt, my sweet aunt Lily, had already been molested by Manolo as well.

I found this out much later. I don't recall who it was that first told me, but I believe it was her older sister, my aunt Sofia. And since then this fact

has been repeated to me several times by various maternal relatives, though never by my aunt Lily herself.

I am afraid of hurting her, she is so tender, and so I have never spoken to Lily about it directly.

OceanofPDF.com

PHONE CALL

For a while now, I have felt the urge to call my fathers' sister, Ed and Manolo's sister, my Aunt Mina. It is an urge, but seems important for this book as well—for its further development (for my further development?). Manolo and Ed are both dead now, and so I need her to tell me some things I will otherwise never know. All those things, the family stories, that will disappear with her when she is gone. But she is poison. She is a cruel and terrifying creature, opening you up with feigned concern, telling you that she sees how you are hurting, luring you in with lowered voice as she whispers her sympathetic understanding of your wounds. Hypnotized and unable to move, you let her grasp you, and, as if drugged, you watch her as she tears open your chest so she can eat your heart. You hand her your entrails. When she is done with you, she slithers to a darkened corner where her tongue flicks about her bloodied face, savoring your remnants, some sick depravity pulsing in her fiery eyes.

She is Manolo's sister and she is perverse. Ed's grandparents saved him from all that.

Mina has damaged countless relationships, has turned one against the other, time and time again. Mina makes it a habit to drop devastating bits of gossip, while biting into a bit of cheese, sipping from her glass of wine. People's hidden ailments, unwanted pregnancies, unlawful dealings. With me it took the form of a direct betrayal.

When I was fifteen, she moved to Hollywood from Mexico City; long divorced from her handsome Dutch husband, she came to visit us in San Gabriel one day. A teenager now, I was starting to forge my way. Though I was terribly unhappy at home, I was making a world for myself outside of it, starting to go to parties and clubs where I'd meet kids from all over Los Angeles. I was ditching school and taking the bus all the way to the beach where, surrounded by all the other wandering teens, I floated in water and sand from 9-3. It was on the bus home from one of these beach days, sitting on the wheel shelf all the way at the back, that I first heard Blondie yelling, … I'm gonna get ya, get ya, get ya, get ya, get ya … and in that moment my

relationship to music changed. But what Mina saw on the day of her visit was my familial misery. What she focused on was my grim reality inside that suburban home. Bright eyes and rosy cheeks, she came and sat beside me on the couch in the den and put her long long legs up on the coffee table, near my own feet which I'd just lain there; my young aunt, hip and good looking, sipping on her white wine while she inched up and got real close, asked me to tell her all about my friends. What did I do here? At first I was cautious, for I'd always known she did not love me, but she grew excited at my stories, and I was gravely hungry for release, for a sympathetic adult ear; she was so open to me, and seemed genuinely interested in all I had to tell, grew more and more excited, commiserated more deeply with every word I shared, her eyes widening in accord. I had someone to talk to! *¿De veras?* she said. *¡Que Padre! ¿Oye, y que tal tu mamá Rosa? ¿Es tierna contigo?*

Tender? Was she tender with me? Was she kidding? She'd lured me in—I had to correct this—and so I frankly told her that on the contrary, Ed's wife was cruel. In fact, I couldn't stand her. I told her how miserable I was whenever she was around. It poured out of me. I told her that she was an uptight miserable hag. Cold and sadistic. How I wished she'd just let everyone live their lives in peace.

I know! she shrieked, and we both laughed at our realization of a joint contempt, her hands momentarily going to her mouth with the glee of it. She's ruining my brother, she added, conspiratorial, sweeping her long bangs out of her eyes. I can never see him alone! He's my brother for Christ's sake! she yelled. Her Lucite bangle bracelets clanked about as she flew her arms around. I nodded vigorously as she spoke and she gave me a sip of her wine.

She now lowered her voice in delicious confidence and told me Ed's wife was a bastard. She used that word, which was a dagger thrust into my heart too. Was I a bastard? And then she continued, Her parents weren't married, she said as she swirled the yellow liquid in her glass. It was an affair. If you can call it that, she said, Her father's a full forty-five years older than her mother. Mina cinched her eyes toward me, Would you call that an affair? I shrugged my shoulders and she continued, She's soooo *self-righteous*, but, guess what, her mother was the help!

What? I was astonished. Ed's wife had made me feel like a contaminated indigent in regard to my parentage, the product of scandalous depravity. My

mother, in her eyes, was scum. But her own mother? Ed's wife was such a snob in her many big-jeweled rings and mink coats, bragged constantly that in Cuba her father had been a judge. Demeaned and humiliated others. Dreamed only of fancy cars and big big houses.

And then I realized that she'd never mentioned how they'd met, her parents. And I understood that she was a woman who had completely re-invented herself. This was why she was so insistent on rules. Her mother had broken them and now she was here in her made-up life and so could be deceptively insistent about class and breeding.

She was the cleaning woman! my aunt stressed, almost yelling now. That hideous midget monster! her eyes flashed as she referred to Ed's mother-in-law, who like her daughter, was a cruel rule-ridden woman. This is why, Mina said, vehemently pointing in my direction, *this* is why she grew up in a convent. They had to get her out of the way. To hide her! She lies about everything! my aunt added, as her eyes blazed in my direction.

My head was spinning now.

And it was *my* mother, Mama Rita, who helped get them out of Cuba, Mina added, though her words were fuzzy now—my head pulsing—what were these words she was saying?

After she married Eduardo, Mama Rita pulled the strings and dealt with all the paperwork to get her parents out, Mina said. My mother did that for her! My mother knows! She knows everything. Ask your dad, she said, calming herself a bit while pulling the chalice to her wine-soaked lips. She pointed at me to stress the point, Ask him, go ask Eduardo.

I nodded my head no. I would not be asking Ed. And in that moment I felt something like compassion toward Ed's wife. I felt sorry for her.

And then, the next day Mina told them everything I had said. Ed and his wife. The parties, the boys I liked, the ditching, my secret trips to the beach, all the awful things I'd said about her, and … and … and ….

Then she told them to watch out for me. I was trouble.

I didn't say a word to defend myself—there had never been a space for me to speak. And my already difficult relationship with my adoptive mother plunged into new depths of dreadful misery. But I'd begun to see her through the distance of her lies, her made up biography, her regal posturing … those lies like a moat around me, protecting me. Though she would continue to insult and wound me, to inflict her fury and disdain, she could

never really reach me now, for I was armed with a pity that colored her pathetic.

I'd not spoken to my aunt Mina in more than thirty years. Thus, if I was to make the call now I would need a clear excuse, a strong enough reason with which to introduce the sudden and unexpected contact. I had put it off for a full year as I knew the call would hurt me. I was not sure how she would effect it, but she was clever in her cruelty, stealthy in her viciousness. She was not someone you could guard against, for she was cunning. Afterward you would replay it, bewildered, try to identify where you could have better positioned yourself, more determinedly armored your heart.

Still, I needed to know about Manolo. I needed to clarify some things.

And so, on the anniversary of Ed's death, he had been dead two years, I picked up the phone. It had come to me that morning when I looked at my calendar and saw the date clearly written out, his name in New Courier underlined there. In my trepidation I avoided it the whole day. But in the early evening I understood that no other opportunity would present itself. I knew only this mournful anniversary could provide the excuse for a call.

So I dialed.

Oh no!! He was so wonderful! she gushed, dripping with emotion when I told her the reason for my call. I miss him so much! He was so good! So good! Ay, Eduardo! she cried.

He did so much for you, she said. You all suffered so much! You suffered! she yelled. You were like kittens, constantly being given away!

She began to talk about Ed. Mama Rita had sent him, the eldest, off to be raised by their grandmother. It was simply too expensive for her with all us little kids in Catholic school, how could she possibly manage it, Mina asked. And he was the oldest. He would be okay.

Mi mamá just couldn't do it, Mina said. So she made the decision to send Eduardo to live with our grandmother, an excellent woman, she added, with a big, beautiful house. It was good for him there, decent, and anyway, it was all too much for Mama Rita. My father was never around. Manolo hung out on the street with all the other neighborhood boys, loafing, playing soccer between cars, breaking windows when they didn't like someone, throwing dice with his friends while scheming how next to make a quick peso or two; they drank beer all day, ran around in rowdy groups, and egged each other on, shoving and laughing, chasing the girls.

Though Sebastian wasn't as wild, wasn't always hanging on the street, we all became friends with him, Mina said, because Sebastian's family lived right across from us on Laguna del Carmen, and Manolo met him on the street one day. And soon, his sisters were my friends too.

Without my asking, Mina had brought him up.

So my three fathers had lived across the street from each other, I found out. They'd been boys together. And once Ed was gone, she told me, Manolo and Sebastian continued to play soccer together, with the other boys. They went to school together too, for a while, until Mama Rita was able to send them to the Catholic school one colonia away. In those days, Mama Rita had an abarotte, or bodega, on the corner of their street, near El Colegio Militar, and she was always working, but through the store she made enough money for their Catholic education. Yet, even though they were now at different schools, Manolo and Sebastian became even tighter, houses across from each other—windows like eyes looking at the others' day and night.

And then, one day, their father, Mama Rita's husband, mortgaged off the house.

Eduardo Gonzalez senior was half the size of his wife. He was a tour guide who went by the nickname Speedy. Speedy Gonzalez. He perpetually wore a sad grin-and-bear-it smile, spoke English, a little French and some German, and the tourists sought him out. He had a bum hip, and so a minor limp, and he knew everything about Mexico City. He was an orphan, had been raised in an orphanage, and now, as an adult, he was always rushing, was itchy and hard to pin down. Mama Rita and he did not seem like a couple, except when she was yelling at him; he was rarely around, kept other women, was a gambler, liked to drink, and had his hidden perversions (one of which he passed on to his favorite son, Manolo). According to Mama Rita, Eduardo Gonzalez senior was her undoing. And he said she was his. Or they were each other's. Either way, when he lost their home, they had to move. Yet the boys stayed close, Manolo and Sebastian, running around together always, Eduardo junior, Ed, joining them whenever he was at home.

Sebastian's family was more prosperous, Mina told me. His father was a serious businessman, dry and heavy-handed. Lots of strict rules, and grunted commands, and directed forceful gestures. But his mother, Pilar,

was lovely, Mina said. Delicate and warm and inclusive. Pilar always had a kind word, a soft hand at your back or on your shoulder, or caressing your own. You could easily make her laugh. Manolo was often at their house in the evening, singing loudly with them at their frequent big parties, for several of the siblings and one or two of the uncles and aunts were excellent musicians. Pianos plunking, guitars strumming, everyone joining in for the chorus, *llorar y llorar, llorar y llorar,* they'd sing, dripping with emotion, spread out in a horseshoe around the various little tables piled high with beautiful party food …

After the disillusionment of you, my aunt said off-handedly, after your birth, Manolo left for Chicontepec.

Chicontepec is the little village in Veracruz that Sebastian Manzo was from, or rather, that his family was from. Manolo had been to visit with Sebastian and his family many times, on vacation, and he'd had such an excellent time there, swimming lazy in the river with his best friend, going to cock fights where they yelled out for their favorite cocks together, grabbing up their winnings and running to the food stalls in the park. The next day sitting around a big mid-day table, huge family meals daily, where the women doted on Sebastian's beautiful friend. Away from his parents and the city, in the country with his best friend, Manolo was happy.

After you were born, Mina said, Manolo decided to leave Mexico City and went to Chicontepec to live more permanently. He became the town doctor.

I wanted to ask why in that moment he would go lick his wounds in the family village of the man who had betrayed him, but I kept silent.

One day, when he was in Mexico City—he was always back and forth, no one ever knew when he would show up, his horn honking out his arrival—they all decided to go to the graveyard together, Mina and Sebastian and Manolo, to visit Adrian, Mina and Manolo's brother, just a year younger than Ed, who had died in a fight a few years prior.

Adrian had been the golden child, the middle boy, and everyone's favorite; he was a great athlete, a swimmer, and was headed to the Olympics, but he had been killed in a fight over a woman. Or maybe it had been a road-rage incident. I'd heard different versions as a child, so for me

the motive for the murder remained confusing, though it was clear he had been shot.

And during this visit to the graveyard, my aunt told me, with Manolo and Mina present, Sebastian asked for forgiveness at Adrian's grave.

Why, I asked my aunt, For what?

Because Adrian never forgave him! How could you have done that to my brother? he said, because it was clear you were Sebastian's daughter. Your best friend? Adrian asked, spitting out the words. How could you do that to my brother, your best friend?

And Adrian never even looked at Sebastian again, Mina said.

So now, at the Panteón Francés de San Joaquín, the modernist Mexico City graveyard where he was buried, the hazy light filtering in through the tall ash and weeping fig trees, the three stood before Adrian's grave, “I want you to forgive me,” Sebastian said, looking down at the ground. “I know you can hear me. Forgive me, Adrian.”

Mina—long straight bangs dipping into her huge eyes, in her red drop-waist dress, and boxy jacket, her square heeled patent leather shoes, the perfect 60s lady—stood at the grave next to Manolo, who wore a dark suit and thin tie. This brother and sister looked at each other then, in disbelief, *¿Y a este, que animal le pico?* their widened eyes questioned each other.

No puedo creer lo que le hiciste a mi hermano, Adrian had said to their friend, the only one of the siblings clear enough to directly address the betrayal and confront him. I can't believe what you did to my brother, he said, and then Adrian never spoke to Sebastian again.

But I don't understand, I said then, Why didn't Sebastian just turn and ask Manolo for forgiveness directly, if he was standing right there with you? It was the perfect opportunity. My mother was his wife, after all. He was the one who'd been betrayed.

Mina ignored my question, which I let go because at some level I knew the answer.

She rushed off the phone then, though I protested, because I wanted to ask more questions. When we did hang up, it took me a moment to contain myself. And then, what stood out was that Manolo had named his first child after Sebastian's mother, Pilar. Pia. My beautiful sister. In my early childhood, as I'd called out to my older sister, unbeknownst to me, I'd also been calling out to my biological grandmother, calling out my ancestry: *¡Pilar! ¡Pia! ¡Pia! ¡Pia!*

How deep did Manolo's love for Sebastian run?
And how confused was I in the midst of it?

OceanofPDF.com

AUGUST 15, 2024

Another set of tenants had left, and so I was once again laying in my house in Los Angeles, the house I had left eleven years before to go live in New York, the house that was built by my ex-husband, the house in which we'd lived our lives. The house our daughter was born and raised in until her adolescence. The house that in the years after our divorce became too sad and weighty for me to live in, so that I moved myself and my daughter across the country to start a new life.

I only occasionally visited the house now, when it was vacant, one of the long list of tenants having moved out.

Today I looked out at the garden from the bed. I was partially propped up and so I could see into it, the thorned silk tree at its center nearly dead now, though still hanging on. The tall succulents Jorge and I had planted together twisting in odd configurations, looking like strange, green creatures, reaching for the sun.

Los Angeles is so bright, but because the courtyard is shaded by a tall sycamore the cacti fight each other for light, contorting themselves to get at it. They are like us, I think to myself.

I thought about my aunt, about her effectiveness. She is able to draw out and mirror the darkness you carry inside. What daily silently tortures you. She confirms and underlines it and then throws it back at you in the most painful manner.

The disillusionment of you.

Yet this world she'd briefly sketched out for me was what had actually been there, what I was born into, the guilt and the confusion and the mixed-up love and anger, that at times bordered on hatred … I was born of all of this mixed-up emotion, and I'd felt it, though as a child I did not understand it at all … it was put upon me … and I felt it. I became the sign of it to all of them, and so, in that world, I *was* it.

I am trying to change my sense of that, but it has not been easy.

I want to try to understand who they were to each other, these two men. The previous night as I was falling asleep, I thought, They were in love with each other. It came to me clearly, as a statement of fact. At least it was

pretty clear that Manolo was in love with Sebastian. He never held him accountable. He remained his best friend, unquestionably. This must have been because my mother never really mattered to him. And perhaps, I thought, Sebastian making love to my mother was a way for him to place his own desire for his best friend, Manolo, somewhere else; in the most adjacent place possible. In the only place possible for himself then, in 1960s middle class Mexico. He too loved Manolo, I was now sure of it. It was a reciprocal friendship. He would have pulled away if Manolo's love was too much for him.

My mother was the sacrifice. And I was the actualized symbol that had to be erased, and so they sent me away.

It was Manolo's mother who navigated the big black car that came to get me from my abue's house that fateful day. Mama Rita who, as I got older, must have decided I must be gotten rid of and put me on the plane. She had her husband fly me away. Eduardo senior flew me to his son, Manolo's brother, away from Mexico City and my family; he flew me to the only one of the three men I now think of as my father; he flew me away to Ed in the United States.

OceanofPDF.com

BETTER

The next time I spoke to Dr. Jacobs he asked, Do you feel better?

Better?

That you've figured something out, he explained.

I don't know, Dr. Jacobs, do you think I've figured something out?

I think so, he answered.

Well, maybe. It is fascinating, the way people's lives play out so perfectly, so logically almost, in relation to their compulsions, like tragic tales with details that add up and fall fully into place around them—unless you get some help, as I am trying to do with you now … trying to make sure my compulsions don't control the narrative, don't end up looking like fate.

They had such love for each other, I added, and my mother just did not matter—she was just the body on which they played out their drama. She didn't matter to them at all. What mattered was their friendship which, at least for Manolo, was homo-erotic. I am sure of that.

And when seen in this light it makes perfect sense that he lived his life out in Sebastian's town—though it is a twisted and miserable sense.

Yes, Dr. Jacobs said.

OceanofPDF.com

LA

We left Ohio of the raining frogs and wide sloping hills and blankets of pristine winter snow, Ohio of the many woodland creatures, and the buzzing summer life. We left Ohio of my best friend Cathy, whom I missed intensely after leaving, and with whom I would exchange letters full of nothing (our ridiculous pet nicknames) for many years to come. After five years of me growing from a small Mexico City girl into someone different, a middle-America country girl, we left Ohio just as I was entering sixth grade.

Ed had gotten a new position at a state university, and so we drove all the way to California and Los Angeles, and in LA the kids were wild. The girls wore short short skirts and platform shoes and were already working it, and the boys had flowing hair which swung long and loose behind them as they leaned way back in their chairs defiant, taunting each other, arms akimbo, knees spread wide; the two best boys were in the other sixth grade class—there were two classes for each grade at my school—and were already artists and were exceedingly cool. Their names were Walter and Andy and Walter had hair that fell past his shoulders, and he spoke slowly, clearly, sure of himself, and Andy was the handsomest boy I'd ever seen. He had thick black hair and creamy skin and perfect lips. He was third-generation Mexican and he didn't speak Spanish and I couldn't take my eyes off of him. In fact, none of the Mexican kids, of which I was no longer the only one, spoke Spanish, even those who could. The name of the game in LA, I was quick to find out, was fitting in. I was eleven and it was sixth grade. Walter and Andy read *Mad Magazine* and they were cartoonists; already sharp and ironic, they were always drawing. In Ohio we were so innocent; in Ohio the smartest boy, Dirk, could draw too, but he used his skills to make complicated mazes to the center of which only the cleverest of us could make our way. In Ohio we raised our hand to answer every question and tried hard to win the spelling bee. It took me a while to adjust to these kids here in LA; their bored irony was something I was just not used to. But by

the end of sixth grade I would turn twelve and I would learn Manolo was not my father and very soon after that I became wild too.

As when we arrived in Ohio five years prior, in LA we stayed at a little motel before we moved in to our house (though here, instead of at the edges of the woods, the motel was in deepest suburbia, a previously foreign concept / reality which I would come to know quite well because it was what I would soon inhabit), and the girl I met there in the pool would end up at my school. She had moved to LA from Pennsylvania, which sits right next to Ohio and the spelling of which I liked to say fast. Ohio was so short and symmetrical. Roxanne and I would become friends, though the following year she would move to San Juan Capistrano, a romantic name for a dreamy beach town with darting swallows that make a big splash on their return to the mission every year in March.

The day after arriving in San Gabriel (which like San Juan Capistrano, has a mission too) we all went to look at the house we would soon move into. Ed had gone to LA alone to find it a few months prior, a small Spanish house with a clay tiled roof, the only house I would live in in Los Angeles with my adoptive family. Over the years Ed would expand the little house by adding another bedroom and a large den which he would fill with books, and where his desk would sit hidden surrounded by shelves full of them, and a bathroom and a kidney shaped swimming pool. He would transform the garden too, planting it to look like a Mexican courtyard with guavas and mango and lime, abundant with edible life. But now, today, while Ed and his wife walked the house with the extremely loud and eager realtor, the boys—now six and eight—and I investigated the garage which stood open wide and where in our snooping we soon found a cage with a hamster inside. We had never had a pet, and so this was exciting. The cage sat on a long worktable, and we had just approached it when the realtor walked in and saw us before it. Ah, you found them! she yelled. Her bright red suit sat stiff and wide around her shoulders. The previous owners wanted to gift you their hamsters! she said. She peered inside the cage, But there were four? she said, her statement also a question.

My inquisitive gaze questioned her back.

The owners had moved out three weeks earlier and now there was only one in the cage. It was clear nobody had come to look after them; nobody had come to feed the hamsters. The mother had eaten her babies I now understood. She was all flying paws and gnashing teeth and was clearly

starving because she chewed angrily at the bars of her cage as we stared, eyes wide in horror. Her ravenous teeth were working the metal as I leaned down to warn my little brother, Thomas, not to put his finger near her. He slowly placed his small hand in mine and grabbed at my palm hard to stop the impulse.

Our teacher was an ancient and serious old woman with dyed red hair. She was very thin. Our thin, red-haired, serious, old teacher was dedicated and smart and was impressed by my college town education. It took a while for me to learn that I was not supposed to want to please her, was certainly not supposed to raise my hand. And then it took a little bit longer for me to learn from my classmates' angry sighs and hard looks that I was not supposed to do my homework either. I still stood out though, because though my breasts were budding, and this was Los Angeles in the 1970s, where every other eleven-year-old was extremely hippy-cool and very beautiful, Ed's wife continued to insist I wear frilly little-girl dresses. And white lace-embroidered socks. And black patent-leather Mary Janes. But I ran fast fast fast and though I looked strange in my out of place outfits, despite my overdressed aspect my speed won me some points …. We had races on the big asphalt playground, a marked-in-chalk straight track which we had drawn out, two runners, one on each side of the thick white line, one-hundred-yard dash. And I always won. I was faster than any of the boys, zooming past everyone in my crinoline dresses and shiny black shoes. Maybe, I later came to understand, we had so many races because they were all deeply entertained by the ridiculousness of the sight of me in flouncing tulle innocently speeding by the hip and sneering pre-adolescent gawkers. At some point late in the year I'd had enough, and so I started borrowing my new best friend's clothes, which I changed into when I stopped at her house to pick her up on my way to school; she lived a few blocks closer to it and I would change back into my dresses before going home. (A year later, by now sometimes hiding my shoplifted clothes—a skill newly acquired—in the bushes outside my own house, Ed's wife would catch me in one of my alternate outfits and stare me into terrified submission, but for now and into seventh grade, in the mornings I'd go into Lisa Cheng's bathroom and change into her pants.) We'd walk the rest of the way to school together and on Fridays, during assembly, when both sixth-grade classes were brought together, I stealthily watched as Andy walked in with the other sixth grade

class—they had a young male teacher and somehow the whole group of them seemed a notch above us. Compared to them, we were pathetic losers, ugly too. I stared at Andy from across the cafeteria which doubled as our assembly hall. In this cafeteria cum assembly hall, one day just before the end of the school year, Mineko—the Japanese girl whose own mother outfitted her in prim little-girl dresses and patent leather shoes too, but who didn't have a best friend who would let her borrow her dittos or her high waisted, sailor chemin de fers— gave a concert on the piano while her mother watched from the sidelines. Mineko was mortified, made to go up on the stage in front of all of us to perform, and as she was my tulle doppelganger, I felt deeply for her. My eyes watered and my chest tightened for Mineko as she played. I could feel the anxiety radiating from her and understood her pain as she was forced to perform classical music for the pack of her crude, unruly classmates. Oblivious to this, her mother stared at her daughter from the sidelines as Mineko's fingers skillfully moved across the instrument, a proud otherworldly mother's smile on her face, her hands crossed at her chest.

Sometimes in this same cafeteria we watched movies during lunchtime because there was too much smog to play. They called it a Stage 3 smog alert when the air in that suburb of Los Angeles hung heavy, thick, sickeningly brown and poisonous so that on those Stage 3 days we kids were not allowed to run outside. On those days I could stare at Andy for nearly the full lunch hour as he drew or played card games with Walter.

On our way back to class one day, one of the meaner girls, pretty and so dominant, asked, What were you staring at? Like, for the whole hour.

But I was used to my sister Marta's dangerous traps so I turned my head away from her cruel gaze, Nothing, I said, my heart racing only a little.

Toward the end of the year we were running around outside when I was overwhelmed by the urge to defend my friends from the boy who had taken over the drinking fountain. I saw a long line of kids waiting, just standing there really, and then I saw Robert at the head of it. He stood guard over the fountain like a silent dare, fury on his face, and on his whole body too, written there deep and hard; he wouldn't let anyone drink.

This simply could not be. I just couldn't get my head around it, the injustice of it, so I stomped straight up to him and told Robert he couldn't do this, it was everyone's water. What did he think he was up to? He was

stocky and unlike the other boys his blond hair was short, shorn at the sides like a military man, his blue eyes angry. Without pausing to hear me out he turned and punched me in the stomach. Hard. I tried but couldn't breathe, stood gasping for air, trying to inhale for only a moment of pure disbelief because immediately I ran to the bathroom where no one could see me cry. A few days before this drinking fountain incident Robert had been forcibly pulled off the boy who sat in front of him, Doug, a nice boy who always smelled vaguely of chicken soup. Doug was tall and awkward and passed gas often but Doug was also quiet and polite and kept to himself mostly, and was no threat to anyone at all. Yet on that horrible day Robert was suddenly on him, on top of him, straddling his chest while repeatedly punching him in the face. He sat over Doug shaking that docile boy's shoulders and head as our old, serious but kindly teacher hobbled over aghast; we ran over behind her and stared on in shock. One of us (who had the presence of mind?) ran next door to the cooler sixth grade class and called out to the male teacher to come and pull Robert off of Doug. All of his students rushed to see the action from the windows and door, not daring to enter our lowly room. And then a few days later Robert punched me in the stomach for challenging his water takeover.

Robert was adopted, I found out a week after he punched me, and this fact alone explained some things to me, such that— though others didn't—I suddenly understood the rage. I knew something must have happened in his house, or must be happening there all the time, as it was in my house. Or else the something was happening inside him, in ways that rose up and overtook him. Or maybe it was all of it, all of it at once. Either way, the following week the strangest thing occurred. Robert pulled my best friend aside and told her he liked me. Eeeewwww! I yelled at Lisa and at our third, Judy, my hand darting to cover my eyes before quickly shifting to covering my mouth, when she told me. He punched me! I yelled through my fingers. And when I looked away from Judy and Lisa and up toward Robert there in the distance, wandering the field alone during lunchtime, my heart hurt because perhaps I was the only one who understood his rage and violence. He was my doppelganger too, though Ed's wife still did not let me tell anyone I was adopted, and so no one at the school knew this fact but me. Yet, for just a moment, as he wandered that field alone before me, I thought that Robert must have known who I was, somehow. At some level, I now believed, he must have seen and understood that I was a version of himself

and thus liking me was a sympathetic and loving feeling for both of us at once.

And then, with two weeks left of sixth grade, I turned twelve, and in a little over a month it was the fourth of July, and because we had only recently moved to LA, that summer I did not get sent to Mexico City.

It was the bicentennial and so the celebrations were tremendous and on that very day I got my first period. I was in pain and was embarrassed by both the pain and the blood. That night we went to a restaurant on the waterfront from which we could see the fireworks reflected on the ocean waves. With the water they rose and burst and sparkled and fell and spread. We lived near the beach now, could drive to it in under an hour, and so we were able to watch the colorful explosions from our table at the restaurant that sat on stilts high above the water's surface. We were served balls of ice cream with lighted sparklers stuck inside them and the boys shrieked with delight while I stared at the beauty of the bursting flames.

A few days after my birthday, a month before this bicentennial ice cream and my first period, I was ordered into the living room and my eyes blinked in rapid succession as I learned that Manolo was not my father; and though in those days I never even thought of him, or it, the it being what he had done to me during one of those summer visits, the molestation, at twelve he became not my father and I was not supposed to cry, and so I became an athlete instead. I was already a runner, and I delighted in my speed, and soon I began to play soccer too. Ed encouraged this; it was his idea, in fact, You'll like it, he said. Sebastian is a great forward, he whispered to me knowingly, as if I was supposed to somehow digest and understand this, as if I was supposed to want to double my biological father, whom I could not remember ever having met. You will be good too, Ed said. And the next fall when I joined my first team I was.

I always listened to Ed, to what he told me. I adored him. And to me it was very clear that he loved me too. Kids know things. I knew this. He became a referee and sometimes he officiated my games. He was not supposed to side with me, and so he didn't, but I loved to watch him blow the whistle and pull out the red and yellow cards while wearing his silly black and white uniform, his shorts and long socks. This was what we did now on weekends; like Ed I wore a uniform, carefully pulled on my shin

guards before yanking my long socks over them. I wore a headband to tame my long hair.

The boys, my brothers, were quite big now and with them and with the other neighborhood children, boys also mostly, I ran and kicked outside … I was an older sister now and this gave me something, a little authority, perhaps, and I took it. Somehow (when did it happen?) I was suddenly strong, and by this I do not mean physically, for I was quite small, I mean something inside me, something like a conviction, something had shifted from fear and weakness into this other thing that pushed me forward and I defended my brothers from the neighborhood bullies even though the scariest ones were older than me and already drove. The meanest one was pock-marked and ugly and had a purple muscle car. And when I stood up to him for picking on my little brother, who wore thick-rimmed glasses and was a smart aleck, rather than flicking me aside like he could have he flirted back at my scolding. What was it with these sadistic sad bullies?

Still, I was strong now. Though I had long and flowing hair and was in some ways very feminine, I could jump over fences to break into the middle-school grounds; the school was only a few blocks from our house and next year I would go there, but for now I could jump the fence onto the grounds with my friends; and I loved to climb the wall in our back yard so I could pick the neighbor's plums, which I tossed down to my brothers where they stood waiting with open arms. I wanted to be a boy, I think. I think I was partially a boy, or had parts that were certainly boy-like.

And suddenly I had two lives here as well, in this one place, Los Angeles, because though I was terrified of Ed's wife, her matching pant suits and taut angry lips and staring hard eyes and hair-sprayed bouffant, and though I made myself small and silent in her presence, outside, in the world, I was becoming brave and I was much faster than the boys. And now instead of all of the vulnerable and frightened little creatures that I so carefully tended in Ohio, I loved the neighborhood cats, the way they roamed, the sultry way they threw themselves down on the ground and called to me. The way they luxuriated in and reciprocated my physical effusive love.

I'd had my first period and my body started changing fast and Ed's wife, who was all skinny sharp angles, did not like this one bit and so started openly criticizing. She talked about me disparagingly, disgust in her voice,

when we were all trapped in the car together, to Ed, who sat next to her, driving, his head lowered, never once saying a thing to stop her. Never once saying, Okay, that's enough.

Ed did not defend me. He would never defend me. And out of all of it this is what truly made me sad, what weighed heavy in my throat and heart. What pains me still.

Perhaps she thought my own body would become like my mother's, which was sexy, and which my mother used, and must for Ed's wife, who was Catholic and prudish, have been a terrible threat. My mother's body was a threat. I grew ashamed of myself, disgusted by my body. And I grew ashamed of my mother, and the ways in which she used hers. And of my mother's relation to me.

Soon after I'd arrived to live with them, Ed's wife, who so easily lied about her own past, had lied about me.

At seven years old, as we were arriving in Athens, Ohio, for Ed's new appointment at the university there—I had been living with them in Lawrence, Kansas for a few months by then, long enough to have gone from six to seven—Ed's wife told me to lie about being adopted, to pretend I was a part of their family, a biological older sister to their two sons. There is no other family, she insisted as she stared me down. Don't you ever mention them.

This was confusing to me, but I would never dare contradict her. How was this going to work? The parts didn't add up. Where was I supposed to have been born in her version? How did I fill out the lie if someone asked me a question? But the younger boy, Thomas, my new little brother, had turned two the day before I turned seven, and to him I really was an older sister, I loved him so much. And so, yes, I could pretend.

To my bewilderment, a few days later, while sitting on the front porch I heard her telling Lori's mother—my friend Lori who had nearly bitten off her own tongue—that I was not theirs. And soon after I heard her say the same to one of the nuns at my first school. I was living with them for now, but was not their child. She only had two children, sons. I was her husband's niece.

It became clear that as I was trying to swallow the new reality she had pushed on me, Ed's wife was contradicting her own story.

And I was left with nothing, not my previous family, my biological family, as Ed's wife would become enraged if I mentioned my mother or my sisters or my Aunt Sofia or Abue, and not Ed's family either.

And in the years that followed, Ed's wife would wait until I was gone on those summer visits to Mexico to take family portraits without me, with which she lined the walls of their house. Formal photos of Ed and herself, with their two biological sons seated before them.

Where are you? my junior-high and high school friends in LA would ask when they came over to visit, and, terrified of her, I was left mute.

Silenced by her rage, my past was disappeared.

I don't know, I'd say, my heart in my mouth.

Where are you?

For all those years Ed's wife had worked hard to separate me from them, my family, by repeatedly cutting them with her words, constantly cutting me with her words, by cutting it all and leaving it to float in shards, leaving me to float in shards, separated and sick and worthless in the air which surrounded me, in the emptiness of air which was me, without offering anything in return, nothing to put into the abyss that these disconnected floating around me disgusting worthless parts left. There was nothing. I was the abyss. I was an empty vessel now and this nothing which sat gaping began to be filled with a rage that looked like adolescent rebellion; I began to talk back to my teachers now, even when they showed an interest in me, even when they were decent and caring, even though I may secretly have liked them too, even though they gave me awards for being bright and pulled me aside and spoke warmly to me and attempted to look into my eyes while asking me to please try. But instead of trying I began to ditch school, and to smoke, and my friends and I wandered wild and used each other as alibis. It was all classic teenage rebellion but which I enacted only outside of the house for I was too terrified of Ed's wife to challenge the sick rule with which she dominated my life. To her I never said no. She stared me down, angry, her steady black eyes, slammed her hand hard on the table, her many rings clanging sharp, as she yelled her words at me, challenging me to flinch, straining my humanity, until I obediently dropped my eyes. She made me give her massages and paint her toenails and other more difficult things, and I did as she said, always, when I was inside. I picked up the house, vacuumed, and cleaned the bathroom and washed the dishes, and

waited until tomorrow's 7 am when she would be in her car on her way to her job at Hollywood High.

But now, somehow, though I was fully silent in her presence, worked to make myself hardly present in her presence, through this too I was gaining something like my own sense of being. Though I was banished, always, to my room … in this way punished, banished from her sight, I was gaining something. Where did this something come from? By the time I was fifteen I was ditching whole days of school and going to the beach instead where I lay in the hot sun, dissolving into sand while I smoked pot with my friends. Though I did not like being high it was something to be floating in front of the water. To be water and sky. To dissolve into sand. And then, by the time I was sixteen, there was the radio in my room keeping me company late into the night, Rodney Bingenheimer, and the liberation in that … it was freedom. At night I lay on my twin bed and listened to Rodney and KSPC and KXLU, the best college stations in LA; I was in 10th grade, had just turned sixteen and one of the stations announced a last minute daytime gig, Black Flag at La Cañada High School, and so the next morning a group of us convened in the hallway of our high school and we egged each other on in the open breezeway—my high school was all blue sky and open breezeways—some kids stayed behind, afraid of ditching but even more so of what might happen to them there surrounded by all those punks while the rest of us decided to take our chances and piled into three cars. By now I had cut my long hair into a short bob. When we pulled into the parking lot, surrounded by countless other cars full of teenagers, the police had already broken things up, an hour before Black Flag was set to begin. We never even entered the posh school grounds—but even from the edges we could see, these La Cañada kids were rich.

I thrilled at all this music, at these packs of kids, and I was moving all over Los Angeles now, no longer stuck in San Gabriel, for I was going out. And because Ed's wife was the girl's dean at Hollywood High School, which was an hour from the house, she was out from 7 till 5, or later. And there was such a freedom in that too. In the house in the afternoons when I was not out with my friends I liked to talk to Ed. We'd sit across from each other in the living room and he would tell me about the books he was reading, and then he would tell me what I should read next, and we'd discuss the things he had suggested Faulkner's *The Bear* and Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Paramo*, D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and*

Lovers, García Márquez's everything, and Cortázar and Carlos Fuentes, whom he especially loved; and he showed me *The 400 Blows*. I could not believe this film. I identified with Antoine …. I was Antoine. And Ed was his father, sweet but spineless Julien …. It was as if Ed was trying to tell me something through this movie. Later I learned that the director of the film was Antoine too, it was his story, and thus the director was both the boy Antoine as well as his artistic father, Antoine turned into an artist. Like the director I could become my own artistic parent; I could write about the things that had happened to me … and I could offer these things I wrote to others as the director had offered me Antoine, and all of this reading and this music and these films were an aesthetic experience … they were art, a way for me to discover myself … no, to create myself, a creative self that was not just in reaction to Ed's wife, the rage she inspired, a self that was not just in reaction to being sent away from my family, not just in reaction to my mother not loving me, not just in reaction to Manolo and what he'd done to me; I could create a self that was not just all of this pain that operated in reaction to others … a self that was creative, and made something out of all of it, and was dreamy, and hungry, and figuring itself out.

That would all come later. For now there were boys, boys whose bodies were lean and pliant, moving and doing, on skateboards and surfboards and motorbikes and such. There were boys who leapt from the stage and landed with a flair and boys whose bodies ran and twisted and glided and one tall, thin boy with beautiful eyes and smiling red lips who fell wrong off his motorbike while on his way home from his afterschool job one early evening as he was rushing so he could get ready to go out to a show, speeding on his motorbike when he smashed into someone's just now opening car door, so that he had to be in a cast for many many months and while thus restricted the leg in the cast was caught firm and did not grow at the rate of the other so that when he finally got out of the hospital many months later, like Iggy Pop, one of his legs was shorter than the other, and so he was instructed by his doctor to wear a shoe with an inch-and-a-half riser. He did not wear that shoe. It was 1980, and this boy became a punk rocker like his older brother who, two years prior, had been the first punk at our school and was in a great band called The Simpletons, but whom we were all vaguely afraid of. And this brother of the Simpleton and I began

dating. He had shorn hair and wore a black leather jacket even in the Southern California heat. And with him there was Iggy Pop, yes, and Darby Crash, The Buzzcocks, and The Circle Jerks, X-Ray Specs and The Slits, Adolescents, and X, and so much other great music, and a stupid abandon, and all of this blanking out and forgetting matched my insides.

By the time I was in eleventh grade I was mostly with my punk rock boyfriend or with my best friend, sleeping over at their houses on weekends because at our house things had exploded, they could not stand each other, and Ed had gone to teach in Mexico with his university for the semester to get away from it all, and his wife had stopped speaking to me, her scapegoat, altogether. And she had made it clear she was sending me back to Mexico for good at the end of the school year, which was my junior year, and so I crammed two high school years into one—I must graduate—two years in one, like I had done when I first came to live with them in Ohio. And then the very night I graduated, she surprised me: Say good-bye, she commanded. We're taking you to the airport. I was confused. We've got your bag in the car, she said. I didn't understand her, I had plans to celebrate with my friends who stood in a horseshoe around us. I knew I was leaving, knew she was sending me back to my family, but I had been told it would be tomorrow, the day after my graduation. I had one last night. And for a moment Ed and his wife faded into the background as I looked at my best friend, my diploma in hand, looked at my punk rock boyfriend with tears being held back in the depths of my eyes, they both began to openly cry; I gave each a quick hug goodbye, and stared at the ground as I left them, following behind Ed and his wife, who with a brisk and angry step led us to the waiting car. And with only that one suitcase, which she'd had Ed shove into the trunk before coming to pick me up—all of my other belongings, my whole life of diaries and letters and yearbooks and trophies thrown into the trash—Ed's wife, with Ed driving the car silently by her side (both of us, he and I, noting his cowardice, like Antoine's father Julien he would never defend me), took me to the airport and put me on the red eye back to Mexico City, where I wandered lost for a whole year with my mother, who was just then, once again, beginning to lose her mind.

At eighteen, a year later, an adult now, and so legally in charge of my own life, I would slowly make my way back to Los Angeles— stopping off for a few sick and sordid days in the town where Manolo then lived because he

had promised to help me with the passage. Slowly and alone I made my way back to LA where I began to put the pieces of me back together, guided mostly by aesthetic choices, the kinds of choices I'd begun to make in my adolescence with Ed: the things I read, listened to, and saw. And like Ed had done twenty years earlier, I put myself through school, and I began to meet artists, so many young artists, and a year later, at nineteen, I started dating a particularly clever one. One day we realized that he'd been at the Black Flag show that had been canceled when I was in high school. Steve was a little older than me and had graduated from that school two years before the cancelled gig. We could have met there, he said, holding my hand. I wish we had, he added teasingly, leaning in and looking into my eyes ….

I really loved that guy.

OceanofPDF.com

FITTING IN

In the ’70s and ’80s in Los Angeles assimilation is the name of the game. There are no real neighborhoods in suburbia yet, little expression of deep ethnic pride, just ghettos and then this deadening flattening out and featureless repetition. Assimilation means things being taken away, everything is taken away. A blanking out. You know that you must try to fit into the nothing that is offered. But you don't *look* Mexican, you hear over and over again, which is like saying, I don't find you threatening because you repeat me, because I have succeeded in blanking you out, or you have willingly blanked yourself out to match me, and this has been easy because Ed's wife has been decimating you for years, so that shame and humiliation have been pushed so far inside you that it seems like those two electrically charged sensations, those senses of injury of being, are all that buzzes within you now. They are you. This assimilation thing is so close to what Ed's wife has perpetrated and nearly accomplished within you. This assimilation thing simply builds on top of that blank.

OceanofPDF.com

FREUDIAN REVOLUTION

Ed. Eduardo. The man of the embracing smile and quick blue eyes, and easy laughter, an addictive warmth that radiated out from him and towards everyone around him. Funny and smart and with a good-natured teasing manner, oblivious to his own emotional needs, discounting himself for others, the eldest of five children, the older brother who learned to take care of everyone else. He was deeply loving with me.

Ed died as I was working on this book. Ed died after a fall he had while tending his garden. Ed died. Pained, I knew I could not be there, knew I would not be welcome at his wake. His wife would never permit it. Luckily, I had said goodbye to him two years prior. My sister had put us in touch, Pia, who has been a gentle, caring witness to my life; sisters do this for each other, they witness and hold your story, they make loving gestures, they give you back missing pieces of your own life. Meaningful fragments. One day, two years before Ed's death, she called and said, Who do you think is here alone this weekend?

Manolo had just died. For me that death came and went with little notice. I heard he'd died and it barely registered, though at some level it must have moved me, must have revolutionized some part of me, because it was the following year that I began this book. The following year that I started to wonder at who he was, what kind of man he might have been, that I began to question my organizing memory as I tried to put it down on the page. His death must have liberated me in some way I was not conscious of, and allowed me to question.

There was a funeral for Manolo in the town where Pilar and Marta and my mother live, and Ed had gone to the service without his wife. I had been estranged from the two of them for many years at that point, as Ed had found it impossible to maintain a relationship with me when—after having had my own child—I told him I no longer wanted anything to do with his wife. I could no longer put myself in the path of her viciousness, and feared, too, that her cruelty might be extended to my daughter. I did want to

continue to see him though, I'd said. And we did see each other for a while; he would come to visit me and my baby, until he finally couldn't bear his wife's anger at these visits.

But at Manolo's funeral, Pia told Ed how much I missed him. She knew I would love to speak to him, she'd added.

He said okay, and told her when he would be back at his hotel. He gave her his room number.

Then, having set it all up, she called me and said, Who do you think is here alone this weekend? I told him you'd call, she said.

Thank you, I said to her. My lovely Pilar.

When I called he was napping; he sounded sleepy still when he answered the phone. And I told him. I told him then how much I loved him. I said it. I said it directly. I love you so much. I am who I am because of you. I want you to know that. I want to remind you of how much I love you.

Ha ha ha, he laughed. He could not respond at all beyond that easy, meaningless laugh.

OceanofPDF.com

1210 S WALNUT

After his death I decided to go to the house in which I had grown up, the house in which I had lived with them. I was visiting Los Angeles from New York, staying with my friend George at his loft, and because I expected it to be emotional, I asked him to go with me. I've known George since I returned to LA at eighteen; he'd met Ed and his wife, had visited that house with me several times in the days when I was still struggling to maintain a relationship with them so as not to lose Ed completely. I'd wanted George to join me on that visit because he knew what it meant to me, knew it would be difficult, but in the end I went to the house alone.

Over a cup of tea that morning I'd told George I was planning my visit for that afternoon, and when his response about joining was ambivalent I took it as a sign that it was important for me to make the visit alone. Later, when I asked him about that noncommittal response, he said he wasn't aware that he'd answered in that manner. So it's possible that I'd read into his bland tone what I'd needed to read. Regardless, after running some errands I went to the house without him.

I drove down and east into that suburb of Los Angeles which I mostly avoid; the entire area is simply too emotionally fraught. I approached the neighborhood from the north, and in the sections of it that were on the outer reaches of my old haunts many things looked the same, so I began to soften and shift from thinking into feeling, and the feeling was familiarity, a memory sense that spread through my body reminding it that this was where I'd grown up. But the closer I got to the house, the stranger the surroundings became, until it was all suddenly very altered, as in a dream in which you know that you are in a familiar place, but it all looks quite different, so that upon waking you are aware that the way in which things looked different in the dream is in fact saying something to you about yourself, your interiority, about your feelings in regard to things, your feelings in regard to that place, or to those people, not necessarily directly related to the actual place or to the actual people, but to you, your feelings. So then you try to pause and think about those feelings, to consider them more deeply, in order to try to understand something about yourself through

them. Though this understanding is always shifting. And this shift in the understanding of the feelings is like an image of who you are, or rather who you have become.

In this dream, which was not actually a dream, as I moved toward my childhood home the stores became increasingly small and sad, and the Mexican character that had existed in the neighborhood when I'd lived there was now completely gone. The streets are wide in that suburb of Los Angeles, and the trees that used to line our wide street, large and willowy elms that had added much character, had mostly been cut down. Those trees had been beautiful, one in front of each house, lining both sides, canopying in an arch down the center of the streets and creating much needed shade that we could play in all day. It was all so barren now; it was arid. It was Ed who had been the first to cut his tree down because he'd wanted to make a cinderblock fence that reminded him of Mexico in front of his house. I was so angry when he did it, but he wanted his low wall and the tree was in his way, he said. He had added Spanish tile to the wall. I understood that he wanted to bring Mexico City to his home in LA and that the wall reminded him of his childhood. He planted other things in place of the elm, fruit trees and bananas and fan palms and lots of other tropical plants. But as I looked around now I saw that most of the neighbors who had followed his lead by cutting down their trees had not planted anything in their place. They had simply wanted to rid themselves of the upkeep, all those unruly roots and falling leaves.

As I got closer to the house I was overcome with the sense that the street no longer held the same weight it had years ago. Ed and his wife had long since moved south to San Diego. In the days before they left, as I'd approached the house then, a sense of foreboding would descend upon me inside the car as I got close, tightening my chest and stifling my breathing. But now, it just felt sad. As I inched up our block, I saw that the other houses on that street looked desolate, shabby and run down. Our house itself looked shabby too, a lot of junk near the front door, and two very old cats atop some worn-out cushions. The sleepier of the two cats was quite dirty. He yawned as I passed by. I drove past wondering what the houses further up the block looked like now, while thinking about the people who had lived on that street then, things that had happened on it, my childhood. Having reached the end of the block I turned my car back around. I didn't want to park directly in front of the house; I wanted to park a little bit away

so as to be able to get out of the car and walk up to it. And just as I pulled up in front of the house next-door to ours, my friend L called.

Hi L, I said, as I turned off the ignition, It's interesting that you're calling me now just as I'm pulling up to the house in San Gabriel.

Because L is a psychologist, we often talk about things having to do with memory, and inner conflict; she knows about my life, and so we laughed a little at the coincidence, that she, a therapist, should spontaneously appear, through the phone, as I was doing this difficult thing, and that lifted the mood a little bit too, for I was not hidden and alone any more as I had been then. L and I talked about an art opening we intended to go to the next day but decided to go to a performance at Redcat that night instead. We ended the call and I got out of my car and walked up to the house. I tried to look in, beyond the front gate. I snapped a couple of pictures. The guava tree in front was a tree that Ed had planted; it had grown from the little plant given to him in a small pot by my then mother-in-law, Jorge's mother, twenty years before, into the large tree it was now, its thick branches beautifully gnarled and mangled though it was too early in the year for it to offer me its fruit. There were quite a few plastic containers by the front door, quite a lot of junk, including those old threadbare cushions. The entrance of the house had never looked like this; there'd always been flowers in pots, and little statues and objects meaningful to Ed which he had placed there. The more domestic of the two, he had always cooked and tended the garden, which he had loved.

Ed had slipped in his garden in his new house near San Diego, just three months before my visit to this, our old house. When he fell he hit his head. Pia called to tell me he'd fallen in his back yard. I would never have known otherwise. The wound had bled profusely, she told me. They took him to the hospital and while there he got pneumonia and he had to be intubated. There was internal bleeding. The night of her call I thought of him as I dozed in and out of sleep. I worried about him but knew I could not call. Three days later there was a blizzard on Long Island where I was then staying, very high winds and snow falling the entire night. In the morning everything was white, the air too … with the snow still falling in swirls. That third afternoon, after a morning of phone calls with various friends, I looked at my phone and saw the text from my sister. Ed had been sent home the day before because his heart was too weak for further treatment. They couldn't operate on his head, she said, because of the weak heart. He'd died

at home in the middle of the night, at 1:42 in the morning as the blizzard here was blurring everything white.

A full fade to white.

And then a cut to an overwhelming sadness, myself a small figure looking out on that blanket of nothing. I knew I could not go and see him. There was nothing I could do. He had died because of his weak heart. The heart that had an impossible time holding on to me. I would have to say good-bye from where I sat in the midst of this blizzard.

As I approached the house in which I'd lived as a teenager, Ed's old house, one of the cats, the dirty one, black and white with grubby matted fur, ran up to me mewling for love, and as I petted his dusty head, the other cat, a little bit larger, healthier looking, nice black fur, ran up insistent, and I regarded them both, petted them, first one, then the other, and soon they emphatically threw themselves down on the ground at my feet, competing for my affection, asking me to really get into it. I laughed as I crouched and gave them much love and thought of my daughter; Penelope would have found this so amusing, and I realized then that this was a completely different house now; it was a completely different life. I looked at the cats more closely and I saw that they were replicas of the cats that I had moved to Los Angeles with twenty-five years earlier, Pepper and Virgil, when I'd moved back here from New York, where I'd gone for graduate school. I'd returned to LA with my then-partner, Mark, in 1999. There was the black and white spotted cat, like our Pepper, and the black cat, our Virgil. During graduate school and in the years after we had lived with them in our cramped apartment off of Grand Street in Chinatown in New York and then in Brooklyn when we'd moved there for more space. We'd sit writing back-to-back in those cramped apartments, each at our own desk. And then we drove those cats across the country to Los Angeles with us when I had wanted to move back in the days when my relationship with Ed and his wife was still so burdened. In those days I was still confused about the two of them. I was forcefully inserting myself into their lives so that I could remain close to Ed. At some level I knew even then that rushing back to LA with Mark wouldn't help, that I couldn't fix things that had never been right to begin with, but I couldn't stop myself. In fact, there was nothing at all I could work out because it had never been about me, or what I wanted; the dynamic between us was sick because of my insistence that Ed love me as

if I was his daughter. But I had very little control over things, and it took a long while, and some further pain, to begin to clarify my mixed up emotions around my relationship with them, my adoptive parents, and to see that although I loved Ed deeply I was knocking at a door that would not fully open, had never fully opened because it couldn't, and that the confusion about my position in relation to them affected my relationship with everyone else, including with him, with Mark; it was such a mess, all of it. I was such a mess, because of my refusal to deal with reality as it was. I was not Ed's daughter. My inability to see made it impossible for me to walk away and that insistence on something Ed could not give me soured my relationship with Mark.

There were other things that severed our relationship as well, of course, at thirty-one he still seemed like a boy, but he had been adoring and I had loved him. And now, here were these cats, their doubles! Incredible! Not just one double, but the pair, double doubles, the pair, in front of me, in front of my old house, begging me for love, demanding I remember what I'd given up with Mark—my past being laid out there before me on that visit. They threw themselves on the ground at my feet, the black one calling out to me with a warbly cry, so that I was obliged to pet and pet them for a while longer as I thought about the uncanny nature of it, this set of feline doppelgangers. Like a repetition, but a repetition that made clear there was difference, that there had been motion. That things had in fact changed.

A minute or two later—having fully comprehended that things were completely different here now, at this house, as they were for me too, and that I would never have to come back here again, that the heavy weight of the past was finally lifting—I walked away. The black cat chased after me for more love, insistent, as Virgil my old black cat had always been, and so I gave it to him, crouching down again and whispering lovingly to him. Sweet Virgil, I said to him, we must finally say good-bye now, before decisively parting and walking to my car.

And then I drove off and up the avenue that sat opposite the one I'd driven down, Del Mar, half a mile from and parallel to the one that had flowed me into this memory dream an hour before. It was a much more beautiful street, which surprised me because back then it had been the lesser of the two avenues. (It was the street my elementary school best friend, Lisa Cheng— the girl who had lent me her clothing—had lived on, just a couple of blocks from our school.) And now this lesser one had become

impressive, with lovely restaurants and big trees and beautiful Asian markets lining both sides ….

I hopped on the freeway, and headed West, back toward downtown and my friend George's loft.

OceanofPDF.com

CHICONTEPEC

I had just turned seventeen. There is a photo of me, diploma in hand; I am beaming (how is it that I don't know what is coming?), my best friend, Judy (Lisa had moved to Hawaii the year before), standing beside me. I wear my hair in a bob, my eyes shining, my mouth caught in a wide smile. I am wearing a pink dress under my gown, and burgundy colored cowboy boots. I still wear my cap. I am leaning in, toward the right side of the frame. We are going to celebrate, the whole lot of us, my best friend, our red-haired friend Jenny, and my boyfriend too; they are my age, but because I am graduating a year early I am the only one in a gown. It would be my last night and we planned on making it a good one.

When suddenly I felt a sense of unease, and as I saw them approach from the sidelines my breath faltered, my face shifting from joy to confusion, my insides beginning to race. Ed and his wife? She was an electric fury staring directly at me as they marched in my direction, her eyes locked on mine; frozen still, I could not run away. My legs were useless liquid.

Why were they there? I must flee.

Say good-bye, she said now, as she came to a halt directly in front of me, We're leaving.

My eyes rose toward her, my head bowing, Leaving? My best friend, Judy, stared at me; I caught her eyes. My friend was confused, but she said nothing. We were all afraid of Ed's wife. Beside her, Ed stood meek and silent. Then she said it: To the airport. You're leaving tonight.

The truth of it fell on me hard; there was no fighting it: I was going tonight. My eyes began to dart, I could not control their movement, from my best friend to my boyfriend, the stupid eager smile falling from his face; foolishly, on seeing them approach, he had been excited that he was finally going to meet my parents.

For a moment I did not move, but then I turned and hugged Judy tight, turned and hugged him too; he was crying. A knot extended from my throat to my stomach which was suddenly buzzy, churning now, while my idiot

punk rock boyfriend continued to cry, his hand wiping at the sides of his eyes, flapping there.

I stepped away from them, left them there, perplexed and startled children, myself no longer a part of them, no longer in the frame. They were confused and disconcerted children who watched silent as I was led away.

And for the second time in my life, I was suddenly gone, a ghost there already as I followed Ed and his wife down the high school halls which to this point had been so full of life for me—now dead—and to the parking lot, floating surreal behind them. My feet were not touching the ground. The ground had disappeared; there was never any firmament.

I had packed that suitcase myself while she sat at the foot of my bed, watching, after having forced me to throw the whole of my childhood away into the trash as she had ordered. She had watched me pack those trash bags full of my childhood belongings, books, and photos and diaries, badges and trophies and mediocre art. I made a pile of my records which I would give to my adoptive brothers. She sat on the edge of my bed, staring stern and silent. Wordless, stiff and affectless, she watched me throw myself away.

She was Cuban. Twenty years before, as a young woman, she had had to do the same, throw her whole life away as I was doing now, so that she could leave Havana with one suitcase and a bottle of rum, which she was told she could sell for some cash on her arrival in the US.

This was how they were made to leave their homes. How she was made to leave her home. How she was now making me leave my home.

Some twenty years earlier, someone had sat there cold and hard with her, and her swallowed-down suffering had fully fermented and turned into a bilious rage that she played out on me, the girl in her life.

She spoke, I want to show you what I saved you from. I am going to send you back so you can see what I saved you from, she repeated. And then, and then you will thank me, she said, as I finished packing my suitcase.

Who was she speaking to? Mina had told me some of the details of her life, so that I had begun to suspect that it was not only me whom she was punishing with all the cruelty she inflicted. In the following years I would come to learn more about her life and would come to realize that for her my body had merely been the place on which to enact her own pain.

What followed for me was difficult. Difficult because for a year I swam, fully submerged, through all of the strands of my confused and liquid being.

Though Emilio was in Mexico City, which relieved me … Emilio was the boy I'd met at the party with my sister in Tlatelolco the year before; she had handed him to me … his family was from the north, a norteño, and he had blue eyes which he playfully narrowed at me; his hair was black and he had broad shoulders. There was a small bump on his nose and he was smart and always wore jeans and a suede cowboy-cut jacket. He often stood regarding me with his hand on his chin, mouth twisted up in the form of a question, those narrowed-at-me eyes, when I behaved in a way he found odd or amusing, legs slightly apart, fully considering me. Why do I like you so much? he would ask. I would shrug back at him. You have me, he'd say, *Me tienes*. We'd written each other letters for that whole year after I met him, and when I came back to Mexico City, having been sent there by Ed's wife, there he was, waiting. He meant much more to me than the punk rock boy I'd left in LA; and in the weeks after my mother went mad, after they had all left— Oscar and Marta and my mother—my boyfriend, Emilio, would come and stay with me in the evenings. And though this wasn't the first time that I'd felt it, this time Emilio was there. It was night. I was in the bedroom, reading, propped up on the bed. A pressure, like another body, pressed down upon mine. In the moments after I'd felt this heavy presence and had yelled out, Leave me alone! Leave! I'd heard Emilio call out and scramble and then run out of the apartment and down the stairs of the building, and I rose quickly and followed, rushing through the front room after him, not knowing why I ran. I chased Emilio fast, down the stairs and into the street, where an old man was walking, too far ahead for us to reach him now, so that we stopped running, dead in our tracks; I reached for Emilio's hand, and we stood and stared while the old man moved down the middle of the avenue at midnight, his elegant black coat flowing behind him, his long white hair being lit by the dim streetlight above him so that there was a kind of glow emanating from his head and his shoulders. There was a fog that gathered at the height of that light, so that it was all a bit hazy and dreamlike. He was tall and dressed as from another time, his shoulder-length white hair thick and wavy. That's him, I thought now, and as I watched him recede, tall and with a clear and determined step, there was an uncanny sense in which my mother's madness was captured there in that old man; I couldn't say how, but there it was, firm and real and actualized, no

longer an emanation, diffuse and spilling out of her and rushing in at me and tainting my entire life; it was actualized in him, in the definite way he moved into the distance as Emilio and I stood now, dumbly watching him depart. It would be all alright, I knew, after we saw him leave together. For a moment then I understood this fact.

My arm rose from my side, and I reached out as if to grasp his fading figure, and I hit something I couldn't see, hit it hard, and when I moved my hand upon it I felt his arm and turned and I saw that Emilio was laying there beside me. I touched his face with my hand. Softly I mapped out the shape of his closed eyes and the slight bump on his nose, his beautiful lips, and then I moved the blanket from on top of myself and shifted my body from where I lay on the bed beside him, onto his body, where he lay. I was on him now. I was the pressure on top of his body. The book I had been reading fell to the floor as I adjusted myself, and Emilio stirred with the noise, but I shushed him, then reached down and rubbed and rubbed him and then I took him in my hand and pushed him deep inside myself and began my rhythm, Shhh, I whispered into his ear, It's alright, shhhh, keep sleeping, and his arms went up onto my shoulders and he pushed me down further onto himself, and then wrapped his arms around me and I felt my eyes grow wet and so I rubbed my face in his hair to dry them, shhhh, shhhh, shhhh.

Was that old man the uncle I'd heard of, also mad, who would come to luncheons at my grandmother's home, my abue's home in Veracruz when she was just a girl, a Jesuit priest sitting on either side of her uncle at the big formal table—those priests like parentheses, through their presence speaking to something deeper than could be directly said, holding him in like a subordinate clause, the priests who had traveled with him from the monastery where he lived, now silently eating alongside his family, my family, silent but present, there to control and subdue should the uncle threaten an outburst, should he try to erupt out of the containment they embodied, as they all ate? This great uncle was an artist, made beautiful paintings which hung looming in my grandmother's house; he was brilliant too; and like my mother he was mad.

My mother came of age in the ’60s, and this was, from the first, a clash because the ’60s everywhere were an affront to the middle class, which in

Mexico is conservative, rule-laden and judgmental, Catholicism permeating everything, even for those of us who were not outwardly religious, and strangling women and young girls in their tracks. The macho culture—cruel and demeaning and powerfully dismissive of girls and young women, which we felt even in a house full of women—further controlled all of our lives. Yet the ’60s in Mexico were as the ’60s elsewhere, an explosion of clashing cultures, the repressed and churchy past butting heads with the exploding present on its way to the propulsive future, the containment of women bursting open—even a little freedom was seen as explosive—with the advent of the pill, all of it detonating right there in the moment, before all the old people's eyes.

With my mother there was nothing to discuss; with her there was unbridled desire, which shuttled into a paralyzing guilt that she could never acknowledge, much less speak to, though it would shut her body down.

I'd always been afraid of my mother, the fact that she had no stopping place, the boundarylessness of body and mind, all of it, the wild mania, or the other side of it, the complete loss of self in the stultifying depression; yet as a teen her unrestrained behavior also thrilled me, because after the deadening, rule-infested severity of Ed's wife, who reprimanded and then punished severely every imagined infraction, my mother's uninhibited fluidity was both scary and thrilling.

But my mother was hard to catch. She was impossible to pin down. I have two memories from this time in which she seemed to actually be there with me. In one of them we are on a bus, traveling through Mexico City together. We sit near the back; her hair is short and black, her eyes dancing. She smiles in my direction and her crooked front tooth peeks through her full lips; she pulls them together, almost timidly, to hide that crooked tooth, dropping her eyes as she does so, which I find charming. I loved Alice too, she says of that wonderland book full of the wildest transformations. We're both fascinated by folk tales and fairy tales, and Greek mythology, the ways those gods act out, and I tell her my favorite myth is Arachne's, and my favorite saint's story, Ursula, who was so pious she refused to marry a pagan king unless she was allowed to make a pilgrimage with ten thousand virgins first; together they all sailed the rivers and seas for three glorious years until they were massacred by the Huns in Cologne, like a punishment for that time with women, that time without men. We both love the Beatles and

agree that John is the best. (I do not yet know about John's mother, that she was probably afflicted with something very much like my own mother's illness, that he was raised by a strict aunt but always longed for his mom.) We love Sylvio Rodríguez and Lorca (of course), whom Ed—who is a Latin-American literature professor—told me to read last year, and García Márquez, Eréndira especially …. This is just fabulous. Our taste in food is similar too, anything with tamarind and my abue's picadillo with almonds and yellow raisins and her fava bean soup. The city rushes by beneath us. Since I hadn't grown up with my mother, these small things we had in common were enough. She too seemed happy to be like me in that moment. I was a tomboy, she tells me, and I loved to climb trees. Me too! I say, and I show her a scar on my hand from when I fell out of one in Ohio. I am like my mother, I think to myself, as we pass the Alameda and then Bellas Artes.

The other time, we are in the small apartment in which we lived together with Marta for a while. We are just back from a matinee showing of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* to which we took my youngest sister, Isabela, who's just turned ten—I am a sucker for stories of lost and wayward British children; we all are. Pilar was with us too and together we ate sandwiches which she had made for us at my abue's, and which we snuck in, defiantly eating them in hidden nibbles as we watched the movie; we'd broken the rules together, and we flashed mischievous grins at each other before returning to watching the children on the big screen above us joyfully fly about in their car as they sing their songs in unison with their daddy Dick Van Dyke. And now my sisters have gone home to the safety of my grandmother's house, and Marta is probably with Bubbles because she's nowhere to be found, and my mother and I put a record on the record player, Cat Stevens, the record spinning on the little turntable in front of us when suddenly we start singing together, in unison, like the children in their flying car, *All the times that I've cried, keepin' all the things I knew inside, it is hard but it's harder to ignore it. If they were right I'd agree, but it's them they know, not me, now there's a way and I know I have to go away* … I am sitting on the floor, while she sits on the couch above me. We have horrible voices, neither of us can sing at all, but we are belting it.

Otherwise, my mother was hard to catch hold of. She was impossible to pin down. I would try to capture her attention by telling her stories, these are my friends in Los Angeles, I say. These are some of the things that we do; I try to build a story. I tell her about how in Los Angeles we'd pile into

my friend Jennifer's car, she was the oldest and the worst looking, the only one of us who had a job and a car, and we'd only have to drive for half an hour before being able to run in the water and lie on the hot sand at the beach; I tell her about my friend Lisa who'd moved to Hawaii with a boy the year before. She was only sixteen, I tell her, and they just took off. And then I tell her about my new best friend, Judy, about how in my last year in LA I nearly lived at her house as a way to get away from Ed's wife, about how nice her parents were with me and how her father, who really only loved his dog, ate his dinner on the floor with the dog, because he couldn't bear to sit at the family table, his own father having tortured him as a child with his alcoholic cruelty during every single meal. So that now he lay on the floor only a foot from the TV every night, not interacting with his family, lovingly feeding his dog tasty bits from his plate as he focused on the screen that sat twelve inches from his face. I tell my mother about how we skipped school sometimes to go eat at the central market in LA, and that if we were lucky, and they happened to be performing that day, we could watch the Mexican drag queens sing Camilo Sesto and Juan Gabriel and Verónica Castro in the middle of the day; and though for my friends it was just a kitschy day out, for me it was emotionally weighty too because their songs touched on my childhood and on my missing them all here. I ask my mother questions too; I want to know things about her … but her eyes dart all over, not focusing on me at all, seeming to want to be somewhere else now. I know in the depths of myself she wants to go now. Away from me. She wants out. I am not enough for her. She wants the next thing, the more exciting, thrilling thing, the dangerous thing, the thing that could hurt her. She wants out. She wants to go. And so, sometimes, I go out with her.

We would get dressed up, she was thirty-eight and still gorgeous, and I was seventeen and we would get dressed up and go out.

The draw was deep and wide and animal, abstract and gravitational; my mother, for me at seventeen—because I had never had her—was still, more than a person, a need. I yearned to be with her, even when she was a danger, longed for her, even when she scared me, even when the safety of my grandmother's house with its big open windows was right there, with the sun pouring into it, birds singing in the garden and good food on the stove, my pleasant young aunts and uncles coming and going all day, funny in their shows of affection, my aunts and uncles who treated me like the

adolescent I still was, who both teased and listened to me. Even though all of this flow of pleasant activity was less than a mile away, I chose to be with my mother, who was dark and terrifying and treated me like a woman, who treated me like she treated herself. I chose to live with her in the badly lit and cramped two bedroom apartment Pfizer had provided for my uncle Joaquin, in the manner in which big companies did in those days in Mexico, while he lived with his wife in a much larger, nicer apartment in a better part of town, and so, for a time he allowed my mother—his big sister—to live in this Pfizer apartment free of charge; and here I chose to be with her, in the darkness of my mother, and at night we would go out. And sometimes these nights would turn dangerous …

In yearning—in that space below awareness—there is only need; there seems to be no choice. At seventeen I had no choice. I was being pulled by my deep desire for my mother. And this was how I could get her.

L'Enfant Secret. Can a child be a secret from themselves? Our wounds are a secret; and they run gaping wide, and drive us. For me, at that point still (it would come, yes, it would come), at that point, still, there was no awareness, and so there seemed to be no choice …

Well into my year there, perhaps driven into irresolvable guilt by our nights out, which on occasion went threatening and desperate and wild—my mother having no stopping place with me because to her in her mania I was an extension of her own body, to her my body was her, and so what she did to herself she did to me too, the ways in which she punished herself she punished me—my mother became so depressed she could not move beyond the walls of my uncle's dark and cramped apartment. She wandered the halls a husk, eyes cast down, feet dragging. My mother stopped eating and sleeping and became a shadow woman … became a gaunt and ragged shell …

One night, as I slept on the couch in the front room—my mother and sister Marta shared a bedroom, my brother Oscar, when he was there with us, slept in the other (why was I living here, sleeping on this couch? my mother and my sister scared me, my brother was a mess, my grandmother's house, with all of my aunts and uncles, my beloved older sister, Pilar, and my clever little one, Isabela, was only a few blocks away)—she woke me just after dawn. She shuffled into the room and stood at the foot of the

couch, staring, who knows for how long, until I opened my eyes and saw her there, emaciated and scared, the fear written in her eyes. I looked up at her, startled, confused and upset, how long had she been there, staring at me? And how often did she do this as I slept? What are you doing there, Mamí? They were after her again, she said, her voice slow and halting. They would find her, she said. If she didn't leave now they would get my sister and me too. She had to leave, she said, her voice full of terror. Who? I asked her. Her lips struggled to form the words. Who? I repeated. They're coming, she whispered. I had never heard her speaking quite like this, the things tearing at the insides of her head externalized, her eyes the eyes of weeks of non-sleep, dark and deep. They stared, those sunken eyes, just past me. And for a while she was silent. Then she repeated herself without looking directly at me, her words coming out in nearly silent whispers now, slow, one at a time. She struggled to form those words. One. Then another. Until there was a full sentence of lunacy, punctuated by her hands which had now grabbed each other and were squeezing hard in front of herself. Finally, she dropped her arms to her sides and pulled herself from my feet and inched her way to the door, and opened it. She stood there, holding that door in her left hand, and looked at me as she swung it slowly, repetitively, as if trying to decide, back and forth, I. Back and forth, Have. Back and forth, To.

This went on for a long while, she staring at me, scared, as she swung that door, and repeated the same words over and over again.

Why was I having to do this alone? Why was I the one she stared at as I slept.

Fine, I said, as she continued repeating herself. But wait till your daughter wakes up. (Was I not her daughter too?) Or go and wake her and tell her. Tell your son too. Tell your children you're going because I will not do it for you.

I. Have. They. To. Go … They …

Fine, Mamá, go.

My mother blinked once. Then she blinked again.

And as I stared back at her, daring her to walk out, she dropped her eyes and stood immobile.

I got up and took her hand off the door, gently moved her body aside and then closed it for her. She looked at me again, then dropped her head and shuffled herself back into her room.

A few days later I came home from work—a semi-glamorous job my abue had gotten for me at the national palace, where she had worked since I was a little girl—and as I opened the door I heard screaming from inside the cave of their room, so I ran. As I stood at the threshold I saw my sixteen-year-old sister, Marta, was straddling my mother, beating my mother, shaking her, What is wrong with you!? Marta yelled into my mother's face, and then she slapped her. When my mother didn't answer she slapped her again. What is wrong with you?? Answer me!!

Expressionless, my mother stared up at my sister, her eyes blank.

At the door of hell I screamed at my sister to stop it. I rushed at her and grabbed at her angry quarreling arms to make her stop it; Marta was lost and furiously searching, she was beseeching, and as I grabbed hold of her she shoved me away, What do you know?? she yelled at me, panting. You know nothing! You don't live here! And she stormed past me and out of the apartment; and she didn't come back.

She went to my grandmother's house. The safety there.

Marta was right. I knew nothing. I did not live there. But I stayed.

I plunged into my mother's depression with her in part because this was the only way I could have her, or, rather, was the closest thing to having her—because, though she was barely there, she *was* there; she was not running away. My mother was not leaving. I had been left, and so leaving then, for me, was out of the question.

Until, a month or two later, finally truly frightened by her descent, I called my grandmother who came while I was out and gathered my mother up and took her to her house, where she, with her ministrations, kept my mother safe … and still I stayed in that apartment, taking ownership of those rooms alone, walking the halls where my mother had lost her mind, the halls she had wandered, soaking up her remnants, Emilio coming to see me at night, otherwise I was alone for weeks on end, struggling to get at something before finally leaving, before at last truly beginning my voyage into adulthood.

I would encounter many more of my internal monsters, in their externalized form, on that voyage. One of them, my once-upon-a-time father, would try to devour me, and as I lay near death in a room next to the one in which he was just then eating a whole family alive, gorging himself on the children

first—he ate families whole—it came to me that I had to escape that death trap by wrenching myself out of there too.

It took everything I had in me to gather myself, pull myself together, and finally go.

At my abue's home my mother recovered. And on her swing back to her other extreme—for this is how it was, how it had to be, one pole to the other—I had a terrible fight with her. I was about to turn eighteen. I had always believed I would go back to Los Angeles then, to start my own life. Ed and his wife had told me I had to stay in Mexico City until I was eighteen, they had deemed it so, as my legal guardians. And, frightened of her still and thus obedient, I had believed them. But now it was almost the time at which I could go back. My mother had returned to her easy callousness, the disregard of others that was her essence when in her almost constant state of hypomania, becoming increasingly destructively manic over a period of months, until she tumbled into another depression. While in a depression all of her previous aggression would come crashing down upon her as a wave of guilt and inconsolable narcissistic remorse—wet and violent. As for me, having rounded a full circle with her, having done the full back and forth and back that she was, I would on this day understand that if I was going to survive I had to pull away from her draw.

I had to get myself out of there …

On a Sunday afternoon in that pink dining room at Manolo's mother's house, Mama Rita's—the light coming in through the tall wall of glass brick, diffuse and pink too, that light, Mama Rita in her kitchen, where she was most herself, big and cheery in front of her food, commanding in her apron, furiously moving about in front of her pots and pans, twitching hands shifting quickly from stirring to sweeping back stray strands of red hair, to then pull her askew apron into place, before swinging out to us plates of her beautiful food, back and forth to us every few minutes, something delicious on offer each time, her beaming blue eyes waiting eager for a reaction to what she'd placed before us—in that pink dining room in her house, my sisters and my brother sitting there with us, I turned and asked my mother for the money for the plane back to Los Angeles, money which she had promised me. She laughed in my face. But I watched Isa for you, as you asked me to do when you told me to quit my job, and

though I don't need anything in return for watching my sister, you promised the airfare, I said. It's the only thing you've ever promised me, I said.

She laughed harder still. Who do you think you are? she demanded. You are no one, she said.

With many emotions swirling inside me (anger and disappointment, dejection and humiliation and my continued yearning), and with a heavy heavy heart, for only the second time in my life, through burning hot tears, I yelled at my mother, You promised, I wept. You are my mother! You have never done anything for me! You've done nothing! I yelled. You gave me away, I yelled. How does a mother give her daughter away?

She looked at me and laughed. Though I did see something pass there in her eyes.

Perhaps too scared to defend me, my siblings stayed silent as I wept.

Manolo was there, for some reason. It was his mother's home, after all, though he was rarely there with us. Before I ran out of the house he came down the spiral staircase that led to the front door and he offered to help me get back to the states. If I came and stayed with him in Chicontepec for a bit, he would pay my passage to Texas, he said. From there it would be a breeze to get back to LA.

A few days later, though I didn't tell her where it was I was going, my aunt Sofia offered me the money for the bus. I went and said good-bye to my abue, and though she begged me to forgive my mother I said I had to go.

I wrote two letters, one for my abue, one for Pilar, in which I explained myself, in which I explained why I had to go. I left them in their rooms, on side tables next to their beds, where they would easily find them. I said good-bye to all of them then.

Except Manolo because within the week I was on that bus to Chicontepec.

But before leaving, I saw Pablo one last time. I must have run into him at Mama Rita's, where everyone was always invited to drop in and sit and share the mid-day meal, any time, through this grand gesture *Doña Rita* keeping herself at the center of things … everybody we knew would end up in the pink dining room; she was a great gossip and knew everyone's secrets, and she could also somehow put things in motion, she could somehow get things done, and there was a piano and there was chipotle

meatball soup, and chiles rellenos, and pozole, and chicken tinga on tostadas, and pork in tomatillo, and baked cauliflower bathed in a guajillo chile sauce, there was milanesa, and picadillo, and squash flower soup, and best of all was her chicken mole, and always, always there were fresh tortillas and beautiful red rice dotted with green peas; and so they would come. All of them.

I had not seen Pablo in a very long time, and now here I was, all grown up and living in Mexico City; I was almost eighteen. Let's meet at the park in Claveria tomorrow, he said, three o'clock. I had never been alone with him. I took the subway there. And when I arrived I was first of all nervous, and so I talked a lot. We lay in the grass together. I told him about some of the things I did in LA, about my friends and the music we listened to and went to see, and some of the other things I found interesting. I told him some of the reasons I wanted to go back. He was older and knew a lot of what I said was silly, which he let me know, which of course angered me. Still, we went back to the apartment where my mother had lost her mind a few months prior, and we had sex.

It was a surprise.

Things had been building for a very long time.

While I was atop him he said things he should not have said, the first of them having to do with the fact that I was on top.

And so I asked him a question I should not have asked.

I was still a girl, and I had not yet realized that what I should be asking instead was something quite different, that the tension in the room at that moment had to do with this something else I should be asking, and that what that was, what I should be asking Pablo, had to do with the man who had scripted our crush. The man who in those days I still sometimes thought of as my father … But this question was nowhere near the surface for me then, too horrible to even think then … Has Manolo … you …

In Chicontepec, in the lush mountains of Veracruz, where the monster who pretended to be a healer lived, where my once-upon-a-time father, Manolo, pretended to be a doctor, I finally found myself ….

There were two buses. The first went up and through some mountains, slow and winding, before descending down again to where I caught the second bus that would take me up a second set of mountains, hours later dropping me there, in the middle of all that lushness, the whole voyage,

only 250 miles, taking a full day with that slow up and down climbing. I arrived and Manolo even acted the part of a father, introducing me with only a little mock pride, I wasn't my sister Pilar, after all, whom one could really be proud of, she was so beautiful and polite, intelligent and kind. Yet, though by then I'd lost all respect for him, to me he was still a father of sorts —for it was all so mixed up inside me, a murky conflation of half-truths and lies that I hadn't found my way through yet, all of it swimming about in a disordered mess inside me. Who was he to me, that man? In those days I both understood and did not understand that he was not my father.

That night he introduced me to his new woman, who looked like an emaciated boy, skittish, nervous and taut, dancing around me with jerking limbs, in constant anxious motion. The other women and children in the town had run out to meet me as I arrived. The *Doctor's* daughter! they'd greeted. There were many teenage boys there to welcome me too, quite curious about me.

The next day I wandered a bit and met many people. The person I most liked there was a girl, a few years older than me, indigenous, tall with long black hair. Alma was beautiful and cool and cooked me the most delicious food. She never mentioned Manolo and I never did either. There was a boy, about my age, openly gay and with a scathing dark wit. The Doctor's daughter, huh? He smirked at me, and with that smirk we immediately bonded because I knew that he knew. We hung around the mercado together every day, he sipping a beer while I sipped at Coca-Cola, he saying all the things I was just then allowing myself to think. Look at that, he'd say, there goes the *Doctor* with one of his little friends, as Manolo crossed the street in front of us, his arm hurrying one or another of the town's boys with impatience.

There were loads of boys who hung around Manolo's house, where I lived for that week while he stayed with his skinny, nervous woman of the twitching arms. I got into the rhythm of things right away, in that little pueblo, life slowing to a crawl, watching Alma, her long black hair, cook without speaking much, and then eating the food that she gave me—she never ate with me—then hanging at the mercado with Juan. Getting scolded by Manolo, who continued to pretend he was my father …. Get it together, he would say. Why do you hang out with that degenerate Juan, when you should be mingling with people who can help you, people who can do something for you? The mayor's daughter, for instance?

He infuriated me. By now I suspected he had, or had previously had, something going with Juan. But I didn't answer. Why was I incapable of standing up to Manolo?

One night, I was hanging around with the boys, we were telling each other stories in Manolo's house, some of us sitting on the bed, others on the low couch that sat across from it, facing us, all of them explaining the town to me a bit, who was who, and how it all worked. I mentioned a very pretty girl I had seen that day. Oh, that girl is Juan's sister—she's got a thing with the mayor, one of them said. The mayor is the governor's wife's cousin, another boy said in my direction, fully confusing me. And Alma? I asked. Alma cooks for Don Jose, a third one said, who takes care of her and her mother, though he has a wife as old as him. *¡Cabrón!* That's not his wife! yelled another. His wife is long dead, *¡Pendejo!*

What do you mean, takes care of? I asked, but they ignored me. They were talking about another girl now, who they thought was hot, Oh man, don't even talk about her, *güey*, you can't even look at her, *güey*; she thinks she's married to Jesus! *¡No chingues, cabrón*, I guess I'm Jesus then! said another, Cuz I got some last week, at which the first boy leapt on top of him, arms flying. They started mock wrestling as we watched, a boy on each side of me. Their flurry continued for a shrieking grunting while before they settled—still laughing, their arms slapping out final playful blows—and started asking me questions. They wanted to hear about Mexico City, what people did there. They had met my younger sister, Marta, the year before. Where was she? She was hot. They wanted to hear about Los Angeles. They were twelve and thirteen and fourteen or so and wanted to know about the movie stars there. Which ones had I seen? It's not like that, I told them. It's better than that, I told them. In two weeks, I would turn eighteen and I would go back.

It was getting late, but we didn't notice. Manolo came in. He was never at home in the evenings, so this was odd. I could tell he'd had a few drinks. He marched into the room, confusing us all. It's time to go to bed, he commanded. We all simultaneously looked his way. There's too many of you in here, he said. He paused for a moment, scanned the room, and then continued, Who wants to sleep in the front room with Veronica? he asked.

All of their arms shot up. How did he do it then, pick the one of those boys whom I had a small crush on. The boy who had leaned his body into mine a bit as I talked. Big soft curls, and honey-colored eyes. You, Samuel.

Without questioning this, or even showing confusion, as if his command was a legitimate order, the boy and I walked into the front room and I lay down on the couch in the middle of the room. The boy pulled up some cushions from a couch that sat across the way and set them at the foot of where I lay. Soon Manolo had ordered all the other boys to sleep and the lights were turned off. And this boy, my boy, started whispering to me, saying my name and reaching up for my arm. You're too young, I said. I'm thirteen, he said, and he leaned up and I leaned down and we started kissing. He was eager and I had to hold his hands back as they rose up my shirt, Shhh I whispered. No. Slow down, I said. And I kissed him.

After a minute or two of this my eyes were drawn up toward the second bedroom, toward Manolo's bedroom, which we never entered, and from his doorway I saw him watching us. His silhouetted body at that threshold, dark and looming.

The boy's hands were inching my body and my stomach turned liquid.

Shhhh, I whispered at the boy, who was once again reaching for my breasts, as I shushed him more vigorously, taking and holding his hands. I need to go to sleep now, I said.

The next day Manolo ordered everyone out of the house, except me and the honey eyed boy.

Let's go, he said.

We got in the car and then he drove us up and down some hills, through a long stretch of woods, a bit further, up near the mountain which had once been a volcano, and we ended up at the boy's house, where his mother was cooking a big meal. Manolo walked in as if it were his home, and introduced me as if I was his daughter, and I said hello and sat in a chair near the table. The boy pulled up his own chair to sit near me, eagerly looking my way. His mother worked in the kitchen. A little sister played with some wooden spoons on the floor. An older brother worked on a car in the garden outside; he'd lifted his head from under the hood to greet us as we'd entered. There were chickens and a goat in the yard; I could see them being animals through the window, scratching and pecking and strutting about. I suddenly became very tired. My eyes began to droop. I was exhausted. The mother finished cooking and placed the food on the table. Manolo sat there like he was the man, like he was the man of the house. I could barely stay awake, and then as soon as I picked up my fork I was

overcome by nausea. My stomach turned. I don't feel well, I whispered. And though I was barely audible they all turned my way. The boy ran to the kitchen and then to my side with some bubbly water. I don't feel well, I repeated.

There's a room at the back of the house, the boy's mother said. She looked concerned, and I took this to mean that my face had gone pale. You can lie down, she said kindly.

I'll take her, the boy eagerly responded.

I let myself be led out.

He guided me around to the back of the house, to a little separate room, with its own entrance, a part of the house but separate from it too.

The boy guided me to the bed and placed my bubbly water on the nightstand.

He pulled up the only chair and sat next to me and gently took my hand.

I'll be right back, I'm going to get you some aspirin, he said.

Oh my god, I thought. He thinks he is my boyfriend.

Manolo was in the house with the boy's mother, doing his work. I was the fly in the center of his web. He was gathering the others into it.

The boy entered with the aspirin and he took it out of the container for me and tried to place it in my mouth. I took it in my hand instead.

And then I had an odd but lucid thought. It came to me strong and clear, that thought. I will die here, I thought. This is death. I am dead already, I thought.

I don't know how we got home that evening, or how I forced him to give me the money he had promised for the bus to Texas. But we did, and he did, and the next day I was gone.

OceanofPDF.com

TETHER

Manolo once promised me to Pablo. We were in Pablo's mother's small but tidy apartment. Manolo had asked me to hop into his car to make that visit with him.

At that moment Pablo's mother sat to my left, on the other side of Manolo, though she did not eat with us; it was toward the end of the meal, a pause for conversation before dessert. His mother wore her hair in a bun and smiled demurely as Manolo spoke, “One day I'm going to marry Veronica to Pablo. What do you think?” he teased loudly as he elbowed me, knowing I would be embarrassed by his boisterous talk.

I don't visually recall Pablo being at that lunch, those soft curls framing his lovely face, but he must have been there, sitting next to his older sister who sat across from me, though in that moment, my face turning red, I did not dare to look across the table at him. And though I could not raise my eyes, I was convinced, and thought, Yes, one day I will marry Pablo.

But was this simply Manolo's crazed wish that Pablo always be a part of our lives, a way to stay connected to him? Was I simply the vehicle for the enactment of this wish? Was I merely his tether?

Had my crush on Pablo been cruelly scripted by Manolo? And there I was again, at seventeen, with Samuel and his family. There I was, once more, in the middle of Manolo's web.

OceanofPDF.com

GONE

It is only now that I see that in that year, in some way, I became my mother ….

In my longing for her, I stayed in that apartment searching for her, looking and looking, even as what I saw in her mania terrified me, even when, months later, she wandered lost right there in front of me, disintegrating before my eyes.

But I became Manolo too, who had once been my father; I went to that town and surrounded myself with his boys, came face to face with his perversions, older now, for I was seventeen, I was able to see them, to feel them, their twisted, spreading poison contaminating all the boys around me.

My mother and Manolo's stories needed to be played out in front of me, it seems … I needed to see it all more clearly, to witness … a full circle experienced, perhaps … before I could finally convince myself of what I'd seen and so expunge them from the depths of my insides.

I never saw Manolo again. After that, I didn't need to.

And I wouldn't see my mother again until I was a woman. I wouldn't see my mother again until I could begin to fully regard her, until I had the strength to resist her. I would not see my mother again for fourteen years.

OceanofPDF.com

STAY

A few days ago, my friend R came over for dinner. R is a talented painter who lives next door to me in the country, almost at the tip of the North Fork of Long Island, and when she is not in the city, and I am not in Los Angeles, and we are both on the North Fork we have dinner together often, cooking for each other after our long solitary days, hers in her studio, mine in front of my computer, surrounded by notebooks and piles of paper and pens. We are still getting to know each other, as I have only been living in this house a couple of years, and we both move around a lot. I admire R, her work, but also her openness and interest in inquiry, her constant desire to investigate difficult topics, things others would rather not speak about. On this night, as we were finishing our meal, fish and vegetables and tequila, we began to talk about a mutual friend who always seems to get in her own way. This led me to think about a case study I'd read in which a man cannot move forward in his life because of unresolved feelings toward his father. There is a woman whom he might like to marry, but he cannot make the motions to do so. There is simply too much unrecognized aggression toward his sick and elderly father, too many remnants of his childhood relationship which have not been played out because of the patient's fear regarding his anger at his father, and his competitive feelings toward him. These are common feelings for a child toward a parent, but this boy's fantasy is that a conflict would maybe kill his weakened father, a thought so abhorrent that he denies his difficult feelings and buries them deep within. But, of course, the patient's stifled way of dealing with his physically weak father, his denial of his aggression, his holding himself back, bleeds into the rest of his life. As an adult he is so cautious that he cannot make any motion; his competitive drives are guilt-ridden and muted; in fact, he is so confused that he doesn't recognize conflicts as conflicts, or see a need to defend himself, or to strive for things, or to work anything out with anyone. Except now he thinks he might like to marry this woman. Yet the disavowed feelings toward his father have paralyzed him; he is stuck, and doesn't see it is his guilt regarding these terrifying feelings that keeps him from moving forward

with his adult relationships. He has muted himself, his own happiness. He doesn't know how he feels about anything, and has silenced his own desire.

I could see R's house from where I sat at the table with her, and as we spoke I looked through the glass doors past my garden and over at it once or twice. It was a dark night, and the lights in her house stood out sharply against the black. R coughed and drew my attention back to the room; she wanted to continue to talk about the manner in which we get in our own way, she said, the ways in which we silence our own desire, the reasons that might happen, and why it is so difficult to see the mechanisms of these internal conflicts, even as they are bleeding into everything external.

It's so complicated, I said. Then R asked me about my own father.

Ed, I said. I loved my adoptive father, I told her. He's the only one, of the three men who were in one way or another my fathers, whom I think of as my actual father.

R took a sip of tequila, What about your adoptive mother? Wasn't he married?

I again looked away from her, and toward her house in the distance—the light in her bedroom seemed to be flickering.

I can't really speak about Ed's wife except to say that she was brutal, I said. It's not easy for me to speak of the ways in which she was so, to supply the details, it's too painful, but she did much to humiliate me as a child, I added. I turned away from the flickering window and toward R, She had me act as a sort of servant in their house, and terrorized my life, I told her. I then added that she never really took me on as her child, and that to her I was merely an extension of his family, all of whom she regarded with contempt.

My friend's eyes were warm and calm, even as I spoke about this difficult relationship. I looked away from her to the candlelit table, our dinner strewn upon it, our glasses full of tequila and soda, what we like to drink together, and suddenly I understood that she was not only asking about Ed's wife, but her own mother as well. I reached out and played with some warm yellow wax that had dripped from the candle onto the table as I wondered if R was trying to understand something about her mixed-up feelings in regard to her own mother by asking me about my feelings in regard to Ed's wife. And as I looked back at her—she was watching me play with that wax—I saw that for me it could no longer be about Ed's wife, or how she had felt about me, or how she had treated me, or what she had

done to me in my childhood. It came to me clearly then, as I looked back at my friend—that what was important for me now was confronting my own difficult feelings in regard to Ed's wife; what continued to affect me were the feelings themselves and the conflict those feelings had created in me, the deep guilt at my continued anger at her for not letting Ed love me; she was a woman I had not seen in over twenty years, and this was what tortured me still and kept me from moving forward. Ed's wife was not a part of my life at all anymore yet my own rage, my dark side, which I so wanted to deny, my wish for vengeful annihilation, and my difficulty in acknowledging those feelings, in letting myself feel them even, had kept me stuck in that painful relationship.

I think it's hard to talk about our own dark feelings, I said to my friend. To express our anger and jealousy and competitiveness. Hard to even acknowledge we have such feelings, much less openly feel them, in order to move through them a bit.

Yeah, she acknowledged.

For me, I added, balling the wax in my fingers as I spoke, it's much easier to talk about what that woman did to me, much harder to admit that I despised her. But also, it's nearly impossible for me to think about my biological mother with much clarity. It's easier for me to think about this woman whom I clearly despised, and put all of my complicated feelings onto her. She's a pretty convenient vessel for them.

I know what you mean, my friend said, shaking her head back and forth. It's much easier when the other person is deserving of your anger. When they do things that without question cross the line. You know, when the other person seems to deserve all of that.

I grabbed the bottle of tequila and poured us another drink, and we began talking about painting and motion, and the brilliant and complicated ways R incorporates motion into her paintings, which are, in fact, still objects.

The following morning, as I walked my little dog through a path lined with blooming daffodils, the bright yellow forsythia bushes bursting with color directly behind them, all that golden exuberance, the earth springing joyful into blossoming life, I thought, How can it be? How is it that I so easily, so forcefully, protect against my own feelings, instinctively hide them so deep I can't reach them? I am like that patient. Unclear and unable to move. How is it that we continually replay these same sad themes and scenarios in our

own lives; that we don't see it there before us, when it is so plain for others to see?

We scratch our own eyes out so that we do not have to see.

In some way I am only beginning to understand, my complicated feelings toward Ed's wife are connected to the deep guilt I felt toward my mother after the molestation.

Children blame themselves, we are told. When Manolo molested me, I must have blamed myself.

It is a twisted debt that in my life has had to be paid over and over again. A pathology of self-inflicted blame and punishment.

I am trying to fight it. I am trying to fight the desire to pluck my own eyes out, to keep secret from myself and silent for other people. I am trying to fight the desire to quit the searching, to keep from speaking. I am trying to make a story in which my rage and desire and guilt do not get mixed up into one feeling, where they do not end in a continued deep and paralyzing confusion, where my life does not become barren and static in the midst of this confusion. Where I do not feel such remorse that I am often unclear about what it is that I want.

But I don't want to sit down to write. I want to get up and check on the mail, to walk my dog, to call someone; I want to invite a friend over for dinner or out for a drink …

But then the part of me that struggles to be here, that struggles to record myself into the phone, to check the transcriptions, to sit down in front of the computer, to become the subject of my own life, to stay in my own analysis, to push to confront myself there and here on the page, to push for a truth that does not absolve me, that part that sees things and struggles and suffers through it, that part that believes in something deeper in the face of nothing, commands me to stay.

OceanofPDF.com

DEFENSE

Last night, as I lay in bed struggling to sleep, my eyes beginning to close, I recalled the dream I had in which Manolo was a cement statue, immovable, and the young man who appeared at the end of it, the deep relief I felt at seeing him there on the other side of that bed, the intense love that washed over me when I saw him. I was beginning to see that the men I am attracted to are Manolo's boys. In the dream Manolo was a rock—I couldn't kick him out of my bed. In my inability to be rid of him I turned my back in despair, thrown by my own immobility, a hesitation so disorienting it became an anguish. And instantly, magically, there he was, a young man to distract me from the horror of my stasis. When I saw the young man laying on his side facing me, gazing into my eyes, Manolo was gone from my mind. I reached for his hands and we clasped each other. I felt such love, but soon another feeling began to creep in; it was something like doubt. For I saw that he was stuck too. Suddenly I was overcome by the knowledge that he was a man stuck in adolescence.

The adolescence was the point of the dream. I could see that now. That was the way in which I had never succeeded in kicking Manolo out of my bed, the way in which he has continued to dominate my life. Through my attractions. The gentle men who are stuck, like me, the men who remain boys all of their lives, who are unable to move forward, they are the point. The men who, instead of making choices, feel that life is happening to them, who feel no control. They are like the patients in that case study I told my friend about, and I wanted to take them in and care for them. This was how and where the dream came together—it came together in me, in my attraction to these adolescent men, the ways I have played all of this out in my life without realizing it.

They are Manolo's boys, his adolescents. They are Pablo, whom I could not have, because he was Manolo's.

In all of the years before beginning this book, in which I have not thought about Manolo at all, in all of those years in which he was rarely in my

mind, he *was there*, a solid immovable structure. And now, though I was strong enough to push him out, I still felt incapable of doing so.

In my turning away from him in my dream, in giving him my back, I was turning toward the adolescents who were the other side of the equation. The man / boys, who Mark and Steve, and you, so perfectly, for me, embody.

Manolo was always there on the edges, and the shit was inside me.

OceanofPDF.com

PENELOPE

I've written a story about the house in LA, my daughter said after I turned to look at her from the table where I sat pondering my book, just settling in to begin my writing for the day.

I'd just taken a sip of my tepid tea and in a pause in my thinking I had turned toward her where she sat reading and asked what she had planned for the day.

It might need a little editing, but I think it's pretty much done, she said.

Can I see it? I asked.

Not yet, she said.

My twenty-one-year-old daughter was home from school for the month and she presently sat on the low, green, mid-century couch I sometimes lay on while I speak to my analyst, in front of the big window I often look out of, up into the sky, as I speak with him. Her hair framed her lovely face in loose black strands as she lifted her eyes across the living room toward me.

I've been thinking about the house a lot lately, she said, our lives there, and how confused I was about you and dad. I've even dreamt about it a few times, the big windows, the low red garden chairs, you and him sitting in them, arguing. Me looking through those windows into the garden, that seemed so big and wild in those days.

You have? I asked as I took another sip of my tea.

Yeah, it all comes back to me in these strong but disconnected images. But it's all making more sense to me lately. I know he was a difficult guy, she said, though the story's not about that. The story's more about what it was like to feel so confused as a girl. And about the house itself, and the garden. What it felt like to be in it.

I nodded.

The story is kind of more about feelings than plot, she said. I was never mad at you, she added. Penelope pursed her lips in my direction, I know it wasn't your fault.

He was impossible to live with! I laughed.

Her eyes widened and she laughed a little too, I know, believe me, I more than see that now, how difficult he can be. He's pretty nutty …

Ziggy jumped up on the couch and began licking Penelope's face, then lay down next to her and settled.

I think I'm pretty nutty too, I said, as Penelope turned to focus on petting the dog.

OceanofPDF.com

SIMPLE

The next day I lay on that same low green couch in the living room and phoned Dr. Jacobs for our session. I looked out the window and up at the grey sky as I told him all of the things I had been thinking, told him that the writing kept the thinking going, told him about the progress of my book which was directly tied into the progress I was making with him. I told him I'd been thinking about my sense of guilt, the scope of it. It had been difficult, but I was trying to confront what was most painful to me. My shame. My confusion. The resultant self-hatred. And then I told him that the previous night I'd read the afterward to the book, *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, which is written by Edmund White, and that in the afterword White writes that not since Humbert Humbert had anyone been able to communicate the tedium of pedophilia as Hervé Guibert does in his book about a road trip with teenagers, *Voyage Avec Deux Enfants* "the nose-picking tedium and jokey empty-headedness." His words immediately took me back to Chicontepec, and how at seventeen, surrounded by thirteen-year-old boys, I hadn't been able to see that my being there was related to the hold Manolo still had on me. That being there *was* the hold Manolo still had on me. There I was, in his town, surrounded by those boys, whom he considered to be his boys; I was then still trying to work something out with him, or through him, or in regard to him. Without knowing it, this was—at least partially—why I was there; and, I said, I was still trying to make sense of it all now, with him, my analyst, Dr. Jacobs.

I enjoyed their company, those boys, until—it is true—the tedium took over. Perhaps the tedium was in the repetition, in the fact that I was, without knowing it, trying to work something out about what had happened to me through being there, in the middle of it, as it was happening to them. Maybe the tedium was in me, in that repetition, the part of me that could not see and thus could not move forward, the part of me that was stuck; and in that moment being stuck meant being stuck there with them, blindly. I was not just stuck there with the boys, I *was* the boys, because he had molested me too. And at that point still, without seeing it, I was stuck in Manolo's hold.

I paused for a moment, looked away from the cloud-filled sky and at the painting on the far wall of the living room, and then back out again toward the sky where I focused my eyes on a point in the grey clouds in the distance, and then I told him that I believed my guilt was what drove me; I told Dr. Jacobs I'd been thinking about the ways it led me to make miserable choices. That I was somehow punishing myself through these bad choices. I told him a lot of other things too, the ways Steve and Mark and other men I had been with had reminded me of Manolo's boys. For some unconscious part of myself they were Manolo's boys. They were Pablos. And, it was increasingly clear to me that I was one too, I was a Pablo, I told him.

I told Dr. Jacobs many other things then, for I am always making reasons, always churning and churning and trying to understand.

Then he said to me, he said: In all of this complicated reasoning you seem to be leaving out the hope you had that it would work out.

What? I asked. I'm not sure what you're talking about.

You wanted these relationships to work out, with Mark and Steve. And each of them gave every indication that they did too. This was the case with your ex-husband, Jorge, as well. You were hopeful, each time. In all of these reasons and explanations you're giving now, how it was all a repetition of your guilt, how you see all of these doublings functioning, you seem to be ignoring that fact. In the end it is simple. You loved each of these men and each time you wanted it to work out.

Yes, I say.

OceanofPDF.com

CLARA AND CHIL

As I awoke one morning in late November, I felt a very strong urge to visit Mexico City. Still blurry with sleep, I decided I should go and see my aunt Sofia during the winter holidays. I could take Penelope and while there also make plans to see my biological cousin, Sebastian's niece, whom I had just in the last few years gotten to know a bit, but whom Penelope had never met. I could ask her some questions for the book—she would certainly be able to clarify a few things for me.

I'd originally reached out to Clara three years prior, while I was working on a film about an adolescent girl who is taken from her mother because she is a drug addict. The girl is sent to live with her grandmother in Mexico, so that her voyage is the opposite of mine; she goes back to Mexico to live with her grandmother, rather than away from the place and from her. The producer and lead actress both lived in Mexico City so that I was visiting more often than I had since my childhood. It felt important to be working on a project in Mexico. And though I wanted nothing to do with him, I had long wanted to know Sebastian's family. My aunts Sofia and Lily had been friends with his sisters in their youth and had said many nice things about them. And for some reason my mother would bring my cousin Clara up to me sometimes, quite randomly, almost as if at least in that way she could indirectly acknowledge my parentage. Clara is close to me in age, and over the years my mother had told me that she and I looked alike, that in fact I looked just like her mother, and that her parents were charming and good-natured and very much in love, that Clara herself was funny and smart, rode a motorcycle, and was a lawyer in the offices of the Supreme Court of Mexico. My mother showed me a picture of her once (where had she gotten it?), leaning on her motorbike, cool and casual. She seemed together in a way I imagined I might have been, had I been a part of them.

One day, having been curious for a long time, I used the opportunity of one of my production trips to Mexico City to finally reach out. I told her I was coming for work and asked if I could meet her. I told her I'd heard a lot about her from my mother and my aunts. She responded yes, in capital letters.

It had been so easy. For many years I had fantasized about reaching out, but had gotten so nervous that the apprehension had kept me from hitting send on any of my previous messages.

In the cab on the way to her house that first visit my anxiety rose again, though the feeling vanished quickly because I had barely knocked on her door when her husband opened it and he had such soft eyes, and a warm embracing smile, and as soon as I had noted these things she rushed that door, rushed me, and gave me a strong hug, *!Entra, entra!* she commanded in her slightly gruff voice, pulling me in despite myself.

She was lively and quirky, a tomboy like me, laughed heartily, cooked well, had a soft-hearted and thoughtful architect husband who asked a lot of sincere questions and whom she dominated with her big personality. Running circles around them that whole night, demanding attention, were their two rambunctious three-year-old twin boys whom she'd had in her late forties. She teased them heartily and laughed loudly with them. I immediately liked her.

When I wrote Clara to say I was coming to visit both her and my aunt Sofia over the holidays, I decided to also act on the thought that had occurred to me just a few days prior, Can you send me Sebastian's number? I texted. I'd like to see him too while I'm there.

For the book, of course, I told my analyst, the day before I left on my trip. I was laying down as I spoke. I have no interest in him, I added. But maybe he can clarify a few things I'm still very confused about, and though I know he probably won't answer any of my questions directly, perhaps through the way he talks to me I can glean something. I paused for a moment to watch an osprey circle the sky above my window. I think I'll be able to understand things through his body language, even if he's indirect in his replies, I told my analyst. Plus, Penelope keeps saying she wants to meet her grandpa. I gave a short laugh, She's kind of joking when she says it, of course, it's a kind of tease, but Penelope calls him grandpa.

I did not admit to any other reason for wanting to see him.

I had met with Sebastian twice, soon after my daughter was born, when I was still married to her father, Jorge, and we'd made a trip to Mexico City. I had written to Sebastian, letting him know that I knew he was my father, and that now that I had my own child I would like to get to know him a bit.

He agreed to meet us in the hotel Jorge's gallery had put us up in, in a fancy part of the city near Chapultepec Park. I saw him from across the lobby as we approached it from our room and did not recognize myself in him, though I knew we looked alike. Sebastian stood from his chair as we arrived at his side, ran his hand through his hair while he looked at me, gave a proud smile, and before even saying hello he asked, How do I look?

I was stunned by his vanity, but it felt a bit sad too, like an appeal for something not there. Then I did look at him and to me he looked older than his sixty years, with a melancholic air, and thin, with long skinny legs. This was my father. Perhaps sensing my pity, and without asking me anything about myself or waiting for me to reply, he reached his arms out and asked if he could take my baby, and when I said yes, and handed Penelope to him to hold, rather than interacting with her he used my beautiful child like a prop, parading her in front of all of the women who sat in the lobby café, beaming at each of those women proudly as they cooed in his direction.

Very soon after our first meeting, we had a second, a meal during which he again mostly ignored me while asking Jorge many questions about his work, how much this or that had sold for. In the months that followed he sent a string of rude emails, in one of which he asked how I could be so sure he was my father. As a favor to me, my sister Pilar persuaded him and Manolo both to do a DNA test the following year. In an odd email after the confirmation of this fact—99.8% the results had said—he implied that at some future date he might need me to take care of him or provide him with funds as needed. When I didn't reply his tone got angry, How could I ignore him? What if at some point he really did need taking care of?

I stopped engaging with him entirely.

Yet I was left with the desire to know his family, my family, whom I had heard so much about from my aunts. My mother would dangle Clara at me like some kind of bait, or an assuagement, but it was her sisters, my aunts, Sofia and Lily, who in their youth had been close to Sebastian's sisters, and who had known the whole family, his parents too.

He's horrible, Sofia had said after I told her that he'd questioned his paternity. The fact that he's friends with Manolo says everything you need to know about him, she'd added.

Yet many times during my childhood I had wondered, and do still, what a life in his family would have been like. They are a jocular, musical, large

extended family who gather often for celebrations. I imagined being bathed in their love, the witty banter and fond teasing, the singing in big groups … I imagined feeling a part of something larger than myself. I imagined something other than the extreme loneliness I felt as a child. The sense of floating alone through an indifferent atmosphere … nothing to anchor me but my insomnia, and my anxiety, and my constant sense of doom. Nothing to anchor me, in other words, but my symptoms.

The day after arriving in Mexico City, Penelope and I Ubered to Clara's home, and as we descended the car in front of her big brick house, like a country lodge in the middle of that neighborhood full of pretty walled-in houses, her dachshund ran out and excitedly peed at Penelope's feet. Laughing, Penelope picked him up, a wiggly mass, and we entered Clara's world to the sound of her mock-angry scolding the dog in her slightly raspy voice, “No, Luca! Now look at what you've done!” followed by her loud and friendly greeting, arms flying about in quick embraces, kisses planted on both cheeks.

She was in the middle of making us pizzas, fig with blue cheese, pear and goat cheese … I worked at my uncle's pizza parlor! she joyfully exclaimed as Penelope and I marveled at the prosciutto and pomegranate on one of the pies she was preparing. (The next time we visited she would show us the large pizza oven in her back yard.)

I'd brought tequila and stepped into her kitchen and made us drinks, tequila and seltzer with a squeeze of lime. We laughed a lot, and the twins and the dog ran in wild circles around us. Penelope played with the little boys and repeatedly threw a stuffed toy for the dog before Luca finally leapt into her arms and settled there. We ate pizza after pizza, had a second, then a third drink, and soon our laughter matched the pitch of the children's shrieks.

As we were leaving that night I felt a need for more of their company and invited them to breakfast at the semi-fancy hotel in Polanco Jorge had put us up in, he having exchanged some work for the occasional free room there. The next morning, they were late and rushed into the dining room slightly disheveled and full of apologies, the boys bouncy and loud, bickering as the maître d’ in the formal breakfast room looked on, quietly perturbed, while they spread out over the series of tables surrounding ours. Penelope snuck me a look. Tomorrow I would apologize to him, I thought,

wanting to rein them in as I watched the other guests shudder while the boys shrieked their unrestrained conflicts, overlapping fights over toys, and seats, and spilt beverages, We're used to getting strange looks when we go out, their father calmly said to me. Too anxious to simply let this be, I tempted one of the twins to my side with my phone, and he settled in next to me to watch something I'd never heard of but which he determinedly requested while Penelope, who seems to know everything, nodded at me that the show was okay, it passed muster. Having gotten my cue, his father moved over to patiently feed the second twin so that Clara and I could speak more fluidly.

I just don't understand why Manolo would end up in the town your family is from, I told her. (I hadn't yet paused to think, the town *our* family is from … it had not come to me like that yet, had not fully settled in me that she was really my cousin, that we were a deep, if largely absent, part of each other's lives, that we had known about each other since we were teenagers, that, at least for me, our “could have been” doubling had played a large part in my imagination.) I think he was in love with Sebastian, I blurted.

And, to my surprise, she nodded, very matter of fact, That makes sense, she said.

But, also, I raced on in my eager, ardent tone, wanting her to confirm every thought I'd lately been having, I think Sebastian would have pushed him away if he wasn't receptive to it. He wouldn't have wanted, or allowed, that kind of attention. So there must have been something in him too.

They went to Panama together once, she said calmly while buttering a roll.

Really? For how long?

She didn't remember, But it was a pretty long trip they made just the two of them.

This was almost enough for me, her lack of surprise at my conjecture seemed a confirmation, and then this trip to Panama alone; I somehow felt she was affirming it with this detail. I looked at her and said, I tried calling him yesterday morning.

You did? I was surprised when you asked for his number. I wasn't sure you actually would.

He didn't answer, I told her.

He's strange, she said. She then told me that a few weeks prior she'd gone to lunch with his brother, our uncle Alberto (who everyone calls Chil, she said) who was the nicest of the uncles. Sebastian and Chil lived in the same neighborhood, quite close to each other near their childhood home, and so Clara and Chil ended up at a sidewalk cafe they all liked across the street from Sebastian's house.

I ran across the street and knocked on his door to see if he would join us, she said. She laughed a little, He didn't answer! Though I knew for sure he was behind that closed door ordering his wife to shush and duck so I wouldn't see them.

He was a widower, who'd been single the last time I'd seen him, He's married? I asked.

Just got married last year, she said.

I wondered who this woman might be as Clara continued speaking, Then we saw him from the restaurant, on his terrace, she said, And I waved and waved at him from the sidewalk. Her arms went up now, wildly waving about in the breakfast room, Hey! she yelled into the air above my head as if she were once again calling out to him up there, before turning back to me, I saw him duck behind some plants and creep back into his house, she said.

We both started laughing.

I didn't tell her that I knew this house, because it was the house I'd passed with my brother more than thirty years before, trying to peer into its garden, before staring at its front door and wondering at the life of the man who lived inside it. Wondering too what my life might have been inside it.

He's just so odd, she said and took a sip of her coffee, you shouldn't feel bad that he didn't answer your text. I mean, he absolutely hid from us. Yum, she added, as she took a bite of her eggs, before turning and yelling out at one of the twins to stop whining.

I know! Let's call Carlos! she said, turning her attention back to me. I knew she meant her brother, who was of course also my cousin.

Everything Clara said was enthusiastic, proclaimed with joy and conviction … she dialed him, and at first he didn't answer. Moments later he called her back, HAHAHAHA! she let out as she picked up. Look! she pointed her phone at me, He's still in bed!

My cousin, Carlos, whom I hadn't met yet, was holding the phone above his head, bare chested, the blanket laying flat around him. Hi, we said

simultaneously, greeting each other for the first time. He looked surprised to see me.

What a way to meet! I said.

Hahaha! she laughed, Go get dressed! she shrieked at him.

Yeah, sorry, I have to get going! I'm late! he blurted. I just wanted to see what you wanted. Glad I called you back! he said as he looked over at me, and we blew each other a kiss and promised to speak again soon.

It wasn't lost on me how quickly he'd returned her call, how easy and jovial they were together. Still, I was relieved he'd gone because I was still feeling in the middle of my conversation with Clara. I wanted to continue expressing all of my doubts.

But before I could ask anything further, she started speaking about Mama Rita's house, the big birthday parties she would throw for herself, everyone celebrating her, drinking, and yelling and laughing at once. It would scare Clara when she was little, Mama Rita big and loud at the piano, calling out greetings at everyone who entered, people running in and out continually. The parties felt overwhelming to her, Clara told me. There was so much drinking, so much smoking, so much crazy energy. So many people she didn't know.

And the whole time your grandma feeding everyone and yelling out commands and cackling and plunking away at the piano.

She's not really my grandma, I said.

Of course, she said. I saw him a few months before he died, she told me then. And I knew she was speaking about Manolo. You know, Sebastian is *pretty* dark; there were a bunch of us there and we all wanted to go out to eat together, but I had the twins, and said I couldn't very well go to a restaurant with them; the twins were barely two then, and they were wilder than they are now. Can you imagine!? She paused and sipped her coffee before continuing, I mean, Sebastian is *super* dark, Come on, Clara! he said Don't be a spoilsport. Look here, Manolo can't join anyway, he's too sick and weak, why don't you just leave the boys with him? and then he laughed wickedly. Clara raised her eyebrows as she looked over at me.

I was confused, could she possibly be referring to his being a pedophile?

He was always surrounded by boys, I said, pushing it. And I didn't understand it when I was a girl, I added. I once asked one of them why he hung out with Manolo; he was a twin too, that boy, beautiful green eyes. I

had a crush on him, though I didn't tell anyone. He buys us things, the boy told me. He takes us on daytrips.

And then Clara told me about a time when she was confused as well, when it was just starting to come clear to her too. And it was then that it dawned on me that she *had* been speaking about that, Sebastian's demented joke. That it was a known fact in her family. I'd been too scared to bring it up. But somehow she had led me there.

In her adolescent memory, Manolo had come by her grandmother Pilar's house to see Sebastian and his brothers.

Your grandmother and my sister have the same name, I said. I think he named my sister after your grandma.

Yeah, she said. Anyway, he always had these big cars, Clara said, and this time a boy was driving him around in one, like a kid chauffeur. When Manolo hopped out and went into my grandma's house, the boy yelled out to me, Hey, Girl! Come on! Let's go for a ride! And I didn't think twice before jumping in. It was great; we drove that Cadillac around the neighborhood, honking at people, that boy swerving the car back and forth, yelling out at everyone, having a great time. Why're you hanging out with him? I asked the boy when we were sitting in the car back in front of my grandma's house. Just like you, Vero, I was curious. He looked at me like I was an idiot and said, Are you kidding?! He lets me drive this car! He laughed and then exclaimed, He's taking me to the U.S. next week!

You know … I didn't know you knew. I'm sorry, I said, I wasn't clear this is what you were referring to with that sick joke of Sebastian's about leaving your sons with Manolo.

Yeah, she said shaking her head, Sebastian's a dark one, I tell you.

And it struck me then that what in their family was a deranged joke, in my family was a grim reality. They left us with Manolo.

Anyway, Manolo gave those boys things, Clara said. Most of them were pretty poor. And he promised them things.

He gave the mothers things too, I added.

Suddenly I noticed my heart was racing. I breathed in and out slowly a few times to calm myself, trying not to be too obvious. I took a sip of my tea. She knew. Her family knew. Everybody knew.

Clara took another bite of her eggs and said, I know! I'm going to invite my uncle Chil to breakfast tomorrow. Come over. He knows everything; he's the nicest of all of them and he knows loads of things I don't, she said.

Yes! I agreed … and before lifting her coffee cup to her mouth again she promised to set it all up.

When we arrived at Clara's house the next morning her dog Luca again ran out and this time he raced down the street so that we all had to chase after him. People walking by tried to stop him for us but it was my daughter who finally caught him. Clara scolded, Luca! and together we all made our way in the side gate, Penelope still carrying the dog in her arms. My uncle Chil was already there, in the enclosed garden. He was dapper in different shades of brown, beautiful corduroy pants, herringbone vest and tweed jacket, a charming flat cap that he tipped as I greeted him … he was friendly, as Clara was, and began to chat with me right away. How's your aunt Sofia, he asked, still beautiful? and his interest in her caught me off guard.

Clara showed off the huge pizza oven, and then we went into the house. And as the twins wrestled with each other, and the dog jumped all over us and Clara cooked us breakfast, taking a short break to run into the living room to ask if we wanted coffee or tea, Chil and I chit chatted.

Then, as things settled a bit around us, he began to talk.

Your uncle Adrian, he said, and Manolo both, were different, he said. They were interested in other things, he said. I tilted my head at him, in a question, and he continued, In men, he said. Ed, your adoptive father, was only around some of the time because he grew up with his grandmother; when he was home he hung out with them but he wasn't really like them. Chil pursed his lips, I'm not talking about the men now, I mean he was responsible. A hard worker. He wasn't like his brothers who were always running around, partying, like my brothers—how did they think they'd ever amount to anything? Eduardo was a real intellectual. He was serious, like me, Chil said.

I wanted to say something about Ed, about how much I loved him, but stayed quiet so that he would keep talking. Chil now focused his talk on Adrian, He was an athlete, big guy, you know, strong. He was on the military athletic team, training for the Olympics, triatholon I think, he said. One night he went to a hotel, you know, with a man, and as he was leaving the clerk started harassing him, insulting him and his friend, yelling at them to get the hell out of there, calling them perverts. He went on and on hurling insults until finally Adrian couldn't take it, he was twice the size of most men, and he had held back, but he turned and pummeled the guy. Left him

thrown on the floor. And that was it. They were leaving, were almost at Adrian's car when the guy grabbed his gun from out of a drawer and shuffled out and shot him in the back.

My heart skipped. That's how it happened? I asked. That's how he died?

It was a crime, Chil said

Was the guy arrested? I asked.

Oh, yes, he said. There was a trial. He was jailed. I went to the funeral with Sebastian.

I was overwhelmed. Ed had told me it had been a road-rage incident.

I breathed in and out a few times trying to register it, but I saw Chil was becoming distracted, and I didn't want him to get up or stop talking. I wanted to know more, so I prodded him further, to keep him there, onto another topic, Can I ask you, how is it that they remained friends? I looked toward the next room where the twins were now watching TV with Penelope, the dog in her arms. I continued, Manolo knew that Sebastian had slept with his wife. And then there I was, the living proof. Why did they remain friends?

Chil looked around the room a little before answering, Manolo was clearly not interested in women by then, he said. And they weren't going to let a woman, I'm sorry she is your mother, but they weren't going to let a woman get in the way of that friendship. They'd known each other since they were kids. We were all friends since we were kids. Your mother's sisters were friends with my sisters.

Manolo liked boys, I said.

Yes, he nodded with a sad frown, it turned into that.

I wanted to say, No, it was always that. That is what it was. He was sick. But I'd just met Chil, and I liked him, and he was my eighty-year-old uncle, and so I held my tongue.

Was Manolo in love with Sebastian? I asked.

No, no, it never came to that.

I understand that maybe it didn't turn into anything physical, I said. But was he in love with Sebastian? Otherwise why would he end up in Sebastian's town, your town?

Simple, he said, he liked it there. The first time we took him we had to take a little plane to get there, the roads were so bad. It's up in the mountains, and of course the plane had to land in a field big enough for it, so it was a ways out of town and we had to hike the rest of the way to the

ranch. It's so green there, always the perfect temperature; that part of Veracruz is just beautiful land. We were used to it but for him it was something incredible. From that first hike forward he loved it there. My mother's family were ranchers; they kept livestock, my mother's mother, my mother's mother's mother, they had several ranches there. All of us boys would go out into the woods and camp together; we'd hunt. I was the cook; I'd grill up what we got on a fire we'd build. It's just so beautiful there; the food is delicious, plus no one in that little town was going to question him. He was the doctor; nobody was going to question that. Or anything else, he added.

Did you know about me? I couldn't help but ask then.

Oh, yes, Chil said. We all knew. I asked Sebastian to bring you around many times. But he refused. Too complicated, he said whenever I asked.

The twins were still watching TV. Clara came into the living room with my tea and his coffee on a tray.

Come on, she said, grab your drinks.

We did. And then we made our way to the table together.

OceanofPDF.com

HACIENDA MORELOS

The following night Penelope decided to stay in. I want to order room service, she said, and watch a movie in bed. Really? I asked. Yeah, really, she answered. I love it.

I had made plans to take my aunt Sofia and her husband to dinner. I want to treat you, I'd said when I called. Somewhere nice, I said. Though in the end, of course he did not let me pay.

They chose the restaurant, a four-hundred-year-old hacienda in the middle of the city, with heavy furniture, and large chandeliers, baroque paintings, and a series of carefully manicured, lamp-lit courtyards.

The food was traditional, and I let Sofia's husband choose for me.

To start with he ordered grasshoppers, to tease me, looked at me as he did so, are you ready for this? he asked

Sure, I answered, not telling him I'd had them before.

As he talked about his work as a candy distributor, he placed some of my favorite tamarind sweets on the table in front of me.

For Penelope, he said.

Thank you, Candyman, I teased.

Before the food came, I rose to wash my hands, and my aunt said she would join me. We wandered into the courtyard and looked at the play of light that fell from the arabesque lamps above us. It's beautiful, I said.

As we turned to re-enter the large dining room my aunt Sofia took me by the arm. I wanted to keep you, she said.

My eyes must have revealed my confusion.

I wanted to keep you, she repeated. After Torreón. Your mother wouldn't let me, she said. She despises me, she said. She wanted to punish me.

I looked into her eyes which shifted from my face to my hands in which, for some reason, I still held the cloth napkin.

She took a deep breath, It's my fault, she whispered.

It's okay, I said. I don't think so. It's okay, I repeated as I pulled my eyes away.

When I turned from her she headed toward the table as I made my way to the bathroom.

OceanofPDF.com

OUR WORK

A week after returning to New York I had a session with you and told you about my trip to Mexico City, Dr. Jacobs. Before going I'd told you I planned to reach out to my biological father. You were surprised.

I feel it will be helpful for my book if I can ask him some questions directly, I'd told you.

I did reach out, I now told you. I asked my cousin Clara for his number. But rather than setting things up beforehand, like I did with her, I waited until I was at the hotel in Mexico City to call him, I added. When he didn't answer, I emailed him. He didn't respond to that either, I said.

My lack of emotion in relating all of this to you might mean something, I realized.

The fact that I had looked through my decades old emails in order to find his email address so I could write to him when he didn't respond to my text might mean something.

As usual, I was laying on the low green couch looking out the window, the headphones in my ears as I continued, The next night I went to my cousin Clara's for dinner, I said. She's charming, funny and vivacious, lively and quick witted, I told you. Her family is boisterous and friendly. The dog, a bit wild, the five-year-old twin boys, loud and dramatic.

I paused before continuing, The following morning at breakfast Clara repeatedly stressed how odd Sebastian is. As if I needed to hear it. I focused on one large cloud and added, I learned a few remarkable things while I was in Mexico City, and when I learned them I felt they might be the answer to everything. Or at least to many of the things I've been very curious about, I said.

Hmmm, Dr. Jacobs responded.

My uncle Adrian, the one who Sebastian apologized to at the graveyard, the golden child, the one everybody loved the most, the one who was killed, purportedly in a road-rage incident, was actually murdered by the clerk of a hotel where he'd gone with another man, I said.

After a moment I added, It was a hate crime. It turns out my uncle was gay and the reception clerk verbally abused him and his partner as they were leaving the hotel. He was relentless, went on and on, and my uncle was a large man, and finally beat the clerk who wouldn't stop harassing them, and then he and his partner walked out. But the clerk gathered himself, then followed them out with a gun. He shot my uncle in the back as they were leaving.

I paused.

The man was arrested, I told Dr. Jacobs. When I heard this story I was emotionally stunned, but strangely I wasn't surprised. It all made perfect sense now. Now I understood why there were different versions of my uncle Adrian's death. It was a road-rage incident, I was told by Ed. Another relative told me it had been a fight over a woman; that Adrian had stolen another man's woman and that the murder was that man's revenge. There were other versions too, all of them a bit hazy, with details that didn't add up. Mama Rita cried whenever Adrian was mentioned, and so he was rarely mentioned. And as children we thought the confusion just had to do with how painful the death had been.

In 1960s Mexico, his being gay was a hidden fact, I said, a knot in my throat. His reality, like mine, was hidden, full of lies and hazy half-truths and denials.

I paused again—in analysis there are so many pauses, so much space needed before you can go on; this is how it is, we need space and time and reflection to move forward, so I looked around the room from that low couch that sits in the small house in the seaside town three hours outside of New York City. Far away from everything, from Mexico City and Los Angeles, the two places that actually feel like home to me.

And Chil, my uncle who told me all this, knew that Manolo was a pedophile, I said. He flowed from telling me about my uncle Adrian to this fact about Manolo. My cousin Clara knew too.

You, Dr. Jacobs, were not surprised by any of these things I told you.

It seems everyone in their family knew, I went on. For them it was just a dark fact: Manolo was a pedophile. Clara even made a joke about it, rather, she related a sick joke Sebastian had made about it to her. In my own family it was never spoken. It took me years and years to begin to put the bits together, to begin to comprehend. But it seems other people knew. My grandmother must have known. My aunts and my mother knew. And now I

saw that other families also knew. Yet, we children, who could fall victim to him, did not know; we were never warned or protected. Except Isa, she was protected. By the time she came around my aunt Sofia kept her away from him and his family. Sofia dealt with things as they were, and she made it clear Manolo was not someone Isa should be around. In the end, that made all the difference.

I paused again before continuing, and then I said, In the couple of days after I left Clara and my uncle Chil, I thought, Oh this is it. It is all so clear now. Ed's family and my mother's family both were cloaked in lies. They did not deal with things as they were. No wonder I was so confused. I've had to dig truths out of the piles of murky tellings, push through various occlusions, follow threads of feeling that I quickly begin to doubt so that I myself wind and unravel, wind and unravel. Like a cracked detective I've searched … but now I understand, I thought. Things are so clear now, I thought.

And then a day ago, perhaps because I knew I was going to speak to you today, I again realized I don't understand anything at all. Others' lives cannot be understood. What do I know about what drove Manolo? What made him who he was. What do I know about my beloved grandmother, my abue, and what drove her to allow this man to come around us? Why she freed the pedophile. What do I know about why Sebastian and Manolo maintained their deep friendship until Manolo died? What love there was between them. I do not know what it was that drove Manolo to Sebastian's family's town. I know nothing about why Sebastian hides now and refused then to take me to meet his family, even though they asked him to do so. I do not know what it is he is hiding from. Though I guess I might have some ideas about all of this, I know nothing at all.

What are you trying to get at? Dr. Jacobs asked.

Manolo's father was a pedophile, I said. I'm convinced he must have molested Manolo when he was a child because he molested one of my adoptive brothers, Sebastian—Ed named his son after my biological father, Sebastian—anyway, he's the older of the two boys, the troubled one; his grandfather fondled his genitals while he was in bed; at seven years old he woke up and yelled and kicked him off of himself, and when he tried to tell Ed and his wife that his grandfather had grabbed him, they ignored him. Ed ignored him. I don't know why I have never told you this.

He was an orphan, Manolo's father. I can only imagine that he himself must have been molested in the orphanage.

I lay for a long time without speaking, and, in order to give me space, Dr. Jacobs did not speak as well.

Finally, I said into the phone, I don't know, I guess I'm just thinking that I will not get any closer to any of them through my gathering of facts, and my conjecture, my attempts at stitching it together.

I stared out the window again.

After a moment of discomfort I repeated, I don't know why I haven't told you this, why I haven't spoken to you about Ed and Manolo's father. Speedy. He wasn't a blustery macho like Manolo. He was actually kind of shy, or something that looked like shyness. He would slip in and out of the house barely exchanging a word with anyone. He was small and thin, much smaller than his wife. He'd smile at us and wave awkwardly as he went. He was always leaving. A shadow grandpa, disconnected and pitiful, so that we kind of felt sorry for him, his bum hip and slight limp, Mama Rita big and loud in her messy housedress, badgering him, constantly yelling at him, and off he would run. Speedy.

He was haunted, I said. And he passed his ghosts on to me through Manolo.

Though I could hear you breathing you remained silent, Dr. Jacobs, so I continued, Maybe the ways that I don't know, the acknowledgement that there are many things I cannot ever know, is a way to create a space for myself, I said. Otherwise I can become so obsessed with trying to understand. I think I need the space to allow myself not to know.

After further minutes of silence I added, I'm still not sure what is supposed to happen here. How are things supposed to change? How am I supposed to change?

You still did not respond, Dr. Jacobs, so I went on, I understand it intellectually. I can understand what the work is when I think about other people, their work in analysis, or consider characters in books.

I then mentioned Sebald's book, *The Emigrants*, as I often do to you because years ago when I told you the story of Max Ferber in it, you were very interested, and when I told you I thought you would love the book, you

actually read it. This surprised me, Dr. Jacobs, this showed me there was a real back and forth between us, a relationship not just in here, but in the world too, that I affected you too, and that we were in alliance. I've since used this story in the book to speak to you about my anguish when it seems insurmountable. In this novella Ferber lives in Manchester. He is an exile who was sent to England from Germany as a teenager by his parents to escape the Nazis. His parents intended to join him, but were intercepted on their way to meet him. They were sent to Lithuania on the trains, where they were killed. Ferber is a painter who is involved in a project of erasure: he paints and then scrapes the paint off the canvas, paints and scrapes, paints and scrapes. His studio in Manchester is situated near some train tracks. Why would he choose to be there, such a heavy symbol, why would he do this to himself, we ask ourselves as we read. Yet we understand it too. There is something inside him that he cannot get away from. He is compelled to remember through it, to be constantly reminded. He's haunted by that image of his parents being taken away, even as he cannot bear to think of it. He survived and they didn't. It is his personal history and he cannot escape it. Still, he paints and erases, paints and erases. And we know that for us as well, even as we see it, even as we understand that a blind compulsion drives us to that which is most painful, though we might even be aware that it is to do with our own history, even as we question it and are horrified by that thing in ourselves that drives us to such places, even as we lead ourselves to the misery, to repeat the pain, we simultaneously forget that we have previously experienced that misery, that we have seen it and then not seen it again and again and have thus continually repeated it. Speaking of something like this, Max Ferber says, “I gradually understood that, beyond a certain point, pain blots out the one thing that is essential to its being experienced—consciousness— and so perhaps extinguishes itself ….”

But even when not conscious, it is there, deeply embedded, not conscious but there, and it makes itself felt. You have shown me, Dr. Jacobs, the ways that when it is not pulled up and considered, if not pulled up and experienced as such, as pain, if not put into words and thus into awareness, it repeats, over and over again.

At the end of the novella Ferber does blot his consciousness out by extinguishing himself, finally fully blots out his pain in the only way he knows how, by hurling himself into a passing train.

Following that difficult rule of analysis, the rule that tells us to openly speak our thoughts, whatever comes to mind, in order to unravel our associations, I said, I was just now thinking about *The Emigrants*. I was thinking about Ferber, I added. About how in the book, things have to add up—they need to follow upon each other and make sense somehow, and so at the end of the novella he does what we are afraid he will do. What we have from the first been afraid he would do. And then, in opposition to this I thought about something you said to me last year, Dr. Jacobs, you said, This is not everything that you are, referring to the molestation. This is not everything, you said. And now I think you were saying, this is not everything you have been or that you have to be. This does not define you. And I want to make it clear that it has only been during the writing of this book that I have constantly had to remind myself that it has not. During the writing of this book I have had to remind myself of the things I know: that I have work that I like, and a daughter I love, and friends who bring me much joy. And that painter, the one that Ferber is based on, he did not kill himself. He had a wife, and a son, and was a respected artist. He would paint and scrape the paint off of the canvas not as an expression of melancholic grief and self-defeat, but in an attempt to get at his subject, to get it right; he would repeat and repeat in order to get closer to the truth of it. He was searching and re-doing and searching and re-doing each time.

But I have had to remind myself of all this, because sometimes a terrible feeling of foreboding and apprehension rises up and overwhelms me …

There was a long and silent pause before I spoke again, Six months ago, during one of our sessions I told you that I felt I had moved beyond the deep anguish that had consumed me when I began this book four years before, my difficulty with the subject; I told you that I'd moved beyond the ways that anguish has held me back, and that I could finally complete the book. I even felt some pride at my progress as I told you these things, Dr. Jacobs, because the book itself had been a way for me to confront this subject, and so it had deepened my work with you as well. However, a few hours after our session, later that same morning, when I sat down and began editing for the day, I started to think about Ed's wife, Rosa—that is her name, Rosa, a name I can barely bring myself to pronounce—and then I thought about my mother, which quickly led me to think about Manolo, and

all the ways I was still unable to move forward in regard to it all, and I immediately felt a bit dizzy.

I settled, poured myself a cup of tea and sat back down, but things again became hazy as I got back to work on a difficult section about Chicontepec, about the boys there and what he was doing to them, and the sick way Manolo had used me. I was trying to more finely articulate, trying to make the passage more precisely say what I wanted it to say, so as to give the reader a sense of the feelings that had surrounded that place, and yet, as I was working, I began to mildly disassociate in a way that I could now recognize in myself pretty quickly, in a way that I now knew helped me to shield myself a bit.

The memories were still hard to call up without feeling I was drowning in them.

And now, six months later, Dr. Jacobs, I am once again struggling to finish my book. Before going to Mexico City to see my aunt Sofia and Clara, I again believed I'd moved beyond the deep anguish I'd felt when I began it nearly five years ago now. For a bit I'd even felt optimistic, but then I recalled the same feeling from six months before; recalled that I had then also felt I was finally in a calmer place with it all, had also then believed that I could finally finish it, before I had once again felt overwhelmed.

I looked out the window before speaking, My aunt Sofia told me she wanted to keep me, I said.

It seems each time I think I've gotten to a different place with it all, something new emerges that calls everything into question and requires an emotional readjustment, I added.

Paint and erase, paint and erase, I whispered, before falling silent.

Then, in a renewed attempt to follow that rule about speaking my thoughts, my associations, even when I'm afraid they might threaten us, Dr. Jacobs, threaten what we are doing together, I said, I am considering the slow progress of it all; I am thinking about our work together, I added. I am wondering what it is that I'm doing here with you, Dr. Jacobs. When I began this process with you twelve years ago now, I believed, at some level, that the pain would subside, that I would change at some fundamental level, somehow, that I would come to handle my challenges better, that I would in some way learn to more easily move through them.

It is difficult for you to think about the ways Ed looked away. It threatens your love for him, you said.

Hmmm, I answered.

The pain will not go away, you said. Feelings don't go away. Maybe they become more muted. Maybe we realize we can handle the pain; that we can withstand it; that it will not destroy us. Maybe what we can gain through our work together is a way to see the pain, acknowledge it and bear it, to know that we can bear it so that we are not driven by the compulsions which push us to act in uncontrollable ways, in ways which we do not even see as connected to the pain. What we can work toward is an ability to recognize it before we act so that we can control ourselves a bit, so we don't ruin our relationships, so we're not driven to flee when things get messy.

So we are not locked into tragedy. So we are not convinced that our own undoing is fate.

I took a deep breath as I looked out the window, at the sky high above me, and I asked you, Dr. Jacobs, But for me is it the actual pain I am avoiding, or the fear of the pain? When I leave people and places, is it pain? Is it the pain I am leaving, or fear of a pain to come.

Both, you said.

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgements

With deepest appreciation for Hedi El Kholti and Chris Kraus who have been mentors and collaborators for a very long time, and for Colm Tóibín whose thoughtful insight and meticulous attention helped to shape this book. Many thanks to my earliest readers, Eve MacSweeney, Ria Julien, and Charles Dean, who read an early draft and shared their very astute and helpful thoughts with me; and to Karen Braziller and Liz Welch who thoughtfully read in-progress chapters. Penelope Pardo, Tif Sigfrids, Suzanne McClelland, my beloved Pat Steir and Joost Elffers provided their constant support, always. My sister Gabriela Rueda, nieces Michelle and Dani Rueda and brother-in-law Luis had many important and meaningful conversations with me as I was working on this book. My profoundest gratitude goes out to my analyst, Dr. Theodore Jacobs, without whom I would not have written this book.

An earlier version of “An Organizing Memory” was published in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 30, 2024 under the earlier title of the book, *Notes On Disappearing*.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Veronica Gonzalez Peña is a Mexican-born writer and filmmaker. She is the author of *twin time: or how death befell me*, which won the Aztlán Literary Prize, and *The Sad Passions*, a finalist for the Chicano-Latino Book Award. She is also the author of *So Far from God*, a monograph on the Mexican drug war. Her films include *Cordelia*, *Lawrence Weiner: Writing on the Wall*, and *Pat Steir: Artist*, which *ARTnews* named one of the ten best artist documentaries of 2020.

OceanofPDF.com