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Lying in Translation

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LYING
IN
TRANSLATION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by
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ABSTRACT

Lying in Translation is a thesis of creative non-fiction that is a process of self-discovery as I retell my Hispanic grandmother's stories and the life we lived together. Lala is a woman to be feared and loved by all those who encounter her, and the main thread through the work is whether or not I will ultimately decide to embrace her insanity or run screaming from it. Other questions arise, and hopefully, are answered in this book: What does it mean to be half of one thing and half of another? How do immigrants survive in America, in a land and culture so different from their own? Did this difficulty possibly contribute to Lala's craziness and abuse? Were her actions considered abuse if she performed them out of love, thinking them to be helpful and right? Overall I hope in this work to convey what a fascinating character Lala is. I want readers to be repelled by her and delight in her, to see her as clearly as I can, to love her, to become grateful for their own families yet be jealous of the zaniness of mine.

CHAPTER 1: SEX AND THE SINGLE GRANDMOTHER

My first sex lesson was given to me at age five by my grandmother, Lala, who told me this on a bright or cloudy day: “A veces en esta vida, tienes que dejar otros meterle por el culo.” Having just recently become comfortable with the function of my butt, I found it disconcerting to learn that there were other uses. For example, that you literally have to take it up the ass to get what you want sometimes in life, as she informed me was the situation between her and my grandfather and the brand new car he bought her whose horn played my favorite childhood song, “La Cucaracha.”

Lala and I often went to El Club, which was a small dance club for every Ecuadorian living in New Orleans in the early eighties. “La Cucaracha” usually closed off the night, and when it played I would dance like a little brown roach in patent leather shoes scuttling across that slick wooden floor. After Lala told me how she got her car and its smooth-sounding horn she punched at every red light, things changed for me. I didn’t hear the song the same way. And when all those Ecuadorian hips swayed staccato-like to the music, I knew what would happen after the door of El Club swung shut for the night. The wide-hipped women would join with the tight-belted men for who knew why or for reason, only that it was necessary. I remember sitting under a long white table cloth in the corner of the room, my own little tent or coffin, wishing Lala didn’t have to consume every single thing she touched. She didn’t drink alcohol at El Club or anywhere else, but she danced all night in the living room and most definitely, according to her talk, in the bedroom. Her hips shook at El Club more than anyone else’s. She was tireless, and people never tired of looking at her. They

couldn't help themselves, eyes glued to her ass like my abuelo himself had been just before she got her car. I watched her too and pressed my butt hard against the floor. I was scared to dance and scared to someday learn to drive.

I both blame and thank Lala for most of the ways I am. My fear of men, for example, emerged around the time she told me that I would one day have to take it up the butt. Her advice certainly changed the relationship between me and my grandfather. Prior to this memorable day during my fifth year, I used to spend the majority of my nights staring at the bottoms of Abuelo's feet while he watched television. Layer upon layer of dead skin jutted far from the edge of his blue-green recliner. His feet appeared to be perpetually sunburned, and for some reason I was never one to let dead skin rest in peace. Instead of turning around to watch the latest reportaje on Univision, I peeled Abuelo's feet and tried to reach the last layer of white sheets. What I was searching for was a thick, meaty foot, but his skin always began bleeding before I got there.

He always smiled quietly during our ritual and seemed to enjoy it, so I'm sure he was curious about why it suddenly ceased. I don't remember one word he ever spoke to me, so he may have forgotten about the foot-peeling just as easily as he dismissed each night's reportaje with a wave of his hands. But I suspect he didn't, because I remember many of Lala's words. And one night after Abuelo had accumulated a few extra layers, he shuffled to the kitchen to talk to Lala, where she responded by screaming some Spanish insults. Translated, "Don't worry about her! Don't you think she'd like to spend some time with me at night, too! Why does

everything in this world have to be about you? I swear you only care about yourself.”
And so on.

It was true that I wanted to spend time with her, but that usually took place during the day when my mother and grandfather were at work. While other kids were outside riding bikes and jumping rope and nearly falling over from the heat exhaustion induced by these activities, I was learning to form meaningful human relationships through Lala’s telenovelas. The characters on these shows multiplied our circle of friends exponentially. Now instead of waiting around at noon for our family to scuffle tired feet through the door five hours later, we waited for Rosalia to stop Emilio’s wedding in her pink halter top. These friends were beautiful and magical because they still had perfect skin and makeup after kissing one another for a full five minutes or swimming through a river of mud to save their children. And even though they often died and were buried, they somehow managed to rise again.

What amazed me even more than resurrection, though, was that all of these women, no matter how beautiful, were living their lives taking it up the ass. The fact that they could still walk and talk and eat like the rest of us, showed actual human teeth when they smiled, was beyond my comprehension. I saw the repercussions for Lala—sure, she had a car, but she did crazy things sometimes that I couldn’t explain to anyone. Did this universal woman’s plight make all women scream at their men for no real good reason, like Lala often did? Was this who I would become (and what if I didn’t really want a car as part of that crucial exchange)?

After searching the faces of the telenovela beauties for why they’d allow such horrors and finding no resolution, only empty, healthy Colgate smiles, I futilely looked

to my mother, Rosita, for answers. She was so freethinking she once suggested I start calling her by her mother-given name since she liked it so much. At least that's the reason she gave at the time. She was picking me up from daycare on one of the days when Lala was either sick in bed or mad at Mom, so couldn't watch me.

I didn't notice that day that as I ran toward my mother, lunchbox banging and bruising my knees and worth every one of them, that an attractive blue-eyed man was watching her. That she was adjusting her skirt and had her nails in her mouth (a habit I would later struggle to break when I knew a man was watching and couldn't help but make my nail beds bleed). That when I shouted out, "Mommy!" she laughed and petted my head and said, "Yes, I'm going to take you home to her now." Since she took me home with her where I belonged, I didn't fight it. But later she admitted to liking how this man looked at her, as if she were much younger than her thirty years, and how fun it was to just for a moment pretend that she was just my aunt or older sister who wasn't solely responsible for me, a kid who could be dropped off so she could smear on her green eye shadow and go dancing and find a better man than my father, who by the way never once looked at her like that with his stale brown eyes.

I wasn't offended by her honesty, although it was just a couple of years after the event. At this point Rosita was remarried to a man also without the blue she craved in a gaze, and without the merit that I thought was necessary in exchanging rings and moving massive furniture into an already cramped apartment. If only I'd known that day that my mother and I would soon be consumed by an ugly man, if I'd just imagined what this handsome man might provide for us other than a nice face, I might have called her sister. Might have loudly complained, even shed tears, for my real mother.

Rosita, as I now feel more comfortable calling her, if only in writing and not in life, liked to argue with Lala that women have come a long way. In their discussions I wondered where they'd come from, if there were previous forms of torture that surpassed the one currently in place. I fingered my belly-button, unsure of how deep it could go, wished for an outie.

“Women are perfectly liberated to have jobs like mine, working for asshole men.”

“Rosita, no sea tonta. Nada a cambiado, todavia tenemos que casarnos, y Dios y el mundo preferie que sea una vez.”

When they talked, they often stuck to their native language, Rosita long since considering herself a primarily English-speaking American. Sometimes the languages would splice together or interchange, and Mom would slip up with, “Por favor, woman!” and Lala might try eking out a “Pleez, idiota.” One had to be at constant attention just to keep up.

“Yeah, so I got a divorce. But now I get to be a grown, single woman. You always wanted that, and now you don't want me to have it.”

Single. And yet she still wanted eyes on her and for them to come closer so both pairs of eyes wouldn't be single anymore, but a couple. I sided with Lala on this one. Mom should still be married to my father because marriage seemed what naturally happened to people once they got old.

Lala's response? “Yo e vivido cada dia como soltera.” *I've lived every day since I've been married as if I were a single woman.*

As my mom talked on about independence and freedom and other words I wasn't sure the meaning of, and I thought further of body parts I wanted to keep to myself, only Lala knew what she meant by what she said. She'd danced hip to hip with dozens of men while Abuelo sighed into his gin. She'd made every type of Hispano who was worth a damn fall in love with her without even touching them.

But when my grandfather, my Abuelo, started to act as if he were single, he regretted it. He made the mistake of allowing another Hispana fall in love him and then falling in love with her right back. Rosita later told me the whole neighborhood knew about it. At first he would come home just late enough to reheat dinner in the microwave for maybe thirty seconds. Then two minutes. Finally Lala stopped making enough dinner for him, because he only came home for the brown or white liquid that burned his throat, chose the color depending on his mood. Despite her daughter's insistence that the evidence was written not just on his face, but everyone's, Lala assured me she smelled his lies. Smelled them underneath his fingernails and in his sock drawers. Heard them rattling in his head while he slept. Saw it in his eyes that watched her while she worked and played less and less.

So one night she let him come home and stumble into bed without even hissing in his direction. Her nails weren't clawed into the pillow that night. Instead, they gingerly held a hot red pepper she picked from the neighbor's garden. Abuelo went through his routine, removed his important tie and let the stars of love that were in his eyes put him quickly to sleep. Lala hoped he was happy before the moment of supreme heat, before her fierce injection. She hoped his new love was lovely and was worth the

hottest heat of his life. It wasn't. Lala had his children and she had hot peppers. He didn't see the woman again. It just wasn't worth it.

When I got a bit older but still had no idea how absolutely scathed my grandfather was, we all witnessed Lorena Bobbitt's infamy. We learned how she used the kitchen knife to remove what made her husband a man, all because she would not, under any circumstances, take what he wanted to give her. And instead of finding a way to plug herself up, which would have been my first inclination, she plugged him, or unplugged him, as the euphemism would have it.

We sat stunned in the living room. Could a man possibly survive that? In my pragmatism I was just confused about how he'd ever use the bathroom again. Imagine not being able to go to the bathroom, would you get really fat or just explode, I thought as I felt my fourth Coke in the past hour compelling me to go. When I came back I heard the story's clincher, at least in this house, that had Lala in hysterics. She was jumping up and down, hands on her face, red all over. I couldn't tell if the whole room was shaking or if it was just her. She might have been a body throwing itself over a coffin at a funeral or the new contestant running down the aisle on the Price is Right. The closest choice was evident when she finally uncovered her face and her grin, showed the veins in her throbbing neck.

The joke: Lorena was Ecuadorian, just like us. Her gringo Bobbit name came from her maldito, abusive husband. She was Ecuadorian, she was capable of anything, she was just like us (it seemed as if Lala was intentionally emphasizing this point). After this information was revealed, Lala invented a beheading dance. She chopped a banana in half and threw it behind her shoulder. She tapped her feet, she did a samba

solo. On her way back to the kitchen to throw the ruined banana away, she hummed a song I'd never heard before as she skipped.

At this point I wasn't sure whether if she were single, would she be capable of more or less. There was no way of knowing whether having a constant attachment for years was the cause for her skipping this way, this particular hacking of a banana—a single grandmother—or if she were really alone like only poets dare to speak of, was it possible that the same banana would explode with the sheer presence of her, or at least the work of her large foot.

Abuelo sat in his chair, feet still up in their usual position as if this could make him relaxed, and stared at the ceiling. The light made a harsh glare across his glasses and I imagined he may have been trying to blind himself. His feet looked like they could use a good peeling, but something about the glare and Lala's dance and the quiet, calm noises coming from the vicinity of his head made me pretty sure he wouldn't trust anyone to touch any part of him right now.

CHAPTER 2: TRUST IN RED, WHITE OR BLUE CAN KILL YOU

Lala was so mistrusting of Americans that she wouldn't even deign to watch their soap operas. She did indeed watch Bob Barker every morning because he gave unsuspecting contestants the chance to win big money, and nights were well spent with Fred Sanford, a seminal model of her martyrdom. So the entire English-speaking world should not necessarily be denigrated. Although of course, Fred didn't count because his family was from Africa, and Lala was sure the real Redd Foxx bled the colors of that country's flag. I wasn't sure if I should remind her she was talking about a continent as she ranted on about her television viewing justifications one day. But she was ranting, and her own colors were boiling over, so I thought it safer not to. And Bob Barker, she continued, had changed his name for television. He was most certainly Jewish.

But American soap operas were an insult to the telenovela. They all had the same white faces and expressions. Like they just sucked a lemon for sad moments, and as if someone just slapped their asses real fast for surprise shots. I was through with butt talk, wasn't willing to risk where she'd take that image and me right along with it, so again, I nodded my head and settled into the trap-shutting world of privately noncommittal agreement. Not even though the only obvious distinctions between the American and Hispanic soap operatic programming were the channel numbers and characters' skin colors. Not even though, by just having me present, me, her always-willing audience, she had little reason to be unreasonable.

“Ellos no tiene problems real.”

No need for translation: her telenovelas dealt with real possibilities in life, unlike

their blanched counterpart, and therefore had much more to communicate (though they never solved my take-it-up-the-ass quandary, even after repeated viewings). The two most important lessons related to me through these episodes dealt with trust: don't trust dead people and don't trust Americans. If you thought the woman who had been sleeping with your husband actually died in that car explosion, chances are she still visited your kids every day at recess with a brown-bag lunch and met with your husband for drinks after dinner.

The message Lala picked up from fictional programming was that Americans were worse than even the philanderers in these telenovelas and the ones in her life, because they managed to ruin not just families but entire communities with their greed. Every textile or clothing factory that closed down was American owned and shut down for lack of profit or sheer boredom. These American factory owners never appeared in any episode, but that's what made them so frightening. They were like the hunter who killed Bambi's mother, these people who committed such treacherous acts that their faces were too hideous for the screen. She suggested I be scared of what I couldn't see.

Actually, I don't remember any of the telenovela characters complaining about the American's evil deeds, but I do know Lala reiterated it to me several times over. It didn't matter that most of these soap operas were Mexican (a great insult to her if anyone ever presumed it to be her birth country) and my family was from Ecuador. For Lala it was a battle between the Spanish and the English languages, and those who didn't speak her language were out to get her and those she loved most.

My father was an American with an American name so different from my mother's: Roy. His mother was from Sicily, but in Lala's eyes he was a pure gringo who

she would greet with a shaky “Hello” while mumbling “pendejo hijo de su madre, pedazo de mierda” under her breath. Dad let everybody know he was smart, read one-hundred books a year and by the time I was three encouraged me to try the same, but he didn’t know a speck of Spanish or that Lala insulted him through a seductive smile every time they met. During their courtship, Mom says, Dad always told her what a sweet woman she had for a mother. Of course by the time I was born, Dad had tried to convince Mom that not only was Lala the scariest woman he’d ever met, but with all her potions and whimsicalities and general abrasiveness toward most people, she may be a genuine witch.

By the time I remember being able to watch telenovelas, he and my mother were divorced. It’s a wonder that I don’t expect more car explosions and plots to kill evil hospital nurses in my relationships with men, because telenovelas were my primary venue for watching grown couples my parents’ age interact. In my life I’ve never seen the two people who loved me into existence even touch each other. No kissing, not a finger brushing the hair away from the other’s face. Perhaps that sort of thing really was for half-hour episodes and could never be sustained in real days with all those extra hours, but I still imagined sweet gesturing to be true for them at some point before my birth, a time when they did nice things and smiled a lot and speculated who I’d look like more. Whose nose would I inherit, as each pressed down on the other’s affectionately—Rosita on Roy’s straight Rome one or his on hers slightly hooked version.

Unfortunately the women in my family have a propensity for the truth, especially if the situation has absolutely no call for it. So before I could invent a fantastic one, I knew the real story of how Rosita and Roy met.

He first approached my mother under the guise of buying a dress as a Mother’s

Day gift for my Grandma Connie, who at the time was not a grandma and requested that all of her four children please not rush in reproducing, as she'd just gotten over the headache of seeing them grow into adults. She was seemingly more detached from her own kids than the petunias and tomatoes and other bright things she grew in her backyard. When a plant spotted or twisted up into the sky just a bit askew, she just sweated and worked hard with her hands to fix it and smiled the whole time. She didn't smile when any child she had her eyes on would look back at her. Rosita wouldn't know any of this until later, though she said it would've provided a lot of crucial answers at that first meeting.

Rosita and Roy were working at Maison Blanche, she in the woman's department, he in the furniture, and hadn't gotten past requisite Hellos. But now he had a reason to shop around her, to fiddle in her aisles, thanks to this occasion that he'd never before bought more than a card for.

"I'm looking for a gift for my mother. Maybe a dress?"

"Okay, well, what kind of dress?"

"The kind older women play bingo in."

Mom laughed, surely, as she admitted this was the humor she'd soon fall for and then away from fast. "Do you know what size you're looking for?"

Roy stretched his hands apart, then thought again and lowered them. "About the size of a parachute."

The analysis I received from one woman or another who recounted the story: When a man introduces himself through sarcasm, especially when those biting words are in reference to his own mother, he should be wholly avoided. He is unworthy of

consideration.

I never did tell Lala, who I'm sure gave me this analysis, that Rosita's response to his comment compared notes: "The hat that I bought for my mother's head is about that size."

I also came to know the first signs of trouble in their relationship, while they were newly dating and in their separate corners at Maison Blanche, though to Rosita's credit she didn't blame him solely.

Roy and Rosita's first dates were walks to the food court. Women stared and whispered, blinked a lot in a way I've never understood could be seductive. What were they saying? They soon told Rosita.

"When did your brother start working here? He is gorgeous!"

"He's not my brother, he's my boyfriend."

"Oh really? You know, you two look exactly alike. I really thought you were related."

These comments, which became prevalent wherever they went, bothered each of my parents for different reasons. Rosita didn't like how their feelings for each other weren't obvious to the world. That outsiders could imagine him punching her arm in a jocular, aw-shucks manner bothered her. She became jealous of women who would constantly seek her help to get closer to him, so she began grabbing his hand when he wasn't ready and squeezing it too hard and taking their relationship toward a path he hadn't considered yet, and it would quickly affect how each of their eyes would start to look at the other's.

Roy's reaction to the same scenario: "How could they think that we're related?"

It's ridiculous. You're the Spic, not me."

Though I didn't know it at the time, I was thankful that the stories concerning my parents' relationship ended with these. I thank the women who told them to me, and retold them when I requested it, for leaving out the dirty fissures that I only know now because of my attraction to hushed tones. How Roy once nearly threw Rosita out of their speeding car on the highway. That he brought some young girl home to their bed while Rosita worked either a double shift or was attending a night class. That he slapped her around their living room more than once, punched her in the arm and other places in a much more than jocular manner.

I am so thankful because something about how Roy reacted in these situations intrigued me as soon as I heard these stories. He said things that I was sure not everyone would think were funny, but I did. It could have been that any male perspective was curious, since Abuelo, the only other man I knew, was unable to either joke or offend since he rarely spoke. But regardless, I was eager to find out more about Roy on the weekends I spent with him. Though hopefully he wouldn't request that I call him Roy. I tried it with Rosita, but somehow I felt in this case I wouldn't be able to eke out the R.

One of the first things I noticed on these weekends once I started paying closer attention was that Dad would at some point ask me the same question, though he'd cleverly find different ways to phrase it.

"How are your Mom and Lala doing? Haven't drowned, got hit by a car or anything?"

"Has your grandfather gone nuts from all those women around?"

"Are your mother and Lala warping your mind yet?"

Of course the real question was the last one. I could deduce this from the way he looked right at me and held his eyes there for more than a second. He could have stared at me for hours waiting for a reaction, which was unusual for him, because he seemed to be always looking everywhere, missing nothing that ever happened inside any room he'd entered. Intimidated, understanding that he knew much more than I did but not sure what the implications were yet, I always wore a smile and had the same answer ready for each version of his question: "Not yet."

These weekends I was happy to learn about America (at least my father's version) and whether or not it could be trusted, but I still yearned for an occasional fix of the telenovela. But at that house in Gentilly Woods there was to be no mention of Univision or channel 60 whatsoever. It seemed like he hated the sound of that language. The one time he walked in while I was watching my favorite show, the one with orphan girls and the beautiful women who miraculously show up to find them homes, he began making yapping noises. "Yap yap yap, that's all those women do. I've heard that for long enough." After that it was clear that the programming was an annoyance and I was glad to let him have the remote control.

But late at night, when he and Grandma Connie were asleep, I still snuck into the living room with three hours of melodrama trapped inside the little black box that inexplicably sat on top of a larger black box. An old broken Sony television was used as a stand for the smaller working model. I wasn't sure what to make of this, two televisions in one room, and two other working ones in my dad and grandma's bedrooms. At both my mom's house and Lala's, there was one television. I left the question as to whether or not this should be trusted to Lala—it wasn't. Simply thinking it odd, I pressed

the power on the twelve inch screen and hoped the electric hum wasn't loud enough to wake anyone up.

I watched the hours of reruns until the food I'd hunted from the kitchen was gone and the screen flat-lined green and receded into the black of the television. I wondered where exactly that blinding green would go, and if that disappearance was the same thing that happened to the machine that kept sick people alive when they finally died, if it went from a small green line to just nothing at all. People died a lot in the telenovelas just like they did in Dad's books, or so he liked to talk about, and I pondered the fate of these people after so many episodes and paragraphs. With so many new characters to replace the old ones, how could anyone keep up with the ones that were gone past the green line? I licked my fingers clean while thinking about it and went to bed.

During the day I studied my dad's television habits and how he would multitask by reading a book at the same time. He'd been watching the screen along with me and then be lost somewhere in his lap, all eyelids. Yet he was still able to say the most unexpected thing at the unexpected moment, using language in a way I'd never heard before.

Basketball games: "Look at that guy. His fingers are like bananas around an orange."

Hockey: "Fuck that puck up! Isn't that what you get paid for?"

Football: "Now they're dancing. They don't charge, don't fight forward. They might as well be wearing flags on their belts."

He didn't even have to think of these things before he said them! They just came out, and he didn't even seem pleased about it as I was sure I would've when saying it.

He just drank a beer and let something else wonderful spill out. He had a language that wasn't coming from any place I could see on the screen, had a funny way of naming things that TV people didn't. The man could've been President he spoke so well and so right.

Telenovelas rarely made me laugh, and I wondered if he was getting this great stuff from the books he'd read. Before this I'd always thought of the books on his shelves as decorations, which I know as an adult are their function in most suburban homes I've seen. But now they seemed like a phenomenon worthy of investigation. The way he looked up after having his eyes on the page was a different look from when he'd just finished gaping at the television screen. It was a look I wasn't sure could be trusted, because I'd never seen it before.

That's what Lala would say about it—don't trust what you don't know. Yet there was a time, I was certain, somewhere on my way from the delivery room to the bed with my name on it—Brooke, not Lala's vote, Emilia—perhaps even before my eyes stopped crying or made my first print on a page with my soft foot bottom, when I had never heard the Spanish language spoken before either.

CHAPTER 3: A NATURAL BRUNETTE

The Spanish language is the language of lovers. It is the richest and most romantic of all the Romance languages. Because you speak and feel the beautiful words you say, and since you speak Spanish you can't help but feel all words in your bones and your blood, you will be beautiful too and a good lover and men will love that in you. Your hands won't be able to help but move more amorously over their bodies and your black hair will sway better than others' hair and you will be, and already are, a goddess, and this is a blessing and a curse so beware of the daggers that love and this language throws, and occasionally the sweetly—tipped, sweat—softened arrows.

These promises, threats, and spells are all various incarnations of possibly the first poetry I ever encountered in my life. Lala had my fate mapped out for me and recited it when she was in high or low spirits or there was nothing of interest on television. My fate would be equal to hers. A beautiful, tortured woman whose only sin was the need to feel and experience too much. But of course I heard it before I was ready—I may have just started school—so was immediately suspicious of it. My hands were pragmatic; they grabbed things like food and crayons. They didn't ambiguously *move* over anything, much less anyone. I hated seeing my blood, when I fell and scraped myself and saw it I cried, so I had no urge to feel it at all, especially if I were trying to do something so simple as to talk.

But the goddess issue troubled me sincerely. In fairy tales, goddesses were always blonde and fair, hence the word fairy, I thought. Dark skin and hair were equal to meanness, to villainous deeds. A blonde witch? Never. The blonde was part of the

pretty, innocent disguise the witch wore just before she poisoned her prey and ripped off the mask to reveal a spider web of black hair. My hair was so black that in some lights, it looked blue. That seemed to traverse the term evil into some sort of demonic realm. I didn't know what I was capable of yet since I hadn't been tested, but I was sure the plateau of goddess was unattainable.

I came up with two possibilities of why Lala would tell me I was, or was going to someday be, a goddess: her ideas of beauty were seriously skewed or she was a liar. Looking in the mirror I saw teeth grown in way too big, a nose taking up more space than it should, general largeness, a small-child frumpiness. This was quite possibly a game she was playing with me, like when she'd take me to the supermarket and tell strangers to look at her charming daughter. Or she may have been trying to will me into beauty.

I decided to try to help her along a bit. There was nothing I could do about my face. Things were in the place they were meant to be, and no pulling, tugging, pinching, twisting was going to change it. After so much time staring at my face and analyzing what was wrong with it, I couldn't discern the difference between my eyes and anyone else's. In this respect I acquiesced, but I wanted Lala's goddess prophecy to come to fruition, if more for her sake than mine. So I started in on the hair, my biggest blackness.

The entire process of going from dark to slightly less dark then dark again took several exhausting weeks. Using sunshine yellow crayons wouldn't work. The nubs of the crayon got smaller, but I couldn't figure out where the color went. I hoped that night when I went to sleep that I'd wake up with the tips I'd colored suddenly and miraculously yellow, the closest I could get to blonde. Lemons combined with actual sunlight had the odd effect of making my hair only slightly redder. I tried washing my hair with extra-

strength Lava soap, which only served in pulling out tennis ball sized chunks of hair, the soap made it so tangled.

Then I overheard my mom talking to a friend on the phone, saying how she used to peroxide her hair, and how she was so glad to be dark again, and how blondes really didn't have more fun, and how she was ready to dance tonight and hoped this new pink skirt worked. I wasn't sure what her skirt was supposed to do and didn't care. I was off to find the peroxide, the stuff that used to burn and heal my knees when skinned them and now would turn me into a blonde.

Standing in front of the bathroom mirror, a place I'd lately become very familiar with, I grabbed a fistful of hair and poured the clear liquid onto the tips. The result was just wetness, like water, and an odor that smelled like I'd just hurt myself. I sat on the toilet, bottle in hand. I waited, poured more onto the same wet spot.

At this moment Lala walked in. Closed doors never stopped her, and locked doors only slowed her down. Here she swiftly grabbed the bottle from my hand, read the label (but wasn't the writing in English?), and poured the remaining smelliness down the drain. After she slapped my knuckles and told me never to destroy myself again, she sat me back on the toilet to cut off the hair I'd ruined. She told me a story about how stupid she'd once been as well, not having been as proud as she could possibly be as a natural brunette.

When she first moved from Ecuador, she said between snips, a few of the new friends she made in the neighborhood thought it might be fun to become redheads. They each bought two boxes of dye to really let the color sink deep into their dark roots. But of course there was some dye left over—there was a lot in each box—so they looked

downward for a place to color.

There it was, more hair. A way to look more natural in their artifice. Sitting around in a circle with handheld mirrors in place for better viewing, tools I later suspected she'd bought preemptively for exactly this purpose, they started coloring.

Only Hispanic women get carried away in their determination. They left the color on too long. They rinsed and were horrified.

They were fire red. Clown-nose red. A Lucille Ball caricature. If they stood next to Lucille Ball in a crowd, every person who would walk by would indefinitely turn to them and say, "Boy, is *your* hair red!" There was nothing beautiful or natural about it. They were the color of crayons (my face flushed at this). There was no doubt about it, they'd have to wait the two days and dye their hair dark again. As for the hair down there, they'd shave it. They'd have to pull out their handhelds and go to work again.

Just as she said "rasurarnos," the Spanish word for shaving, she gave my hair its last snip. Three inches gone, and I wasn't sure if it was because of these inches I'd known my entire life or her scary story or the thought of unwanted hair in unwanted places or the real truth—that I wasn't going to be the goddess I'd planned on—but I was crying.

After telling her story and seeing my tears, she thought it prudent that we pray to the blessed Virgin Mary, or as she liked to call her, Mary.

"Mirala, estudiala," she said. "Es una mujer bella."

Not study Mary for her devotion, virginity, other virtues that made the word blessed a permanent part of her appellation. No, the important thing about Mary was that she was a natural brunette. There was something about Mary's skin, the shape of her

eyes as they were portrayed in pictures, that compelled Lala to find different renderings and hang them on her walls to compare which was the most striking.

This isn't to say that Mary's other attributes were of no consequence to Lala. When I grew closer to teenage years, Lala made a point of continuously focusing on the blessed virginity, as if by her just pointing at the picture again, she would undo all the sex talking and teaching she'd done. But the first time I remember truly looking at and thinking about Mary, it was because Lala was pointing out her beauty. Just after the story about undoing the color from her fire-red vagina.

It wasn't surprising that Lala would worship a face, as she obviously worshiped anything beautiful. Obsession, some might call it. Maybe a faith. Though she was raised Catholic, the religion with arguably the most striking architecture of any Christian denomination, she didn't see any need to attend church regularly like good Catholics were supposed to. That was all about the money, she said. It was a sin, un pecado.

In her earlier days before shopping for Mary frames, Lala shopped for ones to fill her own face with. When she was younger, she may just have jumped in front of every camera she came across. There is a recording of all the faces she was capable of making. Even when she was trying to be ugly, she was still the most gorgeous woman in any group. I found it strange that there weren't as many pictures of her children, her family, and that the faces surrounding her were as foreign to me as that formerly thin figure of hers, those perpetually happy eyes. She could verify both her former beauty and happiness as fact.

"When I was young," she would say, "I was the thinnest, most gorgeous woman you'd ever want to meet." Her fourteen-year-old boyish frame now gone after birthing

four children, who she was fond of telling everyone, could have easily killed her, she had a kangaroo-pouch lower abdomen that she tried to hide from the world with her underwear. Each time we left the house, she wore tight, throw rug-sized rubber bands that were supposed to pass for regular drawers. So if we went to the supermarket and I tried to hug her hips, I slipped and slid right off of her. I learned from this and my own hair venture that the quest for beauty was dangerous.

But even after everything, she was still gorgeous. Even with the orange makeup that sometimes rubbed off onto her shirt, looked like she spilled her juice. Even though she left her lips on everyone she touched. Even though she had to work a little harder at it now.

Her blind (or as it were, intensely visual) faith didn't just stop with actual religious icons or with herself. She looked to the walls around her room for other images that inspired her. After Selena Quintanilla-Perez, the Latin-American pop star icon, was gunned down by her longtime friend and business partner, Yolanda Saldivar, Lala built a memorial in the young martyr's honor. An entire ten-foot wall of her bedroom was reserved for lit candles, folded-up newspaper and magazine articles detailing the final bloody encounter, and Her—Selena with a bouquet of roses in her hand, her black hair draped across both small shoulders, head tilted and holding a serene smile, the way young people should pose if they want to leave a lasting legacy when they die, as Lala sobbed intermittently, “antes de su tiempo.” Before her time.

By this time a teenager, I was insulted that the pictures of me and my sisters sat on shelves in wallet-sized, dusty frames while Selena was enshrined. But by that time I

no longer concerned myself with the beautiful. I hung posters of Woody Allen and Bob Dylan on my walls, heroic men who, for me, made things possible that beautiful women couldn't. When they spoke or sang, they made sense in a way I'd never heard. I'd see many lovely faces and none of them ever made sense to me. The physically perfect instill me more with fear. Were they boring because they never needed to rely on anything else, or was I just jealous? Regardless, I'd found some different faces to look at.

When Lala first walked into my room and saw this display, she shielded her head with her arms as if these small men in print were about to attack. "Que es esto? Son horrible!" Why did I surround myself by ugly, wrinkled old men? she demanded to know. Why didn't I immerse myself in the beautiful people? I tried to explain to her that I did, that these men's works were universal symbols of beauty and failure and misery and celebration, and that I could learn about my own life through the things they've created. They gave me more to think about than just a face that no matter how hard I tried, I could never hope to emulate or compare. To which she replied, "Oh come on, just look at them. They're hideous!"

The impulse to side with the popular and beautiful is so cross-cultural that I saw it played out in my bedroom one day, in a mini-drama between my grandmother and Bridgette, a friend from school. Neither could speak each other's language, but to them, ugly is as ugly does, and they were enacting their shared belief system with a black Magic Marker on my print from a Dylan concert. They created for him a handlebar mustache, which oddly enough made him look like the Mexican Zorro, and not a bad-looking one at that.

Their justification for this treachery was that Lala wanted to replace it with a poster of Ricky Martin she'd gotten for me, whose sole purpose for a spot on my wall was to be the inspiration for libido and sexual position jokes—Lala would tell them to me in Spanish, I would then translate to my friends, and everyone would giggle about what a horny old woman I had for a grandmother and what good taste she had. For them, the beauty of the man you were with (or wished to be with) mirrored your own beauty. You were on one side of the attractiveness barometer or the other. Sort of like you are what you eat, which I've also thought of as a useless and confusing dictum. Am I this piece of bread? Yesterday morning's orange juice? Regardless, according to their theory, I was one ugly girl.

Eventually I went to a concert and replaced the mutilated poster. Over the years I accumulated more of the not so overtly beautiful and kept my originals hung in their spots. When I moved away to college, white rectangular spots like stamps showed where their faces had been. I'm sure that's what it looks like under Selena's face in Lala's apartment, but I wouldn't know. She's still hung up there, naturally dark, still beautiful, still smiling.

I thought briefly of stealing her from the wall and defacing her. Draw some bunny ears, black out the teeth. Hang her back up where she's been, make this the funniest martyr shrine ever. But perhaps something about a face like that is transcendent, because when I approached her with my malevolent crime in mind, I instantly turned away and regretted even thinking it. I had too little heart, or too much.

The only picture I have of Lala is of the thirty-year-old her, when she was thin,

when according to her, she “wasn’t the way I am now.” This is not the picture of the woman I knew her to be. Here her nose hasn’t drooped yet from weariness, it points straight at you like mine does. Her lips are upturned a geometric five degrees in what I expect is a smile. In our history she’s laughed a lot and cried, but never set her face into a portrait I would call serene. Except for this picture. I wonder what’s happened to her by the time it was taken. Had she shaved herself, had she plugged up Abuelo? Is she thinking Spanish thoughts, I wonder, or has she learned to curse her fate in muddled English yet? Most of all I speculate whether she still believed in her beauty here, and that it came from more than her face. She may have never known that.

Thirty-something Lala, the ultimate beauty, sits in a room with Dylan, Allen, and the backs of book covers with other men who have better words and things to say than faces might suggest. They stay where they are, say nothing aloud. I come and go and live my life and pick them up every once in a while and put them down and am happy. They just look at me and look at me.

CHAPTER 4: LYING IN TRANSLATION

One thing I pride myself on is my ability to leave the house without any preparation. Sometimes, sure, I manicure and apply makeup and earrings and other trimmings that some would call trappings of patriarchal society. Sometimes trappings feel nice.

But I don't find them essential. A friend calls for lunch and I embarrassingly have just woken up, I brush my teeth and go, or just go. I don't shudder if I've forgotten my perfume.

Perhaps this is because when I was a young child, it took hours before Lala and I could leave and have our adventures. She had artillery to work with. There were solids and liquids, powders and gels, there were red paints and black paints and eye tools and lip tools, brushes' dead bristles and brushes with straight, hard ones. This gear accumulated over the years and at some point I got my own section in her box—mascara containing little flea-like clumps, lipstick so worn that the metal casing scraped my lips with each stroke. But I didn't use the stuff much anyway. It was just there so I could please Lala when she got bored some nights. I was her canvas.

The only makeup that bothered me was her orange liquid face makeup that made her look like a pumpkin. Some people call this foundation, or a base, but I think pumpkin skin is more appropriate.

Women make this mistake all the time, smear this thick liquid covering all over their face down to their jaw lines and stop right there. It's a mask. It seems they don't want others to see when they blush or go pale, feel their face might give away too much

of themselves. Women are free to do this. They can be coy or shy and hide under whatever color they choose their skin to be for that day.

But when I was a child I felt like Lala could never hide anything from the world, like she was proud of everything she had to offer and would never want to cover it up. So this mask offended me, so much so that at some point in the day I would pinch Lala's cheeks and rub them briskly under an affectionate, loving guise, just so I could wipe off some of the gook. Plus it took a damn long time to apply just to look like a pumpkin.

Once Lala finished getting ready and we were finally able to leave the house, my gratitude for the exit quickly turned to uneasiness about the entire endeavor and I often suggested we just stay home and play Chinese Checkers. I didn't mind running Lala around almost every day; it was a task that made me feel responsible. And I enjoyed how proud she was to drive us around town in the car she worked so hard for. I liked punching the steering wheel and hearing "La Cucaracha" and dancing to it. But sometimes, once we got to our destinations, the trip felt like a job. I had duties to meet and things to look out for.

My responsibilities were as translator and lookout. In the supermarket she wanted to ask the food stocker why the price of canned corn had gone up from twenty-five cents to thirty in just one week. Whatever teenage employee happened to be stocking that day would look down at me, then to her, then me again, and laugh. Prices change, they said, and there was nothing they could do about it. They may not even have explained this much to me, a little girl, for fear that I might understand basic economics even less than my Spanish-speaking abuela. Their laughing recycled itself, the dozens of sets of white-to-yellowed teeth, as if we were a generational comedy troupe sweeping grocery stores

across the country in hopes of entertaining youthful employees with our disregard for red-sticker prices.

This is the reaction I remember when I relayed Lala's messages truthfully. Sometimes I lied. Sometimes I didn't feel like haggling, so if Lala wanted me to ask the guy on aisle three if she could pay Sunday's sale price on Tuesday, I just told the employee that my grandma said she liked his shoes. He would smile or shrug his shoulders and give a two word response, which I translated to Lala, "He can't do it. His boss says no." Lala's replies worked well for her, because no matter what atrocities she said to an American—"Maldito maricon" or "Indecente putona"—she said them with a smile. Teenage boys never knew she called their manhood into question right in front of their faces, and the girls would've been surprised to know that the sweet Spanish lady thought them ill-bred whores. I noted that she had specialized remarks for the lighter skinned folks we encountered. They were "rubias ignorantes" or "ceros simples," as if being a simple person were the worst thing one could be, a pecado. She often commented as we stood before the light eyes she was speaking of: "Don't trust them. That blue's so shallow you can swim in it. They're so light you can see right through them."

She spent more than a decade perfecting this skill with every boy, girl, and teacher that Lala's children brought home from school. If they told her "Hi" she was disgusted, but would parrot back "High-eee" with batting eyes. (The English language was so simple-sounding, she'd say, even birds feel compelled to try it out. She taught our bird to say Holy Shit and Motherfucker, two phrases in English she wasn't opposed to saying. When she got in the mood, she encouraged me to chime in and show off my

second tongue, and on our way to the store in the Cucaracha car we'd crane our necks out the window to bawl our own rendition of Motherfucker motherfucker, la la la la la!)

Once Lala's children were grown, they still faced this embarrassment with every man and woman they brought home to meet madre. They smiled, she smiled, and she shot venom with her tongue.

My job as a lookout was particularly uncomfortable because I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking out for. It seemed wrong that Lala put things in her purse without paying at the counter, especially since she turned her small tree stump of a neck every few seconds if she thought she heard footsteps coming down the slick aisles. But her purse stuffing was so frequent that I thought of it as more frowned-upon than illegal. I guess this is because the first time it happened, she made it seem so natural, like good people did it all the time.

During our first lookout, we were in a TG&Y, a close-to-dollar store in our New Orleans neighborhood. I wanted a Smurf doll, a Smurfette carrying a bouquet of flowers in her hands. Lala inspected it to make sure it was worth a week of affection, and noting the price tag had fallen off Smurfette's body, decided it was free.

She listed several reasons why she was going to put this in her purse and walk out of the store. One: no price tag (if it peeled off easily with her one-inch fingernails, that meant no price tag). So if we brought it up to the counter they wouldn't know how much to charge us. Therefore they would overcharge us, in which case they would be stealing money from a small hard-working family. Two: this store makes thousands of dollars every day, so they won't miss much in a loss of three dollars that a small hard-working family could use to buy milk and bread. Besides, American companies make so much

money that we're really just trying to even the score. Three: I had to realize some things in life can be free, but that I had to work to get them for free. In this case, I had to work as a lookout. Once my work was done, I'd collect my earnings, today, a palm-sized rubber doll that now sits at the bottom of my sister's toy box. Smurfette is blind from old age and the tacks I stuck in her eyes. But that day long ago, I clutched onto Lala's purse and sensed the joy from feeling Smurfette inside. As we walked out of the store, Lala waved kindly to the woman working behind the register and told her, "Te veo mas tarde, idiota." Lala always kept her promises, and she did indeed return for more.

I was primarily raised by a television and a madwoman with a low attention span, so at this point my own mind wanders to one of my favorite movies, *Annie Hall*. Roy instilled in me an appreciation for Jewish wit, which was quicker than ours. Though he screened this movie and others for me and taught me places where to laugh, he still tried to match wits by making fun of the movie. He scoffed and whined about Woody Allen's whines.

He laughed hardest in *Annie Hall* when the main character, Alvy, recalls the many ridiculous fights his parents used to have. This particular argument is over their cleaning lady, who they've recently discovered is stealing money and jewels from them. The maid is, not surprising for the time period this scene is set, a black woman.

Alvy's mother: "We've got to let her go. She's stealing from us!"

Alvy's father: "Leave it alone. The colored have enough trouble as it is."

"Yes, but it's our stuff. We work for it!"

"She's a black woman from Harlem! Who's she gonna steal from if not from

us?”

The reflexivity on the part of Alvy’s father always confounded me. He had more than he needed, and was willing to have it stolen from him, as long as the thief really was less fortunate. He was a minority too, a more privileged one in this case, and he could empathize with another. After all, his words seemed to imply, that’s what we’re here for.

Lala felt herself like that black cleaning lady when we went to K-mart or TG&Y any place that surely didn’t have the American capitalistic gall to tell an old lady not to take what she rightfully deserves.

Early one morning in the midst of watching Bob Barker and a flower pot-sized bowl of Cheerios with chocolate milk. A shadow moved slowly across the living room window and I got so scared I barely noticed the milk dripping down my chin onto my new nightgown. I asked Lala what that was. I had a feeling someone was going to get hurt.

“Es el hombre que corta le llerba. Calmete, no te preocupes.”

I couldn’t help but worry. The man wasn’t pushing a lawnmower, like she said he was supposed to, and I wasn’t able to see his eyes to judge him completely accurately like I’d been taught, plus something about his measured movements suggested he was not here to work. And Lala usually mowed the grass herself, she liked the workout, so I was confused about why she would hire someone else.

The man from Boise on TV spun the wheel and won fifty dollars. Bob Barker patted him on the back, sent him to the next round. Again a shadow moved across the window, this time in the other direction. The shape of a long thin rod grew larger until it

appeared to be on top of me and not across the room at the window. The big stick made a sharp scraping sound. Someone in our television spun another wheel and there were cheers and the cereal and milk were on the floor and I didn't even care that I lost my breakfast and I screamed to Lala in the kitchen, "Mami Lala, vea la ventana! Es el hombre!"

Here the sun intervened, shined into the living room and blocked my view of what was going on. Lala had a long thin rod herself. It was a broom, and she was smashing it against this man's head. He was trying to block her with his arms and was actually pleading, in what sounded like a little boy's voice, to stop hurting him. I thought I heard a distinct, "You wouldn't open the door for me!" but I couldn't be sure.

Lala had him by one long arm and she wasn't letting go. Every beating she'd ever received and maybe the few that he'd missed out on was transferred onto him during that thirty seconds at Lala's window. By the time he was off and running away without the car-door opener he'd been prying with or even his lawnmower, the wheel on the television had stopped spinning. The hour of Lala's hated American soap operas had begun.

As his quick footsteps receded into the hot day, Lala screamed after him, blended and spewed back out every profanity I'd ever heard her say. She managed to scare me more than I already was. Her speech was, for the most part, nonsensical, but if her words were rearranged in the correct order they would go something like this:

"How dare you, dirty black man, miserable son a bitch. I hire you, give you a job, and this is how you repay me? You are a lowlife and all your people will always be lowlives. You don't deserve to live, trying to steal from me the way you do." After she

ran out of words, she went into one of her chronic fainting spells I'd notice were a pattern not so much when she was in fear of something, but when she'd been insulted. I hurried to the kitchen to retrieve two wet rags—one for her head and one for my spilt cereal so I could wipe up before it stained the carpet.

I didn't understand this at all. I couldn't imagine what the employees at all the stores Lala had stolen from would do if they'd caught her. It wasn't something we ever considered as we stole. Would they feel woozy and weak and have to sit on the dirty floor of aisle nine because someone stole a tube of lipstick or a keychain under their supervision?

Lala miraculously recovered once I changed the channel to her favorite telenovela, "Dos Mujeres, Un Camino." She forgot about the incident so completely that I was the one who told Mom about it when she came to pick me up later that day. I was just grateful that Lala's speech was so muddled during her histrionics that no one, not even her, was exactly sure of what she said. And that it was in a language the man didn't understand. Now that I'd had time to think more about the incident, I remember she'd used the Spanish version of the n-word that every grownup I'd ever met had forbidden me from saying before I knew what it meant. The more I thought about it, I actually felt sorry for the guy.

CHAPTER 5: DOUBLE SPEAKING

Speaking Spanish was one part of being Hispanic that I was least ashamed of. It was embarrassing, sure, if we Lala and I were in the mall and she stared at an obese woman and said loudly in Spanish, “How does she even leave her house? How gross!” and was confused by my mortification. “She’s a gringa, you know,” she’d say. “She can’t understand us.”

But strangers have thought the same of me. Not long ago in a coffee shop, a Hispanic couple sitting right next to me was speaking in Spanish about the affair they were having. I didn’t want to overhear, but they sat so close and I wasn’t in the mood to do the work I’d earlier set myself to completing. They got explicit—the woman loved the king-sized bed at the man’s house, said it was about time he got some use out of it. He loved her legs, how the insides were so soft and warm all the time, and he asked her if it was okay if he touched them right now, under the table, since no one was looking.

At this point I had to look. Not under the table, but at their faces. I wanted to see the look of two people who wanted each other so badly that they couldn’t suppress it even in a coffee shop, with the loud whirl of the machines and the pretentious repartee surrounding them. Words like “nineteenth-century British imperialism” and “Thomas Pynchon” were not sexy, yet these two felt sex, still had to touch. So I looked up to see what that face looked like. And the woman caught me. In the same pitch she’d been speaking in, she said, “I wish that dumb bitch wouldn’t look at us. Does she want you or something? Do you know her or what?” She obviously didn’t know that I understood; she looked directly at me when she said these words, and yes, gave me a considerable,

very Lala-like fake smile as she spoke. I thought it prudent not to correct her. I wondered how many people never corrected Lala.

Later, on my way out to the car, I laughed to myself about how ignorant it is to assume (and how often I'm guilty of it) and also how nice it was to be considered a threat to someone for no real reason. But something else nagged at me. The work I'd tried and failed to get done at the coffee shop concerned my father. I wanted to write about Roy, an often difficult subject and difficult man, but was interrupted by the couple and then my thoughts of them.

Thinking about these two subjects together allowed me to recede back into my memory when nothing had worked just minutes ago. When I was a child, I often put Roy in the position that Lala placed people all the time, a place I thought to be very rude.

Of course I wasn't talking about my dad in Spanish right in front of him. But visiting on weekends was two whole days at a time, and at some point during those forty-eight hours Lala would call with one thing or another to report. The dog shit yellow today. Abuelo missed me, though of course he didn't say so. I was missing a great Saturday night game show that night, Sabado Gigante, because a midget who blows fire from his nose would be the featured guest. So I'd respond to her, naturally in Spanish: was the dog okay, how were Abuelo's feet, really, can midgets *do* that?

Roy would sigh very loudly until I got off the phone. Or turn up the television volume so loud that the voices coming from it echoed and were hard to understand. In essence, he would throw a tantrum. At the time I took this for a bad mood, as it wasn't unusual coming from him. But this is what it really was: he wanted to know what we were saying. He wanted a second language too.

His mother, Grandma Connie, came from Sicily as a child and soon after dropped her language and her culture. Her parents wanted her to fare well in a new world, so they told her she was an American child now, and logically she grew to be a solely American adult. Aside from cooking an excellent lasagna and speaking in loud, exaggerated tones, she had no connection to anything Italian. She had children, one being Roy, who had Italian looks, olive skin, dark hair and severe brow, but no knowledge of what any of it meant. And more importantly, no language.

Grandma Connie succeeded in committing Italian-language suicide, and of all her children, Roy especially felt the loss. He prided himself on knowing things, things that would impress other people or just himself or keep a conversation going at a party. In college he took two years of Latin so he could pick of the idiosyncrasy of conjugating the verbs of the dead language whenever he was nervous. But he still couldn't actually speak it, as that was almost impossible. Even if he could, who could he communicate with?

In Spanish one could communicate. More people in the world communicate in this language than almost any other. The two Spanish-speaking people that afflicted Roy—Rosita and Lala—spoke the language vigorously and perpetually. And now I suspect he hated it. These women from the mountains of Ecuador, who were born on dirt tables and floors, knew something he never would.

Shortly after I was born and ready to start saying very important things, or at least, things, Grandma Connie and Roy tried to commit homicide on my nascent Spanish language. When they overheard Mom or Lala speak to me in Spanish, encouraging me to repeat the Spanish words they said, Connie and Roy discouraged it.

“She’ll get confused.”

“A kid can’t discern the difference between two languages. She’ll mix them up.”

“She’ll sound stupid.”

“She needs to get a strong base in English first.”

“Maricones, vallaten a la miedra!” Lala never hesitated to tell anyone to go to shit, especially if it was a matter of how I was going to be raised. Just because I didn’t technically come from her vagina, she liked to say, didn’t mean I wasn’t born with a piece of her heart in my mouth. Translation: Rosita was my mother but Lala was too. She was going to raise me according to her standards and no one else’s.

The irony here is that most educated team in this argument—my dad’s side—was wrong, as we all now know. Studies have proven that any language children learn in these formative first years will permanently become a natural part of their makeup. If I’d started learning Spanish, say, in grammar school as my father suggested, it would be completely erased from me by now.

Though I think my Spanish language has been brushed aside a bit, maybe partially erased. Recently an Hispanic telemarketer called. I don’t know what list I was on or why, but she sincerely wanted to talk to me about something. Momentarily I thought this might be a trick Lala was playing on me, using one of her friends to call me and ask how I was doing and why I was killing my own grandmother by not calling her every single day and talking for at least two full hours.

But she spoke so fast. I could only tell what type of statement she was making—statement, question, unreasonably vehement exclamation—by the inflection of her voice. After a couple of minutes of struggling with each other, she finally gave up and asked me in perfect English, “Hey, you got a Spanish person who lives there or what? You don’t

understand nothing I say, you must not speak Spanish.” It was strange. When the regularly obnoxious English-speaking telemarketers used to call, I would use the “no hablo ingles” trick as tactful means of getting off the line. Now I wondered how long it had been since I’d done that, or if I’d even be able to fake like the Spanish language was one I actually knew.

These past few years, as I speak Spanish less and less frequently, I find that the times when I am called upon to do so, in an academic setting or for a joke at a party, that it is someone else, someone foreign I’ve never met before, doing the talking. Another voice comes from my mouth, saying words in a technically correct but awkward way, feels like wearing a suit you wore frequently in the past, and putting it on years later to find that it fits too tight.

Perhaps for all these reasons, I was a child who loved being able to speak two languages. I might have stored somewhere the inherent knowledge that one of them was almost taken from me and so I cherished them both, and used them as often as I could.

But a problem I encountered once I started school was that Lala—my constant companion—refused to learn my other language. I spoke English fluently before kindergarten, but I never had the opportunity to use it as often as I did Spanish. Once I started school and brought home books as evidence of which language I’d rather speak, Lala wasted no time in trying to bring me back to her side. After a weekend of me and Mom and Dr. Seuss’s story about the greatest cat who ever lived, Lala had had enough. I came home later that week to three personalized Spanish children’s books: *Brooke encontra a Snow White*, *Brooke encontra a Sesame Street*, and *Brooke encontra a Peter*

Pan. Suddenly, in Spanish, I had met my favorite cartoon characters and could read about our adventures together. I had no idea then that a company pre-wrote these books and inserted the book-buyer's name of choice upon purchase. Believing Lala herself had written and published these stories just for me, I thought her more genius than ever.

Much to her surprise, Lala's genius didn't stop me from wanting to read and learn in the English language. I loved my first-grade teachers. I talked about them when I got home from school, and I pored over their assignments with fervor. Lala questioned this excitement about learning from a bunch of gringos on more than one afternoon.

“Why do you have to read all those books?”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“For school.”

“You don't need school.”

“I want to learn.”

“You learn better at home. I didn't learn anything in school or by reading books. I learned by going out and living. What are you going to do, stay stuck inside a book forever?”

Lala couldn't understand a child who liked school. She had gone to a boarding school led by nuns who beat her with broom handles when she spoke out of turn. Strict moral codes were emphasized over academics, so in her nine years there she learned that kissing leads a sinner straight to hell. The most lasting impression she received from the place was a scar on her side, recalling a fork the nun jabbed her with at the dining table one evening. The details of the why were undisclosed, but the what was certain: school

hurts. For Lala it was a scary undertaking that no child should have to endure, especially one under her loving care.

Certain that my national blue-ribbon school was the same as her all-girls boarding school in its treachery, she tried to convince me that every bruise and cut on my chubby legs was another mistreatment by my teachers and peers who hated me. I tried to convince her of the truth: that I was clumsy and fell a lot when I played with my friends.

One might think that living in New Orleans made it easy to be a minority, that it was easy to make friends of any color. The city has one of the largest black populations in the country and indeed I had several black friends. But there was something about being brown. People couldn't place me. Once, standing in the lunch line, a blonde who I'd like to think has since become the butt of a lot of jokes asked my black friend Adrienne what the deal with my skin was. "You're black, and I'm white, but what is she?"

Adrienne shrugged her shoulders; she had legitimate problems of her own. I answered without even thinking about it, "I'm tan." I was sure that she and the other kids would have a problem with it, though they did appreciate me teaching them that "hijo de puta" meant son of a bitch, and that if they hurt themselves, "miedra" worked just as well as shit but didn't get them in trouble with the teacher. No one ever asked me why I knew these words, because just knowing something that they didn't made me cool, like being the first kid to introduce Pig Latin or Gibberish into the classroom. At this point I was using my other language for the first time not as a method of communication, but as a parlor trick. If I could have brought a non-tangible object to Show and Tell, it would've been my favorite Spanish words. Just like my father, I began valuing knowledge of

inconsequential things that other people didn't know.

But I was still scared every second I pushed Emery on the swings or hit Chris's pitched ball that I would be found out as really knowing and really being something they didn't know. I was sure that when they discovered why my skin stayed tan even in January they would see I was as untrustworthy and weird as Lala thought they and all gringos were.

One afternoon, I fell sick and had to be picked up. Rosita was at work and anyone might guess who was listed as the emergency number. The thought of Lala having to come get me may have actually worsened my condition. I was going to be outed. I was going to have to bring to the next Show and Tell all of the items from my home related to Hispanic culture. I was really going to be on display, an idea I always thought to be novel until it actually became a possibility.

Lala rushed into the classroom and I rushed from the corner palette I was lying on to walk her out the door. Lala yanked my hand back, taking this opportunity to tell all of my classmates and my teacher exactly what she thought of all of them in a loud voice unnatural on anyone but her.

“Brooke odia esta escuela. Ella prefiere quedarse con migo en mi casa. No le esenas nada aqui, solo a jugar con un poco tontos como ustedes.”

Mrs. Brown had no idea Lala just told her I thought both school and her teaching were retarded, and how I'd much rather be at home with Lala than wasting my days in this classroom. Mrs. Brown smiled her sweet sixty-year-old smile and waited for me to explain to her what my concerned grandma had to say. I blushed and said my grandmother was impressed with the classroom decorations and hoped she could come

back soon, under better circumstances, of course. As we left the building, Lala spoke of how she was going to cure me and we'd be finding fun games to play in no time. I nodded as she spoke but stayed silent; I had nothing to say to her.

This wasn't the first time I'd turned red as a result of having to lie in translation, but it was the first time I balled up my fists and nearly punched Lala because of what she said.

CHAPTER 6: FORCES OF MATURE

The first and last time I actually punched Lala came later that year. She and I had always been our own gang within the family, but it had never actually come to fisticuffs. Unless you count the times she attacked any relative who placed one ill-intentioned finger on my sausage hands.

When my cousin Tony tripped me to see what I looked like rolling helplessly down the hallway, Lala grabbed her two-foot ornamental wooden spoon off the wall and cracked him on the head with it. Tony buckled under five pounds of pressure. I appreciated Lala's gesture so much because Tony never bled, so I could thoroughly enjoy his misery without feeling guilty. While he curled his tiny twig legs in pain, she would give me a whack at him. This always made me laugh through my tears. My part in the gang of two was simple: if my mother or anyone else spoke a bad word about her, I cried and said it wasn't fair and that I wasn't going to eat my dinner. At the time and considering my appetite, I consider this a great sacrifice and rebellion. I guess I still do.

My whacks landed on her during one of the typical Robles family gatherings, what could otherwise be called a shouting match. Countless times in our histories, Lala and one of her daughters or sons were so mad at each other that they'd curse each other's homes and swear never to speak to each other ever again. These pronouncements usually occurred when everyone expected to be happiest, like birthdays or Thanksgiving (during Christmas they brought it into the bedroom).

I recall this gathering being on the fourth of July, because I stayed home from summer camp that day and I was hot and uncomfortable and the shouting was making it

worse. Aunt Tammy, my mom's younger sister, made her rare appearance more familiar by immediately running inside and telling Lala to go to hell. Lala spewed back some equally unpleasant remarks, and thinking back on it, I wish I knew what started this particular disagreement to begin with. All I know is what ended it.

Tammy ran to the back of the house and returned with Pipon, a hideous five-foot clown she'd given me at birth. Now I'd always thought the stuffed idiot was ghastly, with its red sagging nose and ass, but I wasn't exactly eager to let it get taken away from me after we spent our entire lives together. It was, after all, my Pipon. As spit flew from Tammy's mouth, as she screamed out to the world she was bringing back home what was rightfully hers for her newborn daughter and taking it away from a spoiled brat who couldn't appreciate it anyway, I reverted back to the same defense I'd grown quite good at: I cried. Before this moment I thought red eyes were a thing of fiction and horror, that cartoon character's eyes could flush crimson but real people's eyes couldn't. They can. Though I can't recall seeing this phenomenon since, Lala's eyes bled the moment Tammy insulted and used me to get to her.

Their movements could only be described as a human tornado. It was hard to tell which arms propelled where, and which mouth sputtered which profanities: "Hijo de puta!" "Valla a la mierda!" "Te odio tu infelice!"

All I knew while the nails were breaking was that I would find a way to kill Aunt Tammy if she hurt Lala bad enough. All everyone knew was that at the end of it, shirts were torn, Tammy's mouth was bleeding through its trembles, and Lala was spitting on her carpet to cast away the devils, who were at this point embodied by her youngest daughter. I thought this was the end. Lala had won; she was virtually unscathed by her

opponent, a young woman thirty years younger and nearly a foot taller. Tammy was going to break and leave.

She began to do the latter, only with a catch I don't think anyone expected: dragging Pipon along behind her. At this Lala seemed, for the first time, bodily affected. Her chest began heaving, she asked someone to bring her water, she started choking, she stumbled back a few steps. I remember Lala's eyes landing on me last before her eyes rolled into the back of her head and she crashed backwards onto the floor. It wasn't Tammy who would be the death of her, it was Pipon.

I screamed from my seat for Lala to wake up. She didn't move. Everyone shouted but my voice was the loudest. If Lala could hear anyone, she could hear me. She didn't answer. For what felt like hours but may have been seconds, she didn't move.

So I did. I scurried toward her and began punching and hitting her chest to wake her up. I tried to penetrate that kangaroo pouch stomach to get to something still working in there. I put my ear to her enormous breast to hear for a thump, but only felt the predictable warmth. Thinking back, I don't know how long or hard I punched her chest. I remember my knuckles were bruised green days later.

The paramedics arrived soon after. To me they were like white angels carrying a white death bed and I hated them for coming to take her away. But after a few minutes of peering over her, they began packing up quickly and quietly while most of us were in hysterics. It seemed like they were trying to get out of there before anyone noticed. I thought I heard one of them say, "I thought my family was nuts." The other one snorted.

"What's wrong with her?" my mother asked. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Sure she is. She's faking it," said one of these men.

Tammy spat and left in disgust—without Pípon. My mom came over to comfort me and shouted at Lala that she could get up now, because it was just us here now.

Abuelo looked like a hangman.

My mom gave me the customary pat on the back that I've often needed as both a child and adult for Lala-related reasons and so much more, but Mom says this didn't happen. She says that my father was there, that he'd come to pick me up for the weekend and that he'd witnessed the entire scene replete with every flung ball of spit. She says they exchanged a look: Dad's said, *I-told-you-she-was-fucking-crazy*, with which he promptly whisked me off to his much quieter home; Mom's said, *she-helps-take-care-of-your-daughter-more-than-you-do*, but his back was probably already turned because his eyes would've had something else to say about that. She says she got into her typical stance whenever Lala embarrassed her, which was to sit, red-faced and white-knuckled, and crack each of her fingers and hope that one of them might break off.

One thing Mom and I remember exactly is how quickly Lala got up and brushed herself off. She almost seemed proud. It was surreal to me that a woman who I thought was dead only minutes ago was now in the kitchen pouring herself a glass of water. Wherever I was going, whether off for a reading weekend at my dad's house, or to the back bedroom with Mom's warm hands on my shoulders, I remember feeling this: I wanted to take back the punches I'd used to revive her and use them on her now instead.

This wasn't the first or last time that Lala faked her death. Years later, after Abuelo passed and I knew the reality of death, I would become accustomed to Lala faking it as I watched television and knotted up our old telephone cord to which she was

attached at the other end. She'd choke through tears splattering into her phone's speaker holes that my indecency was killing her, that I didn't care whether or not her soul burned in hell, and during some commercial break she would start the same quick, short, shallow breathing she had so many years ago face up on the living room floor. Of course she would drop the phone and breathe loudly so I could clearly, crisply hear the histrionics.

Don't misunderstand me, some moments I thought this really might be it, that she'd bitten the bullet, that she was dead as a doornail, that she'd finally become a number of clichés my friends and I overused to describe the thing we were all most scared of. But it was all a sitcom. Lala had become as old and miserable as Mr. Fred Sanford when he called, arms outstretched, to his dead wife during prime time. If Lala's misery would take her down, she wanted everyone else to go along with her.

Lala's story of her obsession with death and suffering, she has said, stretches back far before she ever met Abuelo or had or life ruined by him: at age five she witnessed her mother bleed to death from the mouth. She pounded her mother's chest with tiny teaspoon arms trying to find life in dark eyes but more blood sputtered out in response. Tuberculosis, Lala said, was the color of melted chocolate. Five-year-old Gladys left a trail of vomit from where her mother had fallen in her bedroom to outside their house, where it either took minutes or hours for someone in their modest Quito neighborhood to hear the screams.

What came after was a decade that Lala kicked and punched her way out of. Once, she told me as she held back genuine tears, her three evil aunts shaved her head bald because they said vanity was for the wicked, and she was pretty in a way that was

sinful and wouldn't be tolerated. I thought about my own efforts to gain that kind of sinfulness via my hair, and how I cried when Lala cut off those precious inches I'd ruined. How easy I'd had it, how good was Lala to me. I still don't know if Lala was trying to make me feel guilty the first time she related her scalping story to me (something I am better at distinguishing now), but I remember petting her full head of hair for the rest of that night, telling her it was the best I'd ever felt.

The aunts' malice didn't end there; it lasted for ten years. They pushed her shoulders down hard onto the gritty rice she knelt on after talking back to them. Grabbed her by the throat and beat her in the street for the whole community to see. Chased her with knives but never caught her, didn't get a chance in that situation to see just what their wills were made of.

In all those years Lala never relented. She drew blood from their ankles, whacked them on the heads with their pots, and spit in their faces when they lurched for her in all their open-palmedness. And as soon as her hair was long enough to attract a man from her dimly lit window during a summer's night in Ecuador in her fifteenth year, she climbed out of her life. She let the man and a couple after stick her where they wanted to so long as they gave her a different roof and bed and life outside of her early one.

So our lives—mine and Mom's and most everybody's—were just plain easy compared to Lala's. If we suffered, it was a part of life, and at least we didn't have to bleed the pain out like she did in order to get through it. Lala had strong opinions on how we should live our lives, as suggested in my first sex lesson, and what the quality of our lives should be. And though she believed in God, she also had a jade green Buddha doll that I used to think was for living room presentation but now see as one exemplar of her

many life lessons: we must suffer.

Lala did everything she could to prevent this, as she believed herself a healer of most ailments. She tied string around our middle fingers to get rid of painful mouth sores she said we brought on ourselves from so much lying (the string had to be white as I discovered when one time I went to the sewing kit and brought back thread like a long green caterpillar. She just shook her head slowly, disbelievingly, at the idea that her own granddaughter thought that might work). Lala stole our neighbor's Sunday paper every week long not to wrap up the fragile, not to scoop up our dog Titina's poop, and certainly not to read. She kept it for hiccups. If anyone in the house got a case of them, she'd tear off a Post-It-sized piece and slather it on her tongue. She'd slap it onto our foreheads like she was Jimmy Swaggart and we were one of his believers. When the paper's byline had dried onto our heads and flaked off in what reminded me of a flutter of snow I always wished for in the south Louisiana heat, we were healed.

This always worked for me and Mom and the rest of our family, and I supposed everyone everywhere did this same type of thing. But one day Mom brought home her bar friend, Jimmy, who got a case of hiccups that just wouldn't go away. He couldn't even smoke or drink which I know must've really started to piss him off, as his face was turning purple. When Lala walked by she casually stuck the paper on his head and told him in whatever English she knew to shut up and calm down. Before Mom could explain to him the remedy, his hiccups and Lala had both left the room. This must have scared the hell out of poor Jimmy, who could only say in response, "She's a witch, Rosita, I'm telling you she's a witch!"

CHAPTER 7: KISSES AND PLUGS

Everyone has a worst. Sometimes the worst is a person. Mom: “Bush is the worst” (both Dubya and H. Dubya). General stupidity is a concept that, for Lala, was the worst. “Mira, no te hagas una Enriquita, hablame como una mujer educada.” In other words, I better act like an educated woman if I didn’t want to be dubbed Enriquita, an appellation derived from her girlhood in Ecuador, where a young Mongolian boy named Enrique roamed the streets rubbing mud on his genitals and eating it because he was retarded and didn’t know any better. If even Enrique deserved ridicule for his actions, which he couldn’t really help, I most definitely deserved it. Intelligence, for Lala, was next to godliness.

So times when I didn’t listen to Lala’s advice, do the things she thought was good for me, I was Enriquita. Something about both the sound of the name and the images it brought to mind disgusted me. I saw myself as the long lost twin sister of Enrique, us playing naked in smelly mud and eating it off each other and smiling even when we got sick from it. It was a scary notion that this was what I could turn into if I didn’t listen to Lala, or even worse, that this was just what she wanted me to believe. I wasn’t taking any chances; I was going to follow all instructions carefully.

Most times I tried to follow her advice exactly, even though at times it caused me suffering. Though it wasn’t on par with the pain Lala had experienced as a child, I still wished for less discomfort from the ways Lala sought to cure me, fix me, make me a better me.

The one rule Lala maintained in her house that caused me much discomfort, though she would never cite a doctor or healer or even a television show character who had convinced her of this unerring truth, was that children must shit at least three times a day. There was no should about it, children *must*. Some time after she no longer regulated my bathroom frequency through diapers, she began coming into the bathroom after me. Every once in a while, there was an interrogation.

“Why aren’t you pooing?”

“I did a few hours ago.”

“Yes, but you’ve eaten since then. You’ve got to get rid of that.”

By the time I was nine I knew at what time and on which nights Lala would come in my room with the baby suppositories. They were soft, silver bullet-like plugs that were supposed to be left in for thirty minutes so they could do their magic of cleaning up my intestinal tract.

It was an invasion of a place I’d always wanted, ever since Lala told me about one of those things we have to do in life to get what we want, to be left perfectly alone. Pants down around my ankles, head pressing down under a pillow on my bed, I sometimes saw mirages like those people who are lost in the desert and see waterfalls and lakes with golden buckets for them to fill up and drink down. Instead I saw golden toilets, rolls and rolls of the softest paper. And best of all, the toilet was in the remotest corner not even Lala could reach. I had it all to myself, could make all the sounds or the silence I wanted. But back in reality, once the suppository was in, I had to hold it. There was no should about it. I *must*.

The feeling of having a tube of vaselina goo the size of Vienna sausages shoved up my butt was uncomfortable and, at first, always sent me charging immediately for the bathroom. Again, I must. Of course I'd squat on our ordinary, porcelain toilet and would promptly plop out the silver suppository still perfectly formed, never having gotten the chance to perform its duties. And so another one would go in. And out again like so many tiny torpedoes.

As I got more comfortable with the process, if that word can be accurately used in this anecdote, I often got through by imagining how tough I was, tougher than Abuelo, who was plugged with a similar-sized tool. He screamed in pain immediately and removed the hot pepper, while I got to the point when I could hold on strong for at least fifteen minutes. Of course, I'd had a piece of hot pepper in my mouth before and thought my entire insides had caught on fire. He'd had a whole one, and in a much more sensitive (as I myself was finding out) place. So maybe our war stories just couldn't compare.

Lala tried her best to get me through it; she said she knew it was uncomfortable, but she knew it was for my own good. She tried turning it into a game similar to the ones mothers play with their babies in a high chair when they won't eat their strained peas. These mothers blow their lips to make engine sounds, shout out, "The airplane's coming in for a landing!" Lala would conspicuously creep into my room, one hand behind her back, and suddenly raise both hands in the air like a monster attacking and bellow, "Quien quiere un lulo in el culo!"

It was only when I became an adult that I found out those things in my ass all those years were called suppositories. Lala always referred to them as lulos, so that

was what they were. I've asked my mother and other Hispanics I know whether or not lulo is a word they'd heard of. Mom only knew it as my butt plug. No one else I asked was familiar with it. I'm still not sure now whether or not the word and its rhyming sound with culo (butt) was just was part of the game that Lala invented to make it more fun for me. I'd like to think so. Either way it created a euphony I can't forget.

The injections that I'd reluctantly gotten accustomed to, like many children feel about going to school or eating spinach, became less frequent when I was thinking right. I'd learned to lock myself in the bathroom with *Charlotte's Web* or the *Babysitter's Club* and drop colored gumballs in the toilet as evidence of my being honest-to-God, one-hundred percent full of shit (as Lala jokingly said should be my goal). But Lala was as good a lie detector as any machine with jiggling lines, and after she noticed there was no smell coming from the bathroom she monitored my bathroom visits equipped with the pen and yellow legal pad she kept my shit schedule on.

Although I didn't like the possibility of becoming Enriquita and I didn't love the lulo en el culo, just about the worst parts of my days were when Rosita came to Lala's from work and took me away from her. I learned to hate my mom's car because it constantly separated the two of us. A lot of times my first greeting to my mom, after the hug around her legs I was so desperate to give to her, was to ask if we could live with Lala again. We'd lived with Lala and Abuelo for several months at a time twice before, and I didn't see why we couldn't do so again. When I'd say this, though, Mom would bend down and under the guise of giving me a big hug back and whisper in my ear through gritted teeth, "Shut up, Brooke. Don't give her any ideas."

I didn't know then that Lala was giving me the ideas, speculating on certain afternoons how fun it would be for us all to live together again. And of course I agreed. I didn't know that the times Rosita moved back in, Lala reinstated her college curfew—ten o'clock on weekdays, midnight on weekends. Lala didn't know that Rosita was a grown woman now with a daughter and a career and was going to do whatever she wanted, whenever.

Even when my requests were rebuffed, I still couldn't blame my mom. She wasn't happy taking me away from Lala's, from my daytimes, didn't like to see how sad it made me. But routinely she resurfaced every five o'clock and threw her car doors open to me. I thought maybe she was less reluctant to hug and touch me on our rides home because her arms had to stay steeled against that hot, rubbery orb so she could get us home to whichever apartment we were living in and begin and end her role as mother for the day in a span of just three hours. Trips in cars turned Lala into my mother during the day, and Rosita into my mother at night. It depended on which day it was whether or not I enjoyed the trip east or the trip west just a bit more. It depended on what mood I was in whether I wanted to be hugged and hugged or left almost completely alone.

As I've said, Lala sometimes made things difficult—sometimes I was too smart for my own good, and sometimes I was Enriquita. At some point I noticed that this inconsistency depended on whether or not I let her hug and kiss me enough to her liking. She's since told me that Abuelo hardly touched her during sex and that they might as well have had a sheet between them with a hole cut out. She was raised by

women who hated her, who touched her only to shave her head that one horrible time or to beat her bloody. So when she got her own family she vowed to love them and show affection every chance she got. When her children forced her to hit them, she cried for hours afterward and as soon as they'd let her, she would run to kiss every one of their wounds.

But nights I went home to a much less affectionate mother. And that feeling I got of being relieved by this sometimes filtered into the days with Lala. When I ate my cereal, I didn't need my hair to be brushed and braided. If I was in the tub, I could do my own playing and scrubbing. We didn't need to embrace every time we crossed each other's paths.

I was reluctant to say anything for fear of her reaction. After her birthday last September, she didn't talk to my mom for two months because she waited until the afternoon to call and wish Lala a feliz cumpleaños. Rosita was an ungrateful daughter who wouldn't know if her own mother was dead on the floor for her birthday, she cried into the phone those several times Mom called in an attempt to apologize.

When I first told her my theory that she hugged and loved too much sometimes, she didn't talk to me for a week. She continued placing meals under my nose and watching the same television shows we always watched together, but she didn't speak and we didn't touch. At the end of the week I cried and begged her to talk to me, who at five, still counted her as my only friend. I wrapped my arms around her ankles and didn't let go for what had to be hours as she did her work around the kitchen, though more slowly since my grip forced her to take baby steps.

After I'd become so tired from clutching and crying that I could barely breathe, she bent down, lifted my face toward her, and kissed me. It was a wetter kiss than I had ever received, partly because of the tears still moist on my face, but also because she smushed her lips so hard against my face so fast that, for a few seconds, her tongue popped out and touched my closed mouth with vigor.

I equate the incident to a car wreck, when the impact forces passengers' heads forward beyond their control, thrusting ahead just as they wish they could be pulling back. Sometimes you almost just can't help what you do, especially when you love something so much.

Years later I know the kiss existed in that moment and members of my family would be sickened that it happened, but even more shocked at my open revelation of it. I wonder how Roy would react, the man who said, "Fuck the baby!" in reference to me so many times before my ears and head worked in conjunction to remember it that Rosita finally had to leave him. The man who, instead of attending my first birthday party, went to the track and bet one thousand on a horse he wasn't sure the name of, he was so blindly boozed up. The man who said, at the prospect of having children (just before lightning struck): "I don't do babies or toilets."

Or Connie, who if we ever went out in public introduced me as "Roy's daughter," not her granddaughter and not even Brooke. She gave me the name of her son who, for her, was the greatest disappointment because his marriage failed and he went back to her for help. "We all have our crosses to bear," she told Rosita in an attempt to dissuade her from divorce, at a point when my mom was no longer

comfortable in the role of martyr. For Connie, I was the result of a situation that could've easily worked out, if both my parents hadn't been idiots. So I didn't really have a name or face as far as she was concerned. I was Roy's daughter, she would say and quickly look away.

And even Rosita, who loved me and was my number one true mother, a woman who taught me to be a woman but wasn't into the hugging, physical labor part of it—do any of them have any idea that at the time, Lala could do or speak no wrong as long as she was loving me? That while they shouted at each other all around us, she reached her hands around to protect me from the truth about who we really were, and that I needed that?

As I write of this kiss, I fear that child protection agents or otherwise concerned citizens will shake their heads, wondering how I came out of Lala's control okay and not hating the world for its insanity. I fear that if they saw me, they'd try to look into my eyes for the six year old girl, and the subsequent eight year old girl and twelve year old girl who learned from and loved Lala, at times, almost as fiercely as she loved me. I fear that they would want to console me but be hesitant, maybe brush my arm or shake my hand limply in hopes that I stay strong, keep the faith, maintain my courage. Let me assure anyone inclined to feel this—the way Lala loved was not typical, and it was not horrible. Whether or not those she touched were left for better for it has yet to be seen. There is more memoir left to write.

The kiss over, I felt right again. She still loved me; I could accept being loved too much rather than not at all. When Mom came to pick me up that day, she noticed

my swollen eyes and asked if everything was finally okay between the two of us (I hadn't been able to hide my misery at night once Lala and I were parted). We both answered at once that things were, and Lala added that I was sometimes too smart for my own good, not an Enriquita at all. But now she said it with a smile.

CHAPTER 8: MOM(ME)

My mother hardly ever touched me. I knew she loved me because she tucked me in at night and fed me well too. I knew she cared because she wished me a good day of school when she dropped me off at the bus stop in the morning and told me I was smart. But why did she only kiss me if I was sad, or hug me when I did something in school exceptionally well? I spent a good deal of time on my trips west trying to figure these things out.

Rosita was thirty and single. Her frame was so thin and her hair so permed that it seemed her head was much too big for her body. She wore blue eyeshadow and pink lipstick that my cousin Tony called crazy, and still does, remembering the colors splashed across her face. I thought maybe we didn't kiss because she didn't want to rub off her makeup. Somehow her brown skin was more beautiful than mine. It may have been because she was so good at painting it up.

Sometimes she made me cry without meaning to. She meant to be mean, but it was with a slant of levity, so I would stop hating her almost instantly. When we'd get home from our maddening car rides—I sang the oldies songs she'd taught me to like, but she begged me to stop singing since my voice was so off-pitch—she'd become bored. Most Sundays she cooked for the whole week. It would be something at least fifty pounds: a lasagna, a meatloaf, a Shepherd's pie big enough for a dozen men, or maybe just the one she was dating at the time.

So weeknights we kept each other company after the food was quickly eaten and the dishes cleaned. It was what to do afterward that confounded both of us night

after night. The word “company” is strange because I think we treated each other that way throughout my childhood. Maybe her death and resurrection changed things years later. Or it could’ve been the day she dropped me off at college and said once and for all that I was her favorite, that I was everyone’s because I was so special (no reason given), and immediately forgave me for the previous four years when I hated the world, like most teenagers but louder, sadder. But in my grammar years we were mere guests in each other’s presence and were constantly finding ways to entertain rather than love.

I would color pictures for the refrigerator that would get covered up by new ones. But this stopped because I was always upset that the pictures of the past were slowly disappearing. Tree branches would peek out from behind a bright new girl on roller skates. I was sad for the tree, wished the cartoon girl would run into it and fall over, but I knew this wouldn’t happen so I stopped coloring. I allowed Mom to take me to ballet class, not because I liked my stubby legs in a pink tutu, not because the thin girls (and even one boy!) laughed at me when I couldn’t do a simple pirouette, but so she and I could talk about it.

Rosita was my counterpart in most ways. Instead of trying to please, she teased me mercilessly. It was a way to pass the few hours we had together at night. When my belly was full and I started staring at her, searching for things to say, I’d notice her eyes change. She would begin a conversation I never understood every time she started it.

“It’s getting late, little girl. You’d better go home.”

“Whaddya mean, Mom?” I don’t think I ever called her Mommy, like most other kids referred to their mothers. They didn’t know it made them sound like whiners.

“I’m sorry, little girl, but I’m not your mother. It’ll be dark soon, so you’ll have to go.”

“I’m your daughter, Mom, stop it. I’m your daughter.”

This conversation took many different forms at different times. It would end quickly if I started crying too hard too fast; she’d become exasperated at how easy it was to shake me and she’d begin and complete several Big N’ Easy crossword puzzles. When I felt up for a fight, her eyes would change again, narrowing, tightening her forehead, but in a soft way, as if she were truly sorry she didn’t know me and had to send me away. These times she’d vary her tactics by offering me a stack of cookies, an offer I never could resist, before shooing me out the house. Minutes later she would open the side door where I was sitting on the step, cookies crumbled at my feet. Though she was still laughing as she’d been at the window, she at least tried to hide it by tightening her cheeks this time, and I knew that was the honest face. She’d been entertained, so she let me inside and gave me the fresh, new extra-chocolate chip cookies she’d just baked and lightly burned her hands as she gave them over.

One day she acquiesced immediately, admitting that yes, she was my mother, but only technically, not really and truly. She patted me on the head and consoled me for the fact that I’d never know my real parents, since she’d rescued me from the garbage can down the street. What bothered me most when Mom teased me about this was that I couldn’t recall the memory of those other real parents, where exactly they left me and why and what I felt being enclosed in tin, which I was sure I would’ve remembered. I never considered she was joking with me but was disappointed in myself for not having the superior brain all the adults around me insisted I had.

Growing up I empathized with Oscar the Grouch for this reason, even after Sesame Street was just baby stuff reserved for my little sisters or dummies. He grew up in a tin can surrounded by trash, even had to eat trash. Where was his family, in some dumpster they wouldn't share with him? I wondered how painful that would have been, being dirty and alone, because yes, Oscar was just a puppet, but there were real people, Lala liked to remind me, who had it a lot worse than us and we should think about them when we swallowed (we should swallow a lot to keep healthy) and also be grateful to God for loving and caring so much for us. Sesame Street was symbolic for a lot more, and I was to keep my eyes open for what that was if I was going to be a smart girl in this world.

“Well what about them?” I asked once when I'd seen a commercial that was trying to raise money for skinny kids living in a place I imagined was much like the village where Lala grew up. They were brown, like me, but much smaller, halves of me. Watching this at the dinner table, I was beginning to have a hard time with swallowing.

“What do you mean, what about them?” she asked.

“God must not love or care for them as much as he does for us. They live with bugs and they don't even get to eat or wear clothes.”

Once again I became Enriquita, but not only that, a mean one. How could I suggest God loves us unequally? Lala went through hell, saw her mother die, watched her husband leave and come back and leave and come back, and now had children and grandchildren who would abandon her as soon as they got the chance, and she still

knew God loved her just as much as he loved everyone in the damned world. I learned not to question Lala or God aloud; it made me a stupid, cruel child.

Mom liked to entertain guests at our house, since she was the only one with a child. And I loved entertaining as well; Mom and her friends thought me a genius at every party, and after each weekend I became more and more convinced of it myself. I'd come up with quick quips that would send the whole room of chests shaking and spilling over their beer koozies. Once I silenced the room when I asked everyone why they smoked certain cigarettes with just their hands and others with that long and silver scissor-looking thing, and why that long and silver thing held such a tiny cigarette that stunk worse than the ones they held in their hands. When no one answered I whipped out a cigarette from someone's pack and held the two samples next to each other—see, see, I don't understand the difference here. Applause, standing ovation, another stroke of genius. And all for curiosity. This genius of mine recalls another moment in *Annie Hall*, when Woody Allen says if people laugh at him when they're high it doesn't count, since they're always laughing anyway.

On these weekends Rosita let me in to the adult world she got to inhabit all the time. Right in front of me she spoke to perpetually-drunk Pam, about an affair her sister Tammy was having with a wretched man. Pam (who years later when dying of Multiple Sclerosis, would ask her husband and my mom and anyone who visited her to pray for her entry to heaven, fearful of the sins she committed at this exact time) slurred something like shut up, you shouldn't talk about that stuff in front of the baby. I felt compelled to correct her.

“I know all what you’re talking about. It’s sex, right? It’s in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*.”

I didn’t know then that I’d read D. H. Lawrence in high school or that this classic even existed, only that the Playboy channel had a nightly show of the same name that I’d been watching white-knuckled for weeks. Mom eventually called the cable company to yell for the first and last time about getting free cable, but not before she and her friends cracked their asses up about what I’d been doing quietly for some time.

By the time my mom met Woody I’d gotten used to seeing men come and go, and I liked it that way. They were all nice to me and brought candies and had clean hands when I shook them, and inevitably, a few months later they would be gone. Even when they came around frequently they kept their distance, sat in their proper place in Mom’s used man-chair she’d gotten from Abuelo when he’d purchased a new one to kick his feet up in. These men were nice enough not to touch my mother in front of me when even I wasn’t exactly allowed to.

Woody was different. When I extended my hand to shake his upon our first meeting, he looked at me like he’d never seen a six-year-old’s arm before, a look of pure confusion that I don’t remember ever seeing again. He shook my hand once he realized what I was doing. His fingers were appalling. The tips of each nail were caked with lines of dirt that looked like little black worms. What’s more, he had the first mustache of any man I’d ever met. Tom Selleck didn’t count because he was on television and he smiled a lot, seemed friendly enough. Woody’s mustache was even thicker than Tom’s,

and it covered up more of his face. There was no telling what kind of person was under there. After he shook my hand and began the routine I'd heard before—your mom's told me a lot about you, school, blah blah blah—I was concerned that I couldn't ascertain what he thought of me, couldn't see if he smiled while his lips move or not. I couldn't even see his lips move. The mustache just vibrated when he spoke. I had to guess his mood by looking into his eyes, and that was a scary place I wasn't ready to get into.

Later I would find out more things I didn't like: he left wet towels on the floor. He was a drunk. A few late, late nights he would take a piss into the refrigerator like it was the most natural place in the world. He would call me a prima donna (only his insult didn't quite register with me, as I thought he was making some sort of comparison with the pop star, who I loved). And he would hit my mom.

But during these first days, he disgusted me most by constantly having his dirty, wormy hands all over Rosita. He ignored his assigned seat in Abuelo's old chair and practically sat on top of my mother on the sofa, touching her arms and her neck and her face that looked a lot like mine in the pictures we had up all over the living room. How could he, I wondered. But even more perplexing was the thought of how could she.

Once, in what I suppose now was a prophetic joke, they hung a sign that looked like a bookmark on my mother's bedroom door: "Do Not Disturb—Honeymoon in Progress." The two o's in "honeymoon" double as cartoon eyes, the right of which glibly winked at me.

This was insulting. I was here in my house and therefore no honeymoon was going on. And my mother was in her room, a place that was always open to me. This door had started to close behind them a lot, both day and night, and it was disturbing me

in a different way than they asked not to be. Rosita and I used to walk around naked and forget there were even doors in the house. If I was in a bad mood, either from school or something mean Mom had done to tease me, she'd run in my room naked and sing opera badly or do jumping jacks and push—ups and other forms of exercise that are very funny to look at when a woman with floppy boobs is naked. Now it seemed like every time I was in a bad mood, her bedroom door was closed. The sign on the door made a statement about a concept was unfamiliar with, so I assumed that it must have been mistaken. This time I turned the knob and went through it without giving it another thought.

There was a hideous tent shape on my mom's bed, and a hideously noisy game coming from under it. I'd been camping many times before and helped set up the tent, and from the position I stood in, I felt once again like I was in the woods trying to do the work like an adult but mostly just getting in the way. Even now the tent metaphor feels like the best one to use, especially since by now I've set up several of them myself. But at the time I saw my first tent set up on a bed, I immediately knew this was something I shouldn't be privy to and reciprocally did not want to be. But still I stood there, watching the tent pitch itself in different locations to find the perfect spot, not taking notes by any means, not trying to learn anything that I could fold up inside my mind and unwrap later, as an adult. This was a thing I thought families had to do—see and know everything about each other. No matter how much the exhibitor didn't want to show it, or how wary the audience was of seeing it. Lala had taught me a thing or two. After a few minutes I left the room thinking the good thing about pitching a tent is that it's really easy to knock down again.

Several months later I was excited to be taking my first real road trip across state lines with Mom, but it was marred by Woody and the other girl he would bring into our lives. I'd imagined that during one of our car rides I'd be able to figure out Mom and me and me and Mom. Not that she'd say, let's take a long trip together, Surprise!, to get Woody's daughter. A girl almost my age. A girl I would like very much.

Woody sat in the passenger seat, my former place, and smoked the entire miserable time. This was the salient attribute I ascribed to my father, and I wondered then why Rosita would replace one for the same. Especially when none of us really knew what he looked like with that hairy mask on all the time.

For several hours Woody explained to me how great this trip was going to be, ruining it as each word fell from his mouth, and how after it was over I'd finally have someone to play with and talk to, even late at night. I wanted to say that I already had this with Lala, and I was working on my mom just fine until he came along and took up every inch of space between a mother and a daughter, with his nasty knuckles and greasy breath. But after this morning's tantrum I'd met my quota for the day. No use in arguing; we were already on our way there. Still I wondered, what was he hiding? Who was this man Mom insist on kissing?

Earlier that morning before we left for Ft. Worth, Texas, the land of two-lane highways and heat, and Woody tried tiredly to console me with platitudes Mom had somehow said better the night before, I made myself the heaviest I'd ever been. I threatened to throw the new cat I'd found named Whiskers under the car to prevent its unstoppable backwards roll down the driveway. Woody said that was fine, because his

dog, Bosefus, would eat her soon anyway, so there was no point in keeping her. Mom slapped his head, certain at that point that he would never slap hers beyond jokingly, and said only she could tease me like that. I was somehow relieved, though I thought her slap might have been a bit rougher. By the time we drove up to the white wooden house after six hours of stagnant rolling, I was sticky as hell and done with cars and this man.

Delaynassay Zcherie was the object of our mission. According to her mother who'd long since left Dezi with extended family, her first name meant blue. The middle name, to me, sounded like cherry. Her last name was Jones. I'd met many Joneses in my days, resided far from them in the pages of my yearbook and in the schoolyard, and all of them were white. Jones might as well have meant white. She was Delaynassay Zcherie Jones, cherry red, white, blue, blue eyes. She was a blonde who might as well have had the American flag painted across her forehead.

Dezi, they told me to call her. It was a shortening, an endearing way to say a name that was hard for the tongue to tread through. This normalized her, made her a Jenny, or a Stacey, or a Molly. Ending with an "ee" made girls pretty, lovely. My name was like a cut. Wood on a chopping block being split apart: Brooke. One syllable, one hair and eye and skin color, half a breath to utter. No decoration.

In Spanish we expressed affection by ending names in "ita." My mom was already an ita, Rosita. Lala became Lalita, I was Brooksita. The only problem was that no one knew the lyrical quality my name could capture once translated into Spanish. It was only Lala who called me this. She transformed my name, and me, by extension, into something more interesting, something bigger than I formerly was. Dezi was so

special her name had to be shrunk. My step-sister-to-be was new, I was used, and even before I met her I absolutely hated her.

CHAPTER 9: DARKNESS ROOTED

When I first saw her, she was skinny and wrinkled from a hot bath, wrapped up in a blue terrycloth towel, and she stared at me, not my mom, not her dad, with blue eyes that matched it. All my eyes ever matched with were work shoes and shit. She immediately became the enemy.

“Hey buddy,” said Woody. “Remember me? Well I brought some friends. This is your new mommy and your new sister.”

I was horrified. She better not call me her sister, I could barely say her name. And my mother, Mom, being her mom? It was unacceptable. Dezi must have thought so too because she tucked her face into the towel and turned to run away and cry. Unfortunately she turned so fast her towel fell off and I saw the first naked butt of my life. One that was outside my family. It was the size and shape of a muffin and whiter than chalk. Mine, I already knew at that point, from Lala’s suggestions that I study all parts of my body so I’ll know that if anything starts to look different, something’s wrong, was brown and shaped like a chalkboard. Why was I round in the wrong places? And why did we have to take this girl home to remind me this?

Once we got back to Louisiana, the routine I’d come to know and love was permanently squashed. I’d gotten used to Woody living with us quickly because, though repulsive, he was rarely around. He worked long hours, usually into the night, and the only evidence that he was living with us were the wet, crumpled towels on the bathroom floor in the mornings (Mom would have whipped me for this) and the

occasional puddle of pee on the kitchen floors next to either the refrigerator or garbage can.

I couldn't understand why, a couple of years before this, we had to get rid of our dog because Mom said we didn't have enough time to spend with him and this made him constantly pee and poo on our carpet. With Woody, Mom kissed him instead of kicking him out. She said he was a sleepwalker and that sleepwalkers sometimes do things they wouldn't do under normal circumstances. I asked her if sleepwalking was similar to being drunk and she didn't answer for a while. Then, "In a lot of ways they are the same, only with drinking you can control it better." I made a note to watch how many beers Woody had on those rare occasions when he made it home for dinnertime. A sleepwalker and a drunk was sure to be dangerous.

Once Dezi arrived, that was it. She wasn't going anywhere, and she was always where I was. She slept in my bed and kicked hard at night. I slept with my pillow over my head rather than under it to block her out of my night life, a life previously all my own. I also considered using my pillow to suffocate her and return my comfort.

In our first weeks together I discovered that my stepsister had no mother to speak of, and she'd only met Woody a few times before we picked her up that afternoon in Texas. She seemed to have popped out of someone's head like Athena had from Zeus, only her womb must have been one of a moron. Not only could she not understand Spanish, but she hadn't quite grasped English yet. She said "Yeah" and "Naw" in a drawl Lala and I agreed was characteristic of the most stupid.

Nights I was allowed to stay up late I came to dread. On normal nights with Mom and her friends, prior to Dezi, people laughed and paid attention to me. It didn't matter to me then, as sadly it still doesn't, why they gazed or whether or not drink or drug induced, as long as I was the obvious star of the scenario.

Though I was the star, I also recognized I had to work for it. Dezi only needed to tiptoe into a room to get a powerful reaction:

“She’s so tiny!”

“Oh, she’s shy. She might just be the sweetest little thing ever.”

“Look at those eyes! Those are a movie star’s eyes.”

Lala reacted powerfully toward her as well. When Mom or her friends made a big deal about Dezi’s appearance, Lala would say always as if for the first time, “Anyone can have blue eyes. My dogs and cats have blue eyes. So what? I don’t see anything special.” She would then tell me in secret, “Don’t worry about it, they can’t see straight anyway. Those friends of your mother’s are a bunch of drunks.”

Of course I appreciated Lala’s defense of brown, but I thought it more prudent for us to focus on a more pressing issue. Dezi couldn’t read or even write her name yet. When she colored a picture for Mom to be placed on the refrigerator, presumably on top of my old ones, she didn’t sign her name at the bottom as was standard. There were squiggles and nonsensical lines where her name should have been. When confronted with this, she admitted no one had yet taught her how to write. There was no shame in her answer; she said it while smiling. She was five, and though I had an age advantage on her of exactly one year and one week, I’d been reading for half my life. I’d already written “Dezi sucks” several times in my school notebook. I found my first advantage

was that I could write Dezi's name when she couldn't. I could surround it with terrible words in both English and Spanish and she would be none the wiser. For the next few years, I thought, it's good to know that Dezi will be the preeminent Enriquita.

Rosita's behavior, especially with someone so simple, was also maddening. Instead of coming home to a woman who may or may not suggest that I go find my real mother, Dezi and I came home to cooked food and questions about how our day was and, I swear, comments such as, "Look at my two beautiful daughters." Sometimes she even hugged us both at the same time. Rosita was becoming a television mother; as a teenager I would refer to this time as her Stepford Wife period. I didn't know that she was working harder at perfecting her roles now than the first time around.

As I saw the people around me alter their behavior in strange and unusual ways, I found myself no longer able to be myself. Perhaps I'd felt subjugated before—by Lala with her tyrannical healing methods and Rosita with her innate refusal to accept me as her daughter—and now things were changing. This little person was causing everyone around me to act oddly. As a result, I watched my own behavior change and heard my own words and my sarcastic inflections and saw that they were mean. Somehow I was scared of changing back again and scared not to. I saw myself becoming a darker version of the former oppressed, somewhat resourceful Brooke. Maybe this was because, comparatively, Dezi was so much lighter.

This lightness was something I had to explain to friends at school, that no, she didn't come from my mother's belly over the weekend, but yes, we were sisters. Mom made us use that word—sisters—asked us leave out that crucial step-

Doing what I was told, I went to Hynes Elementary, went to Buster Bear daycare, saw the kids I knew and introduced them to my sister. My friends saw her with eyes of pity. This was a new kind of thought, realizing there is a language that we don't speak aloud, can't hide, can't lie about, doesn't need to be translated.

And the first sets of eyes that saw me and Dezi after we announced we were sisters said back to us silently, "How can a person who looks like *that* be related to a person who looks like *that*?" If only the emphasis in those two *thats* had meant the same, or if I'd read them that way. My own eyes might not have gotten so much darker and deeper.

Dezi smiled at everyone and said nothing. I felt myself darkening as I answered the questions I was faced with.

"When'd your mom have her?"

"We picked her up last week."

"From the hospital?" (The only place any kid could possibly come from.)

"No, a garbage can in Texas."

There, I thought, try that on for size, Rosita. What amazed me even more than how much I could be like my mother was how Dezi reacted to my meanness. She didn't cry or pout or run away as I surely would have, but was truly cute as she scratched a skinny leg and smiled into the sun or some other beautiful part of the natural world that I wasn't lately familiar with, which infuriated me even more. I didn't trust it—could someone really be so blissfully dumb?

Now this Texas garbage can type sarcasm I'd been working with for some time usually got me a laugh, could've been the reason I got a turn or two on the swings.

Now I got looks. The quick look and look away. The who-are-you look. The look that makes you embarrassed that people can see you. But I still went on.

“You know Texas is like another country. So I guess Dezi’s like an alien.”

“She can’t spell her own name. Can hardly say it.”

“I saw her pick her nose and I think she ate it.”

The great inequity in learning to lie easily is that it’s even more difficult to stop. Creating my own Dezi character tipped the balance of power slightly toward my side. In reality Dezi got extra dessert, because she was so small. Her father (“Daddy,” I should call him), said she needed to fatten up a bit. I didn’t get extra. Instead, I got to tell everyone at school that Dezi was a thief, stole my dessert for herself, might even grow up to go to jail. It didn’t matter how miserably mean I was being, I rationalized to myself, because ignorance is bliss, and Dezi remained unflappably happy.

I found solace, at first, that no matter what, Lala would always be on my side. She teased Dezi mercilessly in Spanish, and for me these were the first times when I didn’t feel compelled to lie in translation.

I was happy to relate several of Lala’s messages.

“Do you know that dogs can really talk?”

“Na-ah.” Translated: No, really?

“It’s true, they talk to us all the time. They just don’t like to talk to you.”

Lala and I played with our white furball of a dog, Titina, and feigned having a conversation with it that Dezi just couldn’t hear. We laughed and shook Titina’s paws, as if she’d had something really witty to say about Dezi, and we apologized to Dezi for

not translating the conversation for her, but we had to respect Titina's wishes that she never be translated.

Even as I took delight in Dezi's disappointment, I could not help but feel something was wrong. Titina looked sad, because she too, like the entire world, had taken a liking to Dezi and was hoping to play with her. I stared into my dog's eyes and noticed for the first time that one eye was brown and one was blue. Titina became blind in one eye several years before, when I was just a baby, so I just took for granted her face and her eyes and all their marvel. I realized then that if it weren't for the brown eye, she wouldn't have been able to get around as well as she did, would bump into bedposts. Her blue eye, though beautiful, was her handicap. And her brown eye was her strength.

I started looking around everywhere for validation of brown and, by extension, myself. Even dolls eyes weren't exactly brown, they had flecks of yellow and green, and the obverse went for dolls with blue eyes—there were darker colors to be found if you looked close enough. Finally I looked in the mirror. Yes, my eyes were brown, but there were different layers to it. There was brown and darker brown, close to black brown, and a stroke or two of reddish brown that I didn't even know I had. They weren't that bad, really. At least they, like Titina's, helped me to see.

Dezi and I did eventually have fun times together. I came to find out that sometimes she said funny things and helped out anyone she could and was charming in her naivety. I'm indebted to her in that she was the first to encourage me to use what Lala taught me about lying. We called it storytelling then, and she would ask me to tell

and retell her true stories that we both knew weren't really true, but tweaked a bit to make them better. It's ironic how she was really my first professor, the one I always called dumb.

I'll insert these facts here, though they are far from chronological because the times lump themselves together in my mind. Humans in love do the same when we lose a lover to other arms or the road. We condense months and years of our world with them into singularly life-altering moments. We act as if these moments occurred continuously through our years together instead of being just blips of time. On a white queen-sized sheet spread across a bed, these moments are a small strawberry stain in the corner, tucked under the pillow.

By pausing the story for the moment, I hope to impart that Dezi was never the problem, something I suspected even then. But in my stubbornness I saw her as the opposite of what the fairy tales had always purported: she was the evil blonde designed to bring down the darker, beautiful forces. But I wouldn't feel this way for long.

Lala. Lulo en el culo. These activities didn't end when Dezi arrived. Dezi was a dummy, alright, but she was still a child who must shit three times a day. Lala would make sure of this.

On the day Lala announced she was giving Dezi her first lulo, I thought retribution had arrived. No one could endure el lulo while smiling. I'd just gotten one early that day, and with the pain and discomfort still fresh in my mind, I was relieved that someone else could share them with me. Especially when that someone was Dezi.

I was shocked to find that Dezi must have practiced before. She held the lulo inside her without question, without pillow-clutching or nail-biting that I couldn't have gotten through the experience without doing. Lala didn't even have to play coy games with her to make it fun; as soon as Dezi heard the word I knew so well, her pants were on the ground and she just laid and waited. She even started chanting, "Lulo en el culo!" as if she knew what Lala and I had done before and tried to take it away from me.

But the thing most unforgivable for me was in Lala's ultimate reaction. Suddenly, she could speak English. Muddled, funny-sounding English, but English all the same.

"Oh, you do good poo poo. You good girl."

All the times I wished Lala could speak English—when she was picking me up from school and couldn't even talk to the office workers to sign me out, at the grocery when she wanted to haggle prices, when I talked to her on the phone at my father's and got grief from him about it—she could've spoken English. But I wasn't a good enough reason to communicate in a language she thought so inferior to her own. Now Dezi was.

As far as Lala was concerned, being thin was in again. Dezi had such a cute little figure, Lala said, much like her own when she was younger, actually. She was so good with the lulo and still ate whatever she wanted, she must have a tapeworm.

"Those worms keep you real skeeny," Lala said. "Good girl."

All I ever wanted Lala to think of me was that I was a good girl, but it seemed like I hadn't heard that compliment in a long time. I never thought that there was an art

to taking the lulo, that it could be done better or more effectively by certain butts, but apparently there was. I failed at this, and Lala, my one true north, was falling into the trap because of it.

The only other thing I ever wanted (ten years of Christmas lists excluded) was to be skinny. Lala mentioned something about a tapeworm that could get me there. I wondered why she hadn't told me about this before, and shared this secret skinny girl fact with someone who was already thin.

I dug through the soil in Lala's backyard to find the perfect worm. I knew that earthworms were big, maybe the size of my hand, so I looked for something smaller. Before I even got a chance to get my clothes and hands delightfully dirty, I found the perfect worm. He looked like a toothpick and was brown, just a little darker than me. He was the perfect choice because he didn't move around a lot (a typically lazy boy, Lala would say) and he looked hungry. He would eat up all my food in no time, or so I hoped.

Open mouthed and closed eyes, I swallowed my skinny, gross accomplice. It wasn't worse than lengua, the boiled cow tongue Lala was fond of torturing me with, or even tripa. But the worm was a more purposeful food than all those, so the more I thought about it, the more he tasted savory.

Or so I thought until several weeks later, when I saw no results and asked my mom about tapeworms. She told me how they form inside the stomach, how you can't just "get" them, and she asked with narrowed brows why was I so interested.

I thought about the Mongolian Enrique again and how much I'd become like him, digging in the mud to find the wrong kind of food there, and all for Lala's sake. I

was so stupid, I might as well have rubbed the mud on my genitals too. Lala and Dezi had made fools of me, and I would find a way to get them back.

CHAPTER 10: CAR SLAMMING AND SLAPPING

In my alacrity to get even with my youngest nemesis in a subconscious, dangerous way, I was banned from opening or closing a car door for two months. It might have actually been a more extended period of time or shorter, but I know that for a long time my hands didn't touch car door handles. This was because I'd inadvertently started using them as weapons.

I spent every afternoon riding home with Rosita and Dezi hoping for just a minor car wreck that, while not sending any of us to the hospital, would allow me a ride home with a kind policeman or ambulance driver and away from the display of cuteness that permeated our car. It got so bad listening to them speak sweetly to each other, sharing kind words about their days, that I was willing to call Mom by her real name now. But since Dezi insisted on Mommie (the thought that she was saying it with an "ie" made it even worse!) I had to stake my claim somewhere. Rosita became Mother.

One of these days was especially revolting. Dezi and I sat in the backseat as usual, only she got restless when a fun song came on the radio, a mindless, "Walkin on Sunshine" song, so she stood up and hugged the headrest of the driver's seat. Mother's seat. Dezi was touching her, something I didn't even deign to do. Only Mother was letting her. At some point during the song, she may have even patted Dezi's hand. These were the days before seatbelts, and at this point particularly I prayed for an effective fender-bender.

By the time we got home, I'd gone through several different levels of temper. Scary thoughts rolled around in my head—a bigger wreck wish, should I cause the wreck, kick Dezi's pencil legs out from under her—and I was beginning to frighten myself. So I really don't remember how it happened or if I really planned it, but when I opened the door to the car, I automatically slammed it shut in anger and took two of Dezi's fingers with it.

For the first few seconds I couldn't move. Dezi was stuck, three-fingered, owl-eyed. She didn't cry or make any noise; I couldn't believe how much the silence scared me. Dezi just looked from me to her remaining three fingers, me back to her three fingers. She might die, I thought, she's so little and might bleed so much she might die. Then I thought, she won't die. Mom won't let that happen. But she might need my fingers. I'd just started playing the piano and knew this proposal would be an impossibility—this was not like sharing toys or even the love of my mother, this was my body—but I still hoped she wouldn't die. All the while we were silent and frozen and two fingers were locked inside a door.

Before I could blink again, Mom ripped the keys from her purse, opened the door, and had Dezi at the kitchen sink. Dezi with both of her fingers still intact, though they were a shade of finger I'd never seen before. They weren't black and blue yet, like they'd be days later. It was almost a green, a green mixed with purple that creates an indescribable color that I've only known at that moment.

Standing several feet away from the sink, feeling more ineffectual than I'd ever felt, my first instinct was to laugh. I mumbled “sorry” over and over again somewhere

between the rinsing and the towel pressing, but what I did even more quietly, with my healthy fingers over my mouth, was giggle.

It's what I did years later when I wrecked Lala's car into our house, after she insisted I try to drive and shoved me into the seat, despite my pleading against it, my insinuations that I couldn't judge the right side yet when navigating and I certainly wasn't able to park the car in the driveway. Boom, crash. Nervous laughter. It's what I'd do when I slammed another set of fingers in the car door.

What even further confused me was that it happened again the next afternoon, except this time I did it to Mother. Same Oldsmobile Cutlass Cruiser station wagon, same ride home, same or very similar circumstances of hating the close proximity of another little girl who looked nothing like me and could never be my sister or a daughter to my mother. Mine.

My reaction this time was one of complete innocence. Come on, I rationalized, would I really be so stupid to try to hurt two people in the same exact (rather horrifying) way, two days in a row? Mother said I would have time to think about it because I was punished.

I went to my room by myself where I belonged (the best place for children martyrs), cried certainly and loudly because I was sad and wanted everyone in the house to know it. But if I were to write about this in my journal today, I would remind myself of Lala's reactions to the things she did, once she was called to answer for them. She, too, never *meant* to do anything hurtful. It was also never her fault.

* * * * *

The first time I consciously sensed trouble in Mom and Dezi's relationship was a few weeks later in the same car. Mom picked us up from school in her just-washed Nissan and the biggest pair of sunglasses she owned. I'd been reading Encyclopedia Brown books for weeks now and was practicing my detective work. My mom wore those glasses for the same reason limousines had windows as black as their paint jobs—she didn't want anyone to know what was behind them.

Her eyes could do incredible things; one parlor trick she was ready to perform at will was to pop her eyes nearly out of her head, every vein shaking and red. She could also flip her thick curtain of eyelids up and over her eyes, basically turning them inside out, so that all anyone could see was the white of her eyes and the blood red of the inside skin that protected them. It was disgusting, and I asked her to do it repeatedly. She could make her pupils disappear more completely and frighteningly than anyone I'd ever seen. I'm sure she killed in kindergarten, except she couldn't speak English then. We always joked that her eye sockets were so big that they could be replaced with golf balls, maybe even tennis balls, whereas the rest of us humans had eyes maybe the size of marbles.

My guess, as I mechanically ripped open and stuck back together the Velcro on my Trapper Keeper and remembered the sound of a Band-Aid ripping fast, was that her eyes right now were slit like the limos sitting in front of churches or funeral homes that just crack open their windows. One might be curious, but did you really want to see what's inside?

Dezi was unaware of my thoughts or the possibilities of the parked red Nissan. She was walking on her toes pogo stick style like we learned in P.E., the way the gym

teacher told us to do in order to strengthen our calve muscles. I didn't appreciate having a muscle named after a cow so I sat out of the exercise with a stomachache.

But here was Dezi, trying to improve her already perfect white sticks, and glancing every few steps at me to make sure I'd noticed how good she was at it. I ignored her by deducing that Mom's car was freshly washed meant she hadn't gone to work today. She never went to the car wash, said it was damaging to the paint job, just as silly as scrubbing the dishes just after you've painted your nails. So that meant something kept her home, or maybe called her from work early. That meant less money for her, which no parent (especially mine) would choose over having more money.

Dezi and I stepped into our respective doors—her on the left, me on the right—and arranged our school things in between us as a mini-wall. I was right; Dezi hadn't noticed the presence of Mom in her shades as anything serious at all.

“Hey Mommy, how are you?” she asked, still flexing her calf muscles even as she sat.

I looked at Mom through the rearview mirror. I liked to think that she was darting eyes back and forth between the two of us, thinking to herself how silly it was to remarry and obtain a child like this as a result. But she must have been looking directly at Dezi, deciding her next crucial move.

“I was at work today when I got a call from school, Dezi.” Right, check.

“Okay.” Dezi stopped flexing and focused on the ceiling, as was her usual move when confronted with something she couldn't understand or didn't want to. Which was it? She infuriated me. Was she that dumb, or so incredibly, intelligently

evil that she could fool the world with light eyes and a toothless grin? I decided to leave it up to Mom to find out.

“Why aren’t you doing your work in class? Why aren’t you trying?”

More staring. This was going to be good.

“I stay up with you every night, we do your homework together, and you still can’t pay attention in class?”

“Uhh...”

“Dezi, what is two plus three.”

“Uhh...”

“Two plus three, dammit.”

Dezi kicked her feet together, maybe wishing to be Dorothy and get sent back home, right now. She didn’t have an answer, or didn’t want to.

It looked like Mom’s sunglasses were narrowing. Her forehead was bunched enough to make me think I’d done something wrong too, that maybe the world had. And I didn’t like how it felt. I wished I wasn’t punished from the car door anymore. Maybe then I’d slam someone’s finger in the door to divert attention away from all this. Maybe it would be mine.

CHAPTER 11: DEAR STUPID, MISERABLE DIARY

As a child I read books about kids with real problems. They had ten siblings living in two bedrooms, holes in their clothes, lived with incurable maladies and still tried to smile when they woke up in the morning. They were not just the miserable, as I'd later find Woody Allen dubbed most of humanity, but the horrible. It was amazing that they kept on going, those remarkable little engines of children that they were.

This made me feel a bit guilty about my constant internal complaints about my family. I had a whole room to myself early on in my childhood, and even after others came along there was still my own clothes and shelves and warm bath. So what if Dezi came in now and split things up fifty/fifty. That meant I still had fifty, which was a lot better than zero.

And so what if Lala came into the bathroom to add more bubbles into the tub, to pour more toys in, to ask how my feet smelled lately after taking off my socks. So what if I couldn't properly read a book without her asking if I still loved her, without her wanting to jump in, wade through the black and white and turn into my favorite words, be one of those characters and act out a scene for me so she could once again be the object of my engrossment. The so what about her always finding a way to get in was that, at eight, I was beginning to feel trapped by a person who I wanted to be with, if only she didn't remind so much of how I didn't, if only she didn't hate so much the things I loved. So I devised the slow and sane process of trying to get out.

I dusted off my old diary my father had gotten me for Christmas a couple of years earlier. It was true that when I first got the present, it confused me. There was

nothing practical or fun to do with this thing. Books were good only if they were full already, and who was I to put in the work to feed it.

This particular diary offered mounted pressure since one fully-lined page was reserved for every single day of the year. Would I have something to say every day, and if on some days I had more important things to say than others and could fill the entire page, did that mean on days in which two sentences would suffice that I was somehow less worthy? As I flipped through the now stuck-together pages and pondered these questions, I started to suspect that this was one of my father's tricks designed to make me as neurotic as he was. Like when he swung a dead mouse in front of my face and, after I screamed like a maniac, said that only idiots were afraid of something that was dead and couldn't hurt them. The word idiot I'd just come to equate with Dezi, the person who I least and most wanted to be like.

“You mean idiots like Dezi?” I asked.

“Yes, idiots like Dezi. Or your mother.”

I began my project of exorcizing Lala and anyone else who got in my way by dutifully crossing out the year 1987 that ended each date and replacing it with 1989. If I was going to do this thing, I had to do it right. There should be an accurate account of exactly when I was unjustly harmed or scolded or forced to eat salad so I could consistently judge the amount of time in which my persecutors would be forgiven.

Then there was the problem that it was already March 3rd. Those two months and two days might as well been wiped from my existence. I came to terms with my uneasiness when Lala came into my room and asked why I was fooling around with some book instead of watching the telenovela she was recording for us. That she was

recording it and we could watch it later did not meet with her reason. I had to start now.

My first entry spawned from Lala's tiny request, but the theme on March 3rd was one that carried on through to my teenage years: why does everyone stop me from doing what I want to do. I said something such as, "Lala is crazy. What's wrong with me?"

This theme quickly became addictive. Soon I added the entire family to my inventory, forgot all about the guilt that books and Lala gave me in having it too good.

Regarding Dezi: "She looks just like a little ant, only a little ant everyone says is so cute because it doesn't bite. I am like an elephant and the only good thing about that is I can stomp and kill her whenever I want. But since I am an elephant I am ugly and I hate that."

On Mom: "She is at work all day. I am sick of it. When she comes home it's Woody-Woody or Dezi-Dezi. Maybe I'm really not her daughter. I am going to run away after dinner."

And also, I found what to do with the two months and two days worth of pages that were previously the blank introduction to my diary. There is no evidence as to when the actual date or the singular incident that inspired the wrath of this entry, but I filled up those two months within seconds. "I-hate-my-mother," or alternatively, "I-hate-Dezi-I-am-an-elephant" were written, one word per page.

I have no memory of writing this, but I do remember making many entries like it, and each time this exorcism helped fight back the tears that were trying to find their way from behind my eyes. I could leave my room immediately afterward and get on

with my day, without the red face that would prompt Lala to ask twelve times consecutively what was wrong, how she could fix it, who in the hell made me so sad because she would kill them. It was a great relief not to tell her the truth—that it would have to be a suicide.

One afternoon Lala asked me what the significance of elephants were. Who knows how long the dance lasted, my inventing happy reasons for the massive creature I continuously drew, and her still sure that something was wrong. Sure in the way my pencil pushed so deep it touched three pages after it. In the way Hate was capitalized, like a language or religion.

Unfortunately my mother knew the language I wrote in, and when Lala led her to the site of what she was certain was terrible expression (as anything private was), Rosita read silently.

“She’s just writing about some school kids, Lala,” Mom said. “It’s okay.”

I silently thanked Rosita for lying to Lala in translation and empathized with her, as I’d had to do the same thing in Lala’s presence many times.

Later, when Lala was gone, Rosita told me how sorry she was that I felt that way, that it was okay to get mad sometimes, just as long as it wasn’t all the time. I reassured her that the entries from first two months of that year were done on one mad day, and that most times I was fine. She was glad to know that and told me things about Dezi that I needed to understand.

The facts: Dezi’s mother did a lot of drugs when she was pregnant with her, abandoned her with her sister at birth, and went to drug rehab. Dezi’s mother came

back to get her years later but then changed her mind. Dezi was simple, but it wasn't her fault. Dezi didn't have a mother. We were all Dezi had.

Rosita later told me about conversations she had often with Dezi's grandmother. Each time Dezi failed a test, when Dezi got a new, more patient tutor, when Dezi was sent to bed early for losing her textbook, her flashcards, her toothbrush, the two women repeated the words as if for the first time. As if this time would produce different results. As if after my mom delivered her predictable defense, there would be an A on the report card. A prepared girl born.

Dezi's grandmother: "Dezi will never be smart like Brooke."

"She just doesn't try like Brooke does. She needs to pay more attention."

"No, it's not that. She just isn't smart. Dezi was meant to be a cheerleader."

"Not necessarily."

"Dezi is meant to settle down and have a family. We'll just try to get her through as much school as possible."

Although I didn't know the power my fictions and non-fictions had, everyone else did. Rosita and all her friend who I thought had forgotten about me during all those Dezi years were kind enough to tell me about my gifts once I was a grown woman with bills unpaid, with mounting books I couldn't afford or have time to read and a Dezi unseen for ten years.

"You were really cute, you and Dezi. I always felt sorry for her, you were so much quicker."

"You were a little adult. Dezi was lucky to have you to take care of her."

“So funny, you cracked me up. It’s no wonder little Dezi never talked.”

I think of Dezi fondly now, with her red and her white and her blue and all. I hope this would be the case even if she hadn’t moved back to Texas after grammar school. I wish I could’ve seen her as a high school cheerleader, the captain of her team, the highest flying member. I love receiving her Christmas cards, with her husband and her beautiful daughter who looks exactly like her.

CHAPTER 12: IN OTHER PEOPLE'S SHOES

I was born with inoperative feet. My bones were arranged the wrong way, causing my right foot to shoot off in one direction while the left shot off into another. Doctors spotted this malady early and set themselves the task of correcting it so I would be able to walk properly when the time came; they prescribed me a two-pound pair of shoes with a strong, sturdy wire interconnecting them. I was only eight months old at the time, unable to climb out of my crib, and because of the cumbersome shoes I wore every hour of every day, incapable of turning myself over in it.

Lala says the tears she cried onto my feet each night and the leg rub-downs she gave me were what eventually set them straight. Rosita says it took years of money and hassle—first the shoes that didn't allow me to kick (but inspired the lifelong habit of moving my hands when I talk), then the boots that laced up my ankles, which were laced with wire themselves, costing fifty dollars per sole. At the time when most kids knew how to double knot using the Bunny Ears method, I got my first pair of tennis shoes. They were Velcro, an invention that vied with the hula hoop as the most amazing thing ever created. My mom had to buy me a new pair two weeks later because the straps would no longer stick together; I'd opened and closed them day and night to hear the loud, distinctive crackle I'd been denied for so many years. My ankles were finally exposed, and my shoes were as white as I sometimes wished my skin were.

Many reputations have followed me and my family around from the beginning of our time. I've heard whisperings of, "They're weird!" in high school hallways

between my friends who were obviously confused by Lala's propensity for grabbing their boobs every time they came over to our house, done laughingly so to see if they were growing at the proper rate and proportion (she once said to Danielle, one of the more fleeting of the bunch, "These too soft! Eat more meat!" and said to me in Spanish, "Just make sure she knows to slurp it all up and not spit it out.").

Friends of the family, friends who lasted longer than those hallway meeters and greeters, have tried to be more articulate about our inter-relationships and dynamic: You have to decide on a definite emotion, love or hate—choose your battles—make love not war—can't you all just get along, or at least, two of you?

Among themselves they predicted the splintering off of our family like the corners of our cheap, particle-board bookcases that withered down with every move. Their friends predicted wrong, because none of us ever moved far. My mother, her two siblings and Lala all now live within twenty minutes of one another. It's as if our feet are made of clay, and we keep stomping dully over the places we were born into and cross old paths we've left one another's tracks in.

I've often wondered what the real reason for this is, and the only answer I can come up with is the bizarre disorders each of us have had with our feet. I thought myself immune to these ailments, brushed them off as a plight of the older and more prone to physical inferiorities (as I've often thought myself immune to their temperament and behavior, though in spitting fits of fury have been reminded otherwise). But recently my younger sister forced me into examining evidence that proved otherwise.

I allowed Aimee, one of two lovely products of Rosita and Woody, who for what seems like years has been sixteen and angry, to borrow a new pair of brown leather sandals. I took this to be a beneficent gesture reserved only for those who are truly adult and of good breeding. So naturally I was shocked when just minutes later, after she finished dressing for work, she flung the sandals on the carpet beside me and told me not to worry about it, she'd find the appropriate shoes somewhere in her closet.

“Why? Will your boss get mad if the color's wrong?”

“No, that's not it.”

“Well, they fit. What's the problem?”

Aimee looked down, lips puckered and parted in disgust, her eyes never so round, and assumed her typical pose—she turned her back to me, and once satisfied that I knew I'd have to figure this dilemma out on my own, she began to walk away, adamantly barefooted.

I inspected the shoes carefully, as if maybe I'd stepped in something offensive I didn't know about. I brought the sandal to my nose, a rather disgusting method of detection but effective nonetheless. My nose has never failed me in matters of things grotesque, first proven by the only episode in which Lala poured lengua into my favorite bowl usually reserved for Cheerios with chocolate or condensed milk. The cow-tongue soup smelled exactly like the insoles of old leather shoes my grandfather refused to throw away, and I absolutely would not partake in eating, and from the look on my cousins' faces I could see this method must be failsafe. I still consider it to be so—on a typical take-out evening several years ago, I didn't touch the fast food fried

chicken that poisoned my mother's gall bladder and sent us to an emergency room for the night.

This was not the case here—my shoes' soles were still thick and black and unmuddied, and the surface was brown and emitted a subtle new shoe smell. The culprit revealed itself when I turned the shoe completely upside-down and saw a nice-sized portion of the bottoms of my feet litter onto the carpet. I knew my tennis shoes had, for months, grown old and begun rubbing my feet in the wrong way, and that these new sandals punished me for spending so much money on them by cutting deep into my toes and my soles after ten minute's use. I may have even popped a blister or two with a sterilized needle or my crunching thumbs. But I had no idea that when I turned over these relatively new shoes, a third of my foot would fall out with it.

Stunned, I turned my foot upside-down and saw my grandfather's soles: a white canvas for me to pull apart as a child. Sheet after sheet I tried to reach the layer that was normal-footed, a layer with thick pinkness that could actually leave lineated footprints like babies do when they're born and leave distinct prints like pleats in a dress, before the pleats become vague wrinkles and after thousands of miles, straighten out with the weight of an iron, clunk down upon the earth like clay. Now my toes had no ridges, my feet were a new canvas to begin working on. So since no one was looking, since there were no eyes to be averted or rolled, I began to peel away, allowing a large pile to form in the cup of my hand.

My Aunt Tammy's foot failures twice almost took her life. Both times my Uncle Carlos was involved, though once he was trying to save her life and later he was

trying to end it. She can't remember the first incident between them, and he says that he's often regretted it. They were with a group of friends at a remote Mississippi lake and it was the seventies, where Tammy was high and trying to get laid and society deemed that okay. Carlos didn't. He thought her disgusting and slutty and trying to ingratiate herself too embarrassingly with *his* friends, not hers, and he told her to leave. She left but didn't go far, having wandered into the jagged rocks that framed the water. Carlos smoked his joint and thoughtfully pondered the situation—was she worth the risk in the growing darkness? Was he up for getting in the water after he'd already dried off?

A moment of clarity hit him harder than his drag when he pictured Lala's face after he had to tell her that her youngest daughter had drowned, while he was present no less. He saw a sadness he'd never seen in her—it scared him more than the times she'd stamped his feet in red-faced tantrum—and he wasn't going to let it happen. After stubbing out his smoke and unlacing one shoe after the other, he jumped into the water and gripped tight around Tammy's neck to get her out.

While they were still splashing through the water she shouted, "Let me go, you asshole!" so many times that, once on shore, he did just that and abruptly dumped her on the rock he'd been smoking on. He relit his joint and offered Tammy a hit, relieved that the Lala he knew and loved was restored in his head. Tammy accepted the offer, though instead of puffing, she threw it in the water. Here began years of reflection for Carlos over whether or not he'd made the right decision.

He didn't ponder long before he got his chance to seriously reevaluate his choice. It was just a year later that Carlos tried to kill Tammy. At least, that's her

version. She remembers standing in the bathroom in a pink robe, clutching it and her neck and yelling at Carlos as he yelled back. She remembers his face being so twisted up that he looked like a stranger: his nose wasn't the nose they shared with their father, his neck not the stubby one that runs on both sides but strangely elongated, fictional, monstrous, his mouth a bullet, a ball of fire.

Or maybe she just saw the actual bullet. For her there was no titillation like in a play or the movies, no assessment of what type of gun was being introduced to the frightened character and a description of what kind of pain or everlasting ending it could cause. There was just fire, inches from her head. And her feet, planted, growing roots as she let out a scream that Carlos had never heard before, and by his account, hasn't since.

Carlos recounts the path of the bullet, how it pierced the bathroom wall, inches to the left of Tammy's head, and crossed the hallway that my mom had just entered from her bedroom, and sliced through what was then Abuelo's office but would later become my toyroom and ended flight with brick that wrapped their house. His biggest point of pride seems to be his punishment, which was being grounded for two weeks for lack of gun control, and also having to fix the wall. This later became a reduced sentence, because Lala said he would muck up her walls, so they may as well pay a professional to do it. (And Lala figured the more he was out of the house, the safer it was for all parties, including herself, as she'd been walking down the hallway to inspect the commotion between her son and daughter to see a fired bullet cross just a couple feet in front of her path.)

I could understand how this was the highlight of his story, as punishments from Lala (and Abuelo, implicitly) were notorious for being severe. When my aged-twenty mother went to her friend's house on a Friday night without asking permission, she returned at midnight to find Lala leaning against the front door with Abuelo's black leather belt. Lala whacked Mom and backed her into the hallway, into her bedroom, into her closet until Mom had no choice but to use hanging bellbottoms and cotton shirts as a defense against the lashings.

It became clothes-on-clothes warfare, with Lala having a definite advantage with her sturdy black whip, until Mom found some shoes and hurled them like cannonballs, until Lala found the wire hangers dangling above Mom's head and put them to use, until Carlos finally picked her up around the waist and carried her away kicking and spitting, and locked her and the venom she spat inside her bedroom, where clamoring could be heard for several minutes after Mom examined the drippings scratch marks that crisscrossed her arms and chest.

Though Lala readily admitted to everyone who would listen that I was her favorite, by far above and beyond the children she bore and screamed and risked her life for, and much more than the other grandchildren they would bear for her in the future, I was not immune to her occasional wrath.

When I spent a week of my five-year-old life coloring the underside of my Strawberry shortcake writing table my grandparent's had just recently bought me, reducing every color in my 18-pack to a one-inch nub, Lala forced me to erase the entire painting endeavor with the countless bottles of white out my mom pilfered from the law firm in which she worked (though how she knew that the underneath of that

table was the canvas for my masterpiece, I still have no idea). I remember crying at some points of the repair, and though it is tempting to martyr myself as a mini-Michelangelo who was forced to lie on my back, erasing my own version of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, I suspect that my original intention was less creative and more sadistic—I believe the rabid coloring had a direct correlation to Lala slapping my hand when I felt it wasn't deserved. Carlos, both then and now, would say I deserved what I got, just like Tammy did.

“God, the screaming. I never wanted to hear another woman scream like that again, though I couldn't give up my sex life that easily.”

He laughed, as he does with all his jokes, and I held a steady, not-quite-frozen smile as I've done since he's deigned me “adult enough” to hear his vulgarity. One reason I can't force any reaction beyond a smile is that Carlos's laugh doesn't fit his body—it's the affected hee-hee of a costumed witch or an ornery British woman, not the guffaw of a Hispanic man with a handlebar mustache, corkscrew ponytail, and a potato sack for a stomach.

I responded to this differently as a little girl. Even if he was laughing at my expense (as I'd tripped and cried not at the pain, but at the sheer embarrassment of being fat and falling) I had to laugh with him. I always imagined a girl just a little bit smaller than me inside his stomach making that child-like noise, and I could beat her up if I wanted to.

But I didn't laugh this time. It made me a bit uneasy that he could maintain levity at a time like this, especially since his clay feet place him only three blocks away from my mother's house. What if she called him Pansón (a word reserved for the

unusually rotund) in a less-than-jocular manner? What if she told him what my sisters and I have whispered behind doors—that he’s an obnoxious fatso?

“I would never shoot your mom. I wouldn’t shoot anyone now, I was stupid when I did that with Tammy. But even back then I never would’ve shot her.”

“Why? What made you two get along better?”

“For one thing, she doesn’t have Tammy’s voice. God, that screaming.”

Carlos screamed in pain years later, just days before his father, my Abuelo, would pass away. The story went that an accident at work caused his foot to break. He was a plumber, there were tools, these things happened. The cast went halfway up his leg—there was no way he would be able to get on a plane.

The real story: Carlos was living in California at the time with his girlfriend that Lala referred to as “la putona.” Lala thought most white women were sluts, but in this case, everyone else in the family agreed. While they visited Louisiana, Carlos brought Celia to family dinners. She’d been doing cocaine. She picked at her plate and let her runny nose flood the carne asada. The little clothes she wore, she fell out of. It was just a suggestion: perhaps she should come to the funeral.

Carlos kept his feet in California (at least for the next three years, after which he would move permanently back to Louisiana). He’d broken one foot, and the other one was spiteful about the general disapproval of his girlfriend. The rest of us watched as Abuelo went feet first into the coffin and into the ground. We would do it without his only son, or so we thought at the time.

CHAPTER 13: BLOOD LOVING

Several months after Abuelo died, Lala introduced me to a different side of him. She and I weren't the only women in his life, Lala said. He loved so many that we were all just happy acquaintances to him. He wanted to get rid of her a long time ago, she said. Like the time he took her to a psychoanalyst who said all the pains she felt were in her mind, who said she needed treatment and therapy, who said she needed drugs. I had always thought the pills Lala took were good for her, especially since she sometimes broke the chalky bits in half and fed them to me. Like the time when I fell off my bike and scraped both knees and wouldn't stop crying. And the day Abuelo died. But now she blamed Abuelo and her pills for her misery.

Further proof of his hatefulness, she said: A Palm Sunday many years ago, when Lala was still beautiful enough to have any man of any age, she came home, peaceful and full of prayer with her three-foot palm leaf, and caught Abuelo with another woman. Both were fully dressed, but just caught, like a squirrel in headlights or a fish in a net. Lala used the only accessory she wore to her advantage: palm stem wrapped around her wrist, she beat Abuelo and younger woman with the green paddle like she beat her kids for coming home late. She hit him so hard she damaged herself as well. The pointy leaf edges cut her as much as they did him, and when he went home later that day and asked for forgiveness she let their bloods commingle before she cleaned them up.

When Lala told me all of this I still had Abuelo's swollen white face pasted on my head's black backdrop. I couldn't imagine him doing anything at all, much less

something bad. Lala may never have told me if it weren't for what she learned at the funeral.

Abuelo lay in a very expensive box, hands clasped on top of each other just like they'd been every night for years in his green chair. The minister called for the children of the deceased, and my mom walked up along both her sisters and a younger man she had never met. All four put red roses on the casket that they'd gotten before the service began. The young man's name, he would later tell Rosita, was Alfredo. Just like his father. The minister knew before Lala knew of another family in mourning just as much as ours.

Rosita has recounted the other horrible events of the day. Lala fainted, genuinely for perhaps the first time, and needed her oldest daughters, Rosita and Nancy, to help carry her. Tammy, her oldest, was unavailable for help. She was getting to know her new brother who, she announced, was much more of a brother than her other one ever was. She gave the other woman ostentatious kisses, put her arms around both as if they'd just won a baseball game. She would not look at her sisters or her mother, called the other woman next to her, "Ma." She was still not over Papon, the clown that was rightfully hers.

While all of this was going on, I wasn't with any of them. I was inside a box that was every memory I'd had with Abuelo. All I could think about when I saw him in his coffin, his head slightly larger than I knew it to be, his skin pulled a bit back as if facing a high wind, was that I would never see his feet again. It was a strange thought—I knew it at the time and I know it now—but my hands on his feet was the way we'd always

connected. I didn't remember much about the words we exchanged, or any word he ever said at all. And though I know I often curled up next to him on his chair, I knew I mostly squatted at his feet in curious adoration.

I loved him through his feet. The peeling pair were like a conch shell to me; they weren't only to be handled with careful, delicate fingers but they were to be heard, to put my ear up to and hear a sound that everyone interprets differently, and that cynics say is actually nothing. I heard veins pumping, blood flowing, I heard him say that these were his happiest times. I saw him in his coffin and I remember having not only heard the blood flow, but seen it and tasted it. I remembered when I'd gotten too vigorous with the peeling away, and I'd gone too far and hit the sounds I'd heard so often. I looked from the blood on my finger to his face, which was as composed as ever, lips the ruler-straight line I always knew them to be. He hadn't noticed.

But Lala, who was standing beyond his head, had noticed. I reacted instinctually—I stuck my finger in my mouth to eliminate the subtle but certain bloody evidence. Lala smiled and congratulated me on the exact right reaction I should've had after making Abuelo bleed: “Si mijita, chupe la sangre. Asi tu abuelo es una parte de ti, y pueden estar juntos para el resto de su vida.”

I hadn't known before that moment that my blood-sucking had amounted to so much, that because of my finger on his feet and then my mouth and the taste of iron I drank without reserve, that I'd invited my grandfather to be a part of me forever and ever. I didn't know then that much later, when I'd stare into his coffin, he was alive somewhere in my teeth or my fingers or toes.

Just weeks later my family began making arrangements for another funeral. Rosita went shopping one afternoon with Lala for a new basinet. She was six months pregnant with her third child, so used to the process she could've jogged a mile that day. But her body disagreed. On their way inside Comeaux Furniture, Rosita bent over in pain. Cars looking for a place in the parking lot stopped and people got out, asked if they could help. Lala saw the same chocolate blood that came out of her mother's mouth all those years ago now come out of her daughter's. She immediately felt that this was it for Rosita—a daughter and a husband gone in one month. Here Lala did not faint, did not cry, did not fall down and fake her own death. She got a phone, got an ambulance, got her daughter directly to the emergency room.

A few days later all I knew was that Mom was having her baby a bit early. And that her friends came over constantly, baking Dezi and me cookies, cleaning up around the house, bringing their small children over for me to babysit (the ultimate signal that they were aware of my nascent maturity). They even talked to me like an adult by telling me not to worry too much about my mom. How they must have hated lying to me like that. How their voices must have quivered as they made arrangements with the funeral home that Abuelo had just been buried in.

I was a bit worried, anyway, because I remembered Mom's last maternity leave from me two years before when Aimee was born, and it hadn't taken nearly this long. She was in and out of the hospital in less than two days even though her stomach was twice as big for that pregnancy than it was for this one. Here we were on six and her bed

remained perfectly folded, with the hospital corners tucked in tight like only she and TV army men could make.

But all these facts and observances only gave me slight pause. The proof that the matter was more serious than anyone let on was that it seemed Lala was making arrangements for Mom's soul. She believed in God and asked me to pray for just a couple of minutes every night, which we both usually did half-heartedly until it came time to give bendición to each other—the sign of the cross on the head and a kiss on the lips. These prayers now spilt over into daytime. When she picked me up from school, it took her almost an entire reading of the rosary that hung around her rearview mirror to realize that I'd been sitting in the car watching her pray for ten minutes, her plump fingers moving from bead to bead with that Catholic agility usually reserved for the blue-haired ladies on Easter, the only time we attended church.

Lala began carrying her crystal rosary everywhere she went and assured me that she blessed every space in Mom's sterile hospital room. She prayed for the daughter who was swollen in a hospital bed three times her normal size, whose face she couldn't recognize just as I hadn't been able to recognize Abuelo's; she prayed that her grandchildren wouldn't be left without a mother, like she had been so many years before.

In my world these events lasted for one week. After that I turned ten and was cut off from the world for the next three months. Lala and Mom's friends agreed that since Mom was taking her time getting home, this would be an opportunity for me to spend more time with my dad. I only saw him every other weekend, and had never lived with him for an extended period.

I immediately questioned the veracity of their statements and enthusiasm. Mom's friends heard my father's name and set their eyes rolling (though they thought I wasn't paying attention), and Lala always said that he was a good man until you made him mad, at which point he became the Diablo incarnate. She usually ended her assessments of him with, "I know how much he loves you, but thank God you don't have to live with him."

So now I wondered why I was packing three backs of clothes and two of books, and why Lala had gone from praying to smiling, as if she were one of my old dolls that you pull the string to get a desired reaction. Only I didn't want her to smile, I wanted her to tell Mom's friend to "Valla a la mierda!"¹ and clutch me to her breast, insisting I stay in my own house with her until my mom came back. But someone kept tugging that string, and Lala kept on that smile that crowded her face even as I walked out the door to Dad's open trunk.

¹ "Go to shit!" which actually works very well before translation, as most obscenities.

CHAPTER 14: CALLUSES

I had never lived with Roy in any past that I remembered, and I had to say that he was not the best roommate. He didn't cook at all, and his belief that inundating me with Happy Meals would make me happy was a bit misguided. Sure, I was used to eating a lot and not having to ask for more, and true that he scurried into the car whenever the vaguest signs of boredom came over me, which I was used to Lala doing and therefore deeply appreciated. But I was also used to home-cooked Lala food, the kind of food that just smelling it meant tasting it. I almost wished for that awful smell of lengua to replace the smell of grease and wrapping paper, which is the only scent that fast food has ever had for me.

And his hygiene was inadequate, at least under the standards that my mom's family had instilled in me. It was true that it took several years for me to get used to taking daily baths, and I still had to be coerced into brushing my teeth twice a day, but my dad never, never smelled like soap. He didn't emit a disgusting body odor, just a scent of grease not unlike the fast food we perpetually consumed. That food smell seemed to live on top of him. It also resided in his hair that truly looked, as Lala used to say of me if I let a day pass without washing my head, as if eggs could be fried upon it.

But none of this compared to his feet, his toes in particular. Some might have regarded Abuelo's feet as rather disgusting, with skin that flaked off and left its mark on the carpet at sporadic points in time. What I loved about them was that they were actually pretty, with thick brown skin on top and curly black toe hairs and strong bones

that held up the rest of the six feet of bones nice and tall. I imagined he could have modeled his feet if he wanted, as long as no one asked to look underneath.

The tops of Dad's feet, though, were horrible. They were dry and cracked yet not at the peeling stage; they just looked like a chalkboard that wasn't fully erased. The film on his feet might have left a white ghost on my hands had I ever tried to touch them. I never did because there was nothing to peel away. The closest things to falling off were his toenails, the bone-like chunks at the end of each toe. And they were tinged green on the verge of becoming black, rotten little mushrooms, and I'd learned from food (especially my favorites, bread and cheese) that whatever turns this color has irreparably gone bad.

So I stayed away from them, and missed sitting at the end of Abuelo's chair. Dad too had a chair, but decorated in an awful paisley pattern it hurt to look at, and his slender hips had just enough room to squeeze into both arms. It was not a chair for two.

The only activity that could've rivaled Dad's love for sitting and smoking in his chair was smoking while he drove. Things happened when he was in a car that defied laws of the universe. Mom told me how he once was so engrossed in lighting a cigarette while he drove, drink in hand, that he drove right into the lawn of an elderly couple in New Orleans East, right past their lawn jockeys and flower beds, and straight into their living room. His apology to the couple who'd just moments ago been watching television comfortably on their sofa, and who now had piles of brick on and under and around their coffee table and ash in their hair and their lungs, was profoundly glib. He

said, “I’m sorry. I think I zagged when I should have zigged.” He managed to walk away without a law suit and without a scratch.

While I would never want to be a part of this scenario, it fascinated me: smoke, dust, a car with its face squashed in unrecognizably, a man walking away with a shoulder shrug. That’s how I felt when I was in the car with him, with his heavy foot and stitched eyebrows and how he spoke to me as if there were no roads or cars or other potentially fatal obstructions to contend with, as if it were just he and I debating an issue we both cared about like two adults, with his cigarette often coming precariously close to the tip of my nose when he extended it to punctuate his point.

I didn’t know what would happen, and that I was not only forced to wear my seatbelt, but was more than willing to do so (unlike in my car rides with Mom or Lala) added to the mystery that was riding alongside my dad. But sometimes his high-caliber performances presented a problem for me. Once, it made me throw up.

That night he seemed especially jittery. He’d gotten a phone call and started pacing the living room at such a quick speed I kept waiting for him to trip over his own phone cord. I’d become a bit nervous myself, because he kept using the word “she” like it was a capital letter, like it was at the beginning of a sentence and had to pronounce it properly, or like it was the most important word in a sentence, so he had to slow down when he reached it so he would be heard. How is She? Is She reacting to it at all? When do you think She’ll come home? I knew I hadn’t seen my mom in a while, so of course only an idiot like my stepsister wouldn’t know who She was. But when I repeated these same questions to my dad, he didn’t answer them but kept pacing. Finally, after I assume his feet got tired of doing all this work for nothing, he found a solution: “Let’s eat.”

Minutes later we were on the I-10 headed to what he assured me was a great surprise. I thought, “Yes! I get to see my mom and baby sister. I’ll finally know how both Shes are doing.” I looked up at my dad, who was stating his opinions about whether *Goodfellas*, a movie we had recently seen, contained characters who were convincing enough; he was just asking for a debate. Maybe I’d been a bit too harsh on him. Even the smoke wasn’t so bad—sure, he kept the windows rolled up so I could barely see him, and had to follow the points of his cigarette to know whether or not his hands were on the wheel, not to mention that I could barely breathe. He also seemed to have little control of his appendages. His hands jerked us left and right, in and out of lanes, and when he craned his neck to see whether or not there were cars on the road (which I kept insisting that they weren’t), his arms followed them; four severe brake pumps and three stomach churns were a result. I could concede to all of this because he was my father and he knew what I needed: to see my mother, and possibly later to get a good meal. I looked outside my window at the stars and finally knew the reason they were up there.

Our car tore off the interstate at the Power exit, which pleased me since I knew one of New Orleans’ many hospitals was somewhere nearby. I quietly burped and kept my eyes open, knowing that a respite from my pain would soon come in the form of my mom’s face. But when Dad said, “Here we are” at the sight of flashing neon lights and a gigantic mouse, I became slightly confused.

“Where are we?”

“You know where we are, we’ve been here a million times. We’re at Chuck E. Cheese.”

“Why?”

“So you can eat, and play.”

“Dad, I’m ten. I’m not going in there.”

“We are going in right now.” Dad opened the door and stubbed out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, which I didn’t understand since the concrete was right there. I understood when I saw him replace the half-smoked cigarette back in his wrinkled pack. I wasn’t sure I knew this man at all.

“Bullshit.”

It was at this point I believe I may have crossed the boundaries of father-daughter debate. True, I cursed in front of Lala all the time, but we both knew we were poking fun at and insulting the crudeness of the language, not each other. I think my Dad was less offended by the profanity directed at him and more disappointed by my crassness and ignorance in debate. This was how bar-people talked when they didn’t know what else to say, this was not how his daughter talked. I should’ve learned better by now, but who knows what I’ve learned in that house with a derelict stepfather and crazy grandmother. There were other words, other points he was making as he shook my shoulders much like he drove his car, firmly and with some deep-seated purpose and care (and finally sans cigarette), though I can’t recount them now. I just remember struggling to hold up my hands as a sign of resistance, for him to stop rearranging every organ inside of me. Then, I bent straight down, I turned myself into a sideways L, and I threw up my entire day all over both of our shoes.

This may have lasted minutes, or seconds; one doesn’t know when it feels like her whole life is coming out of her throat. But I remember the results: a small yellow lake that encircled us. I imagined it was a portal that would suck us in and take us into the hot

core of the earth where the Devil lived and where we soon would as well—Dad for his evil driving ways that sickened me and caused me to cry, and me for the cigarette I'd taken a puff off of before this car ride. I'd rationalized that action with my father's perpetual statements that he only smoked when he was nervous because it calmed him, and I figured I could use some of that effect myself. Lala always said that anyone who made me cry would go straight to hell, but then again those who disobeyed their parents were the worst sinners. So I figured now it was going to be me and dad in our yellow circle of puke, down and down until forever.

Of course I'd been through this before. I'd thrown up from eating too much and I'd thrown up from the flu. I'd never done it from inhaling a cigarette, and I'd never done it because I was worried I would never see my mother again. I wasn't sure of what to do.

I don't know what Dad thought at that moment, and I don't know if he was wondering what I was thinking. He never asked. What he did was pick me up in his arms and cradle me, ten and heavy, and walk me inside Chuck E. Cheese. We went to our respective bathrooms and washed our shoes off, I washed out my mouth, and we ate pizza. Everywhere there were mice singing songs and kids riding on horses that never went anywhere. We went home early.

I found out the truth much later that night, though Roy never knew I did. My father's room was adjacent to my grandmother's (the room I'd been sleeping in for weeks now) and separated only by a wooden partition with blinds fixed at a decline so that I could see only down into the room.

His feet—now covered up in brown loafers and safe to observe without another sickness for the night—paced the floor even harder than earlier. If I was asleep the stomping would've woken me up. I wondered if he wanted me to hear him. Pawing at the frozen wood, I tipped up on my toes so I could get a look at something else; I was sure his face would be able to tell me something more. The pacing had by now become just another one of his idiosyncrasies. For all I knew, he was trying to get a cardiovascular workout. I needed to know his mind was where mine was—with Her.

Then he proffered everything I did and didn't want to hear in a single sentence: God I love her so much, please take me instead. And then he did something that made me believe that after tonight, I was going to continue on in this world without both my mother and my father: he cried.

There seems to be a universal moment of catharsis among children when they first see their fathers cry. This makes sense to me; they realize their hero is weak and flawed and it may temporarily crush their spirits, but this isn't what happened with me. I'd always been aware that my hero was flawed. He was obsessive compulsive in all the wrong ways. He made sure his pants were always at least a size too big, enough to fit both hands in comfortably (in order to make sure he hadn't gained weight), yet didn't bother to wash them. If his cardboard box of cigarettes became even the slightest bit bent, he guffed at the world—more exclusively his mother, who hadn't smoked a cigarette in her sixty years—not to touch his goddamned shit. After seeing a movie, he had a hard time listening to points that weren't his own. And those feet that I couldn't bear to look at, much less touch; if one didn't know just how many ways in which I

wanted to be just like him, they would've accused me taking part in an unhealthy process of fault-finding.

The worst, though, was how he always talked about Rosita. He called her stupid, a bit too chubby, married to someone even stupider than her, and a few other words that I would learn at various points in my future: insipid, imprudent, portly, lascivious, inconsequential. Before I ever got a chance to admonish him for his slander (other words I would learn), he would take it back, repeating over and over that I didn't deserve to hear that and my mom didn't either.

Once I was imprudent enough to respond back to him, "No, we don't deserve it. People who are divorced should still be civil, especially if they have kids, and especially since there are so many of you out there." His reply was moments of silence and then, "You are great, you know that? You sure got your brains from me." It was funny that he mistook profundity on my part for just another platitude I heard on a daytime talk show. My hero, the man who kissed one of my feet and crushed down into the other.

So I was aware of his flaws, and I also knew by the way he reacted to movies that he was immune to sadness. Supergirl's plot made him exasperated and mad, Indiana Jones's adventures made him smile, but he didn't even cry when Bambi's mother died. I've met many grown men since then that say this is an exaggeration—he *must* have cried. I will admit that he did let me use his shirt sleeve to wipe away my tears, but his eyes never even got close to moist.

"I love her, I swear to you God, you can't take her away from me." The pacing stopped, and then all I heard were sobs. My dad loved to remind me that when I was a baby I seldom cried, but those times I did he had to leave the room since the screeching

was so intense. He said he'd wear his feet into calluses with his worried pacing. I felt this way now, as if he didn't stop making those noises and saying those sweet things that, in other circumstances, would've been wonderful to hear, my feet would fail indefinitely. They might crumble into dust.

Then suddenly, he slapped himself hard and stopped the sobbing. I saw his arms rise up toward his face, and I heard the smack. The last thing I saw that night was my hero lower himself on his bed like a man much older than him would, like Abuelo might have a hundred times before, and put his head in his hands. I never got to see his face, but I knew everything I needed to for now.

CHAPTER 15: A BETTER HEAD

The next morning I was on the phone with Lala, telling her all I'd heard and the little I'd seen. It took her awhile to convince her that I was telling the truth. She kept saying, "Your dad doesn't cry. Rosita was with him for seven years and he never cried, not when she found him with another woman, not when he came home to find his clothes packed, not even when you were born." This was the first but not the last time I'd hear about Dad's infidelities, and Lala later said she wouldn't have mentioned it if she weren't completely confounded as how to deal with my questioning.

Meanwhile, I dealt with it in the way I'd used so many times in defense of Lala, to get my mom to let me spend the night at her house, to convince Mom that she shouldn't be mad at her own mother; this was a failsafe method that Lala herself taught me. I cried.

As I began the noises, I realized this was the crying that Dad must've been talking about, the crying from those early days after birth, the crying that, given my age (less than one), I really meant. This had to be the same decibel-wise: I opened my mouth as if to swallow the phone receiver. I imagine Lala twisted her dyed-red hair around her fingers and may have possibly felt faint as I asked her to tell me the truth: Would I see my mother again? Was she going to die? Had the answers to my two questions been reversed, my life thereafter would have remained the same. I could go on idolizing Lala because she was older and would die soon, and know that I would have to spend as much time with her before the end she always reminded me of actually came, and remain relatively indifferent to my mother who, in both mine and Lala's

eyes, could be found at any time in our futures because of her strength and tacit immortality. But the answer to the first question was a negative, the second, an affirmative. Lala had already purchased the coffin, and she proffered my help with writing the eulogy. A priest had blessed my mom on her last bed. If I was going to see her, it had to be soon.

Later that day I met a woman I'd never seen before. She had purple legs and charred black feet. Her face was swollen, much like Abuelo's had been inside his coffin, and her eyes receded somewhere inside the puffiness. We weren't able to visit the daughter she had given birth to but were told she could fit inside a shoebox. She needed several machines to help her breathe but was expected to survive. Lala called her Milagro. A miracle.

No one was sure at that point what had happened to Rosita. Years later there is still no definitive answer. For some reason her circulation shut down. Before I visited her that day in the hospital, the purpleness had covered even her head. She'd needed dialysis, had temperature changes eight degrees at a time, and no one could find where the sickness was coming from. Her blood just sat still inside her, couldn't make itself pump.

In the end there were two miracles. When I left the hospital that day, being told from every strange and familiar face that it was the last time I would see my mother's (when it wasn't even her face), I prayed. I prayed that day to the God that Lala always had faith in yet acted against. I prayed in a way I didn't understand—take away candy, take away countries, take away me—much the same way my father had prayed the night before. I prayed for another miracle. And then, after a unit of time that for me

wasn't minutes or days or anything to be labeled but nothingness, then there were two. Rosita would live to raise her three daughters. She came home.

At some point during her illness, Mom wrote Lala a note scrawled in a child's handwriting. It was to be her living will. She wrote with blackening hands that she would leave her daughters with Lala. Not with Roy, who only now was caring for me. Not with Woody, who for the weeks Mom was in the hospital could not be found. Lala, she wrote with her almost dead hands. Lala. Lala. Lala.

Rosita now regrets she made this decision and thanks God herself that it never came to fruition. "It was the drugs," she jokes. "I wasn't thinking clearly."

Through the years, Lala has continue hurting and loving us in different ways. Mom tends to remember the hurt.

Here is a Lala fact she won't forget: Lala started a savings account for me at birth, placed money in it throughout my life and, once I started working in high school, allowed me to put my own money into it too. When I needed it for high school graduation, it was gone.

"I'm done with her, you can put up with it if you want to. You haven't known her as long."

Another fact: Lala's feet prevented her from going to my college graduation. She called my mother an hour before they were to make the trip to my school that her feet had been swollen since Easter Sunday, a few weeks earlier, when our backyard's penchant for mosquito-carrying caused her a loss of nearly a pint of blood and had by

now swollen her feet three times their normal size. Congratulate Brooke for me, she said, because I can't go.

My mom, later that day: "I'm done with her. Her feet were fine when she walked to the bank that day and stole all your money."

Rosita feels more the hurtful parts of life with Lala, but I'm not sure how much I do. I think that ultimately, Lala has ineffective feet just like the rest of us. But as I've grown into adulthood I've felt my loyalties must lie with Mom, who is now completely comfortable with that name. I owe it to her after the years when, even though I called her that, I didn't absolutely know it. So when she took a two-year hiatus from Lala after my college graduation, so did I.

The hiatus is over now. It's inherent in the word; all breaks come to an end, and thus start other beginnings. The first time I saw Lala in two years, she grabbed my boobs toward her in a hug. She missed me, she said, she loved me. She'd been sick, she'd gotten better, she was still alive and wanted me with her. Who knew how much longer she'd last.

The first story she told me when we got back together concerned a scene from childhood I didn't remember. I'll translate it here, completely truthfully, if any of her beauty and insanity is to be believed:

"When you were a baby, I used to kiss your vagina over and over again whenever I changed your diaper. After a while you'd just open your little legs right up, and even though you couldn't talk, I knew you were thinking, 'Kiss me! Kiss me!' And your Abuelo didn't like it at all! He begged me to stop. He kept saying things

like, 'Stop doing that, Gladys, she's going to get used to it.' I told him to shut up, of course, and kept doing it because you loved me to kiss you so much. So...did you get used to it?"

VITA

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