

Little Bird

A Collection of Short Stories

by

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Sugar

She's addicted to candy; this is what her mother says. You're addicted: do you know what sugar does to your brain? It does wonderful things, Daniela wants to say, but she stops herself. Her mother has an answer for everything—she'll surely have one for this. That's how addiction works, it destroys your will, it's self-perpetuating. Her mother is a therapist, and Daniela doesn't understand half the things she says. When her mother is in her study with a patient, Daniela retrieves the bag of candy she hides in a shoebox in her wardrobe and sits near the window in a state of complete mental passivity, eating spicy dried mangoes, gummy bears, and chocolate bunnies. She prefers candy to dessert, because with candy she gets that immediate sugary zap, while with a cookie or a piece of cake she has to eat more of it to feel the rush, and then she often feels sick. Thank god you're a child and still have perfect metabolism, her mother tells her. Otherwise you'd be obese. But look at you: look at that skinny torso, those skinny legs. She looks straight into Daniela's eyes: I just want what's best for you, she says.

They live in an eight story building in Polanco with one apartment per floor. When they come home from school, they often go up the stairs instead of using the elevator because her mother says it's good for them. On each landing Daniela sniffs and tells her mother what they're cooking—it's a game they play. Fried plantains on the first floor, Daniela proclaims. Enchiladas on the second, beef stew on the third, caramel flan on the fourth. Theirs is the fifth floor. Outside their door they often find Juanito, the building

porter, chatting with Paulina, their housekeeper and cook. Juanito is bald except for a few wisps of black hair, and his eyes seem to stick out of his face, as if they hadn't been pushed in all the way. Daniela is scared of Juanito. Whenever he turns away from Paulina and looks down at her with those round eyes, Daniela feels the skin on her neck shrivel. But her mother says they should be kind to Juanito because his wife died last year, and so Daniela forces herself to smile up at him. Paulina doesn't like Juanito either, but he's always hanging around the fifth floor when he should be downstairs checking who comes into the building. He gives me the creeps, Paulina tells Daniela as she flips a quesadilla for Daniela's dinner. But we have to be nice, she adds, sighing. Why? Daniela wants to know, biting into her quesadilla, the soft tortilla and melted cheese comforting in her mouth. Why do we have to be nice? I don't know, Paulina shrugs. The priests say kindness is a virtue. And he's still in mourning; if I'm mean your mom will get angry and fire me. Daniela looks up quickly, swallowing a sharp bit of tortilla that scratches at her throat. My mom wouldn't fire you, she says. She and Paulina are friends. She can't imagine her life without Paulina, who sits with her, shelling peas or chopping onions, while Daniela does her homework, and who chats with her about telenovelas while she vacuums the living room. And Daniela is Paulina's favorite—she knows this because Paulina peels grapes for her. Daniela doesn't like the skins, and when Paulina gives her the peeled grapes she says: I only do this for you. I don't peel grapes for anyone else. Even if I had a child of my own I wouldn't peel grapes for her—only for you.

Daniela's grandmother lives in the building next door and Daniela and her older sister Lisa spend two afternoons a week with her. Her apartment is yellow and orange and she has white orchids near the window, where the sun comes in thick and warm. Often they

bake cookies together. Grandma Alice's almond cookies are famous, and everyone tells her she should sell them and make a fortune. They either mix the batter from scratch or, if they're feeling lazy, they take a bag of cookie dough from the freezer—Grandma Alice makes a batch each week and keeps it frozen—and put them in the oven while they read books about witches and giant peaches. Soon the smell of butter and sugar and almonds seeps through the apartment and into the living room, and Daniela and Lisa grab the cookies, still hot, from the tray, and often they burn the roof of their mouth. Grandma Alice tries to stop them, chuckling. There'll be enough for everyone, she says. They're not going anywhere. Later, when she walks them over to their building, she barely glances at Juanito the doorman. She doesn't like him, and when Daniela says their mom has told them to be nice because his wife died, Grandma Alice shrugs with disdain. If I don't like him, I don't like him, she says firmly, which impresses Daniela with its indisputable logic. In the elevator, Grandma Alice motions with an index finger to her lips and a sly smile before the doors open onto the fifth floor, and she delivers the girls to their mother or to Paulina with a perfectly straight face. Daniela and Lisa know what she means: don't tell your mom about the cookies; it's our secret. Their mother constantly tells Grandma Alice to stop feeding them sugar, but Grandma Alice doesn't like being told what to do, and she thinks grandmothers should always spoil their grandchildren. Otherwise what are grandparents for?

In the kitchen one evening, Paulina layers tortillas, pulled chicken and green tomato sauce for next day's torta Azteca while Daniela paints with her watercolors. She's eating candy from her secret bag because her mother isn't there: she's taken Lisa to capoeira class. Their father isn't there either: he takes them to school in the mornings, comes home for

lunch, and then goes back to the office and works until very late. Give me a gummy worm, Paulina says. Daniela takes an orange one and holds it out for Paulina to bite on as she leans down, the pot with the green salsa still in one hand and the spoon in the other.

Daniela then rummages through the bag and chooses an almond for herself, crunching into the toffee while she flicks her wet paintbrush over the cake of orange paint. They're talking about the latest developments in Paulina's favorite soap opera. Daniela isn't allowed to watch telenovelas—her mother says it's trash for the brain just like candy is trash for the stomach—but Paulina keeps her informed. María Cristina has left Fernando Salvador because she thinks he's cheating, when it's actually a false rumor that José Ignacio is spreading to keep them apart. He's a bad man, Paulina scowls. Always trying to take advantage of María Cristina. Advantage how? But Paulina purses her lips and won't answer. Daniela glares: she hates it when Paulina avoids her questions.

Remember to hide the candy before your mom gets home, Paulina says, changing the subject. Or we'll be in trouble. Daniela sighs and goes back to her watercolors. She gets her candy from birthday parties, where she lunges at the broken piñata, pushing the younger children who get in her way. When Paulina picks her up she says: this is the last time I lie for you. At the next party you'll have to leave the candy, or I'm telling your mom. But Paulina says that every time, and never makes Daniela leave the candy. When Daniela's mother catches her—she can see the red dye on her teeth, can smell the sugar on her breath—she calls the school because she's convinced that Daniela is getting the candy from her second grade classmates. She's tried punishments—no TV all weekend, no friends coming over for a month—as well as promises—she'll take her to Six Flags—but Daniela keeps eating candy. She can't help herself.

Daniela takes another bite from her almondris, the caramel sticking to her molars, swishes her paintbrush in the murky brown water and wipes it on a tissue. It's nice that you're so close to your grandmother, Paulina comments now, pensive, pouring the last of the salsa on top of the torta Azteca and scattering grated cheese over it. I never knew mine. It's nice that you can spend time with her while she's still here. Daniela stops dragging her paintbrush across the paper. What do you mean? She looks up. The fat line of orange paint continues to spread on the white paper. Just that it's a good thing you have her, Paulina shrugs, stacking dirty dishes in the sink now. People don't live forever; we have to appreciate them while we can. Daniela doesn't answer. She's never before considered the possibility that Grandma Alice might die someday. She'd imagined that she and Lisa would grow up with Grandma Alice always next door, and that later, when they had children of their own, they would send them over to bake cookies.

Lets watch TV for hours, Grandma Alice says on Thursday afternoon, a few days later. Lisa frowns: but it's a school day. Their mother only allows TV on weekends and never for longer than an hour at a time. Live a little, Grandma Alice waves her away and goes over to the sofa to get the remote control. Daniela sits next to her grandmother. Why is watching TV on a weekday living *a little*? And what would living *a lot* look like?

They paint their nails and watch cartoons. Daniela wants a different color on each nail, but gets more varnish on her skin than on her nails. Grandma Alice neatly paints her fingernails an elegant, dignified coral. Lisa tries for pink and purple stripes but ends up with a mess on each finger, like stiff chewed gum. Sandra! Grandma Alice calls. Change the channel for us, will you? she asks, holding her fingers out stiffly for the polish to dry. Her housekeeper Sandra, short and very thin, obeys without a word. Stop, Grandma Alice

orders. There. Thank you, Sandra. "Love and Destiny," she tells the girls as Sandra goes back to the kitchen. It's the soap opera Paulina likes. Mom doesn't let us watch soap operas, Lisa cringes. Grandma Alice waves her away again.

María Cristina is nothing like the tall blond Daniela imagined. She's a short and curvy brunette with red lips and huge eyes. Also the men—she'd thought Fernando Salvador would be like her father: thinning brown hair and a perpetual smile; and José Ignacio like Juanito: bald, with those jumpy eyes that scare her so much. But no, they both have full heads of hair: Fernando Salvador blond waves and José Ignacio a stiffly gelled black mane. There's also an evil stepmother that Paulina hasn't told Daniela about: she screams at María Cristina and pulls her shiny brown hair while María Cristina sobs and begs. Later Fernando Salvador saves her and they start kissing. Grandma Alice turns the TV off. Time to go home. But you said we'd watch for hours! Daniela complains. I'm tired, honey, Grandma Alice says, kissing Daniela's forehead. Not as young as I used to be.

In the elevator Daniela looks up at her grandmother. The skin on her neck is wrinkled and hangs in folds, and her fingers holding Daniela's are thin and knobby. Maybe Paulina is right: Grandma Alice won't live forever. They walk out of the building and into the lobby next door, past Juanito, and up the elevator. Everybody dies: Daniela's mother says so. Just don't let it be soon, she prays to the God her mother has told her they don't believe in. Let Grandma Alice live until I'm so old that I don't love her anymore.

A month later Juanito the porter has stopped coming to the fifth floor landing, and he scowls and mutters under his breath whenever Paulina and Daniela walk past his rickety wooden desk in the building lobby on their way to the park. Paulina, head held high, doesn't even glance his way, but once they're outside she seems to deflate, and in the park

she sits on a bench with an unhappy look on her face while Daniela goes round and round the clock tower on her green bicycle, a gummy worm between her teeth. When Daniela asks her what Juanito said in the lobby, Paulina snaps at her angrily. Stop asking questions, silly girl. It's none of your business, missy. Paulina has changed in other ways too. She no longer peels grapes for Daniela, and she shoos her out of the kitchen when she's cooking, so that they don't chat about telenovelas anymore. Even Daniela's mother notices the change. One Sunday Daniela's mother comments that Paulina seems depressed. Paulina isn't there that day: she goes home to Puebla on weekends and lives in with them during the week. Paulina no longer smiles, her mother says. Also, she's gotten chubbier and her hair is a mess. That night Daniela is terrified that her mother will fire Paulina. She can't sleep. At two in the morning she gets up, careful not to make any noise so as not to wake up Lisa in room next to hers, and she takes out a tamarind lollipop from the shoebox in the wardrobe. She sucks on it desperately, eyes wide in the dark, wondering what she'll do if Paulina leaves. Despite her recent moods, Paulina is her best friend. And although Paulina lives in a grown-up body, and can eat what she wants and watch telenovelas in her room at night, she also seems to be the same age as Daniela—the two of them companions in an endless world of their own.

The next day Daniela goes to her mother and asks her not to fire Paulina. Her mother starts at this and says there's no question of that. Paulina has been with them for years. But Paulina might decide to leave someday of her own will, she adds. And we can't keep her here: it's her decision. Daniela thinks about this that afternoon, but she's no longer worried. Paulina will never want to leave. Daniela is the only person she'll ever peel grapes for. Also, she has friends in the building. When Paulina goes up or down to borrow an egg or a jalapeño, she always stays a few minutes to chat with the cooks and housekeepers, and

she asks them what they prepared for lunch that day. That's how Daniela knows if her guesses were right earlier, as she and her mother climbed the stairs after school.

In the spring Grandma Alice changes too. Daniela and Lisa will be at her apartment, she'll be reading to them, and suddenly she'll stop in the middle of a phrase and get up, let the book slip to the floor, and go to the kitchen with an abstracted air. They don't bake together anymore, but she offers them cookies over and over, sometimes just after they've eaten a plateful. She's also started to call Daniela Lisa. When Daniela corrects her, Grandma Alice brushes her off, annoyed, and keeps calling her Lisa. Sometimes they're both sitting on the couch and Grandma Alice will say: Lisa, Lisa, time to go. After their visits, Lisa and Daniela laugh about how silly Grandma Alice has become. She told me to eat the box of chocolates in the bathroom, but it wasn't chocolate: it was soap in the shape of seashells! Lisa giggles. She said that her husband would scold me about the stain on the carpet, Daniela guffaws. It's a new game, where the rules mysteriously change with each visit to the yellow and orange apartment.

On a Tuesday at lunch, Paulina comes in to pick up the dirty soup bowls and gives Daniela a meaningful glare. Daniela doesn't understand; she shrugs at Paulina questioningly. Paulina rolls her eyes, annoyed, and turns back toward the kitchen with her tray. When she returns with the chicken schnitzel, broccoli and mashed potatoes, she doesn't look over at Daniela anymore. Señora, she says. There's something you should know. Yes? Daniela's mother passes Lisa and Father the dishes so they can serve themselves. Daniela has been hiding candy in her wardrobe. I cleaned in there this morning, it was very dusty, and I found a box filled with candy. Daniela stares. Thank you

Paulina, her mother says. You're welcome, señora. Paulina goes back to the kitchen without a glance toward Daniela. Is this true? Her mother asks. Daniela blinks down at her plate. I'm worried about you, corazón, her mother sighs now. We have to do something. Daniela doesn't answer. She rushes to her room to look inside the wardrobe. Her box is gone. She glares out the window. Paulina is a traitor. Daniela hates her and wishes that her mother will fire her after all.

Daniela stops speaking to Paulina. On Thursday her mother tells Daniela that they need a change of strategy. Daniela can't control herself, and it's useless to keep trying. Instead, from now on, Daniela will eat only candy. Candy for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Until you're sick of it, her mother says. Maybe that will cure you. She buys bags of Daniela's favorite sweets—gummies, jelly beans, milky sugary chocolate—and puts them in a round blue cookie tin. At breakfast the next day Daniela smirks at her sister as she eats a crunchy chocolate bar and Lisa has scrambled eggs and a tortilla. Lisa rolls her eyes. Days and days of candy, Daniela gazes up at the ceiling dreamily as she lets the chocolate melt in her mouth. Has her mother lost her mind?

At lunch Daniela is saved from eating trout and chayote; instead she munches on marshmallows and caramel popcorn. That evening, as it's Friday, Grandma Alice comes to dinner and is shocked. But what if she likes it so much that she never eats anything else? She asks. What if it doesn't work? It'll work, Daniela's mother frowns, jaw clenched. And what if she gets sick? It's only a few days, Mom, and I'm desperate. I've tried everything. During dinner Grandma Alice seems stranger than usual and Daniela wonders if it's because she's worried about the candy diet. She drops the platter with smoked salmon on the floor and Daniela's mother has to rummage in the fridge for something else for them to

eat. She calls Daniela's mother Nathan throughout the meal—Nathan is Daniela's uncle who lives in New York. When Daniela's mother returns from walking Grandma Alice home, she and Daniela's father sit on the sofa in the yellow light of the table lamp and whisper.

By Sunday, Daniela has developed mixed feelings about the candy diet. While the others have crunchy chilaquiles smothered in sour cream for breakfast, Daniela eats tamarind rolls. At lunch there's roast chicken and carrots and she watches them resentfully as she licks a strawberry lollypop. The next day, after school, Daniela stomps into the kitchen. Paulina is washing the dishes. You're a witch, she shouts at Paulina's back. Paulina stops moving but she doesn't turn around. They haven't spoken in six days. After a moment Paulina shuts the water off and stands motionless, facing the window above the sink. It was for your own good. Her tone is flat and distant, as if they aren't in the same room and Daniela is hearing Paulina's voice through the phone. You're horrible. You think you can tell me what to do but you can't, Daniela crosses her arms. Paulina starts to hiss but she still hasn't turned around. Always bossing me around, she mutters, when I'm trying to be nice, Paulina says. And that stupid, stupid face. Daniela frowns. What? What did you say? Paulina spins around. I said: grow up, you little idiot! Daniela stares at Paulina's dark narrowed eyes and flaring nose, and at how big she suddenly seems: tall and wide. You can't call me an idiot, she whispers. I'll tell my mom. Paulina smirks bitterly. Tell her! She snarls. See if I care. Daniela's breaths come in and out quickly. Suddenly Paulina's round face slackens. She blinks down at the kitchen floor. A minute goes by. I'm joking, she gives a forced smile. Just a joke. Funny, huh? No need to tell your mom.

On the Tuesday of the candy diet Grandma Alice seems better, almost normal, and in the afternoon they decide to bake cookies again. Let's make twice the amount, so that I can freeze some for next week, she says. They mix almond meal with flour, they cream butter with sugar, and they add half a teaspoon of almond extract. They place a tray in the hot oven and Grandma Alice drops cookie dough balls in a plastic bag to put in the freezer. Daniela, Grandma Alice says, put these in, will you? Daniela is thinking that Grandma Alice has called her by her name when she opens the freezer door and bags of frozen cookie dough tumble out, crashing to the floor and onto her bare feet, so that she howls in pain. What a racket, Sandra, Grandma Alice complains. Put those in the trash and bring my chamomile tisane to the bedroom, she orders, swishing out of the kitchen. Daniela and Lisa turn to the open freezer. Bags of cookie dough fill all five shelves, and the door bins are stuffed as well. There are hundreds, Lisa gasps. What do I do with this? Daniela holds the bag of dough they've just made. And those, she points to the frozen bags at her feet. Let's stuff everything back, Lisa says. And when we get home, we'll tell mom.

That evening their mother calls them into her bedroom. They sit on the big flat bed with its grey sheets while she tells them that Grandma Alice is sick. The last bit of proof was the cookie dough. There's frozen cookie dough there to last ten years, she says desolately, and Daniela wonders if this in itself is a bad thing—to have too much frozen cookie dough. Their mother explains that Grandma Alice will go to a home for old people, where she'll be taken care of. But will she be happy there? Daniela worries. Won't she miss her orchids and her books? Won't she miss us? In bed that night, Daniela can't sleep. Grandma Alice is being sent away because of her and Lisa. If they hadn't discovered the cookie dough, and if they hadn't told on her, their mother might never have made the decision to move her to a

home. It's for the best, Daniela's mother had said earlier. Daniela isn't convinced, though. Grandma Alice will go to a new place full of strangers: won't this confuse her even more?

The next day, while eating jellybeans for lunch, Daniela begins to feel ill. Have a glass of water, her mother urges. Daniela stands up to drink the whole glass. Then she doubles over and holds on to the wall. Acid water rises up her esophagus as she rushes to the bathroom, where she vomits pastel-colored jellybeans all over the sink. She splashes water on her face and climbs into the white tub. She curls up, wailing. Paulina rushes in and drapes herself over the edge of the tub, her hand on Daniela's back. Señora please, she begs Daniela's mother, who stands at the door. She's just a child. Please don't be hard on her. Daniela's mother approaches, bends down, and kisses the top of Daniela's head. It's over now, she says softly. You were very brave, and now it's over. Daniela twists her head up and glares. I don't want to be here anymore. I want to go live with Grandma Alice. Darling, her mother starts to say. No! You can't send her away! Daniela scrambles out of the tub and rushes from the bathroom, across the hallway and to her room. She slams the door as hard as she can.

That afternoon Paulina tiptoes in and sits on the carpet next to the bed, where Daniela lies motionless, staring up at the ceiling. I'm sorry, she says. She lifts her hand and places it, large and warm, on Daniela's arm. I didn't want your mother to find the candy and fire me. She wouldn't fire you, Daniela says. I don't know, Paulina sniffles. I don't know why I told on you. After a long moment she asks if Daniela will forgive her, and Daniela says yes. Soon they're sitting on the carpet and Paulina is telling her about the sneaky things José Ignacio has been doing. He lied and said María Cristina's mother was at his place, so

that she'd drive over. He tried to abduct her outside the supermarket. Evil man, Paulina hisses. If I ever see him, I'll hit him.

At their cousin's birthday party that weekend, Lisa and Daniela lunge with all the other kids under the broken piñata. Later Lisa eats a duvalín while Daniela watches silently. She clutches the paper bag to her chest and the smell—sugar, fake strawberry, plastic wrapping—makes her dizzy. Her mother rubs her back. Let's hope it lasts, she says.

In September they help Grandma Alice pack and move, and later they visit her at the home with its lush tropical gardens. She seems shorter than Daniela remembers, and older—her eyebrows have nearly gone and there are more wrinkles around her mouth. She takes out a blue tin, just like the one from the candy diet, and waves it in front of their eyes with an eager smile. Daniela takes a pack of gummy bears—she doesn't want to disappoint Grandma Alice—but doesn't eat it. Later they walk the grounds of the home, with its bougainvillea and jacarandas, and Grandma Alice has shrunk so much that, though her face looks older, her body seems childlike: thin and frail as she leans against a tree trunk to rest. After a while they take her back to her pistachio green room with its kitchenette, where she sits at the table and waits patiently for the nurse. She's become docile, Daniela's mother says, shaking her head, as they cross the gardens out toward the gate. Before exiting Daniela looks around to make sure no one can see her and leaves the bag of gummy bears on a picnic table. In the car on their way home she watches the trees blur past. Will Grandma Alice continue to shrink, so that she eventually becomes a soft, wrinkled baby? Will the nurses feed her with a spoon and dress her in pink flounces? Back in Polanco, as they get out of the car, Daniela's mother's face looks blotchy and her eyes are red. They visit

Grandma Alice together once a week for a month, and Daniela's mother cries in the car on the way back each time, and soon she decides that it'll be better if she drives over on her own from now on.

One afternoon Daniela and Paulina run into Marta and Gloria, friends of Paulina's who work for the neighbor upstairs, just outside the building. They've been out to walk the dog; Paulina is taking Daniela to the park. Paulina stops when she sees them, but she doesn't say hello. They've fallen silent as well, and Marta raises her eyebrows. Didn't think you'd still be here. I have nothing to be ashamed of, Paulina mutters. Marta huffs. That's what you say. But you flirted with him for months. Poor, lonely old man. Paulina glares. You have no idea what you're talking about. You're heartless, Marta snaps, tossing her head and flouncing past them into the building. Gloria crosses her arms and follows, the dog at her heels.

Paulina yanks at Daniela's hand. At the park she sits on her usual bench and covers her face with her hands. Daniela sits silently beside her. After a moment Paulina looks up with bloodshot eyes, gazing at the autumn trees and at the children on their scooters. I thought they were your friends. Stupid bitches, Paulina answers. What happened? Nothing, Paulina continues to glare straight ahead. Are you ok? Paulina blinks and glances down. There's something I have to tell you. About Grandma Alice? No, not about your grandmother. What, then? It's... look, you have to promise me something. What? You have to promise that you'll be careful when you're older. I don't want you to make the stupid mistakes I made. What mistakes? It doesn't matter, just... Paulina trails off, sighing forlornly. I promise. Daniela wants to please Paulina, to make her feel better. Silly girl, Paulina laughs faintly. You don't even know what you're saying. Daniela shrugs. Tell me, then. Paulina

breathes in and begins again. Promise you'll never smile at men. They start thinking things, and then they can't help themselves. Daniela frowns. So I shouldn't smile at any man, ever? Paulina nods. Ok, Daniela agrees. You promise? I promise.

At six it begins to get dark and they walk home, Daniela stomping on the dry brown leaves on the sidewalk, her hand in Paulina's. In the lobby Antonio, who usually has the weekend shift, sits behind the shabby desk. The elevator doors groan and shiver open. Inside, Daniela stares at the yellow linoleum on the elevator's ceiling. She hasn't seen Juanito in a while. Did something happen to him? Is he the poor, lonely old man that Marta was referring to? Back in the apartment Paulina seems calmer, and she makes quesadillas for dinner. While Daniela eats, Paulina roasts tomatoes on the comal to make a salsa, and they chat about poor María Cristina from the soap opera. Maybe things will go back to normal now, Daniela swings her legs. Grandma Alice will get better and come home, and Paulina will be herself again.

On a Monday afternoon a week later they come home from school to find Paulina with a baby in her arms. She's given birth over the weekend and has returned to pack her things. They look at the baby for a long time. She has grey eyes, Paulina whispers, gazing down at the child's sleeping face. You're lucky it was an easy birth, their mother comments. With Lisa I was in labor for thirty hours. It still hurt so much, señora, Paulina shakes her head. I can't believe you did it twice. We'll miss you, Paulina, their mother says. Paulina looks up, teary eyed, and then back down. Me too. Thank you for keeping me on until the end, Señora. The baby squirms and Paulina brushes her lips against her small forehead. What a small, strange creature, Daniela frowns. And so useless. It can't even say hello. It's a mystery how the baby will ever learn anything. Paulina is gazing down at her with such

emotion, though, and Daniela feels a stab in her stomach. Maybe Paulina will peel grapes for this little creature after all. She'll be the baby's friend, and will tell her what happened in their favorite telenovela each week. Or maybe she'll change. For her baby she might become a grown-up, a mother: bossing everyone around. Anyway, I think you're very brave, their mother says. I couldn't have gone through with it. Paulina looks up. Thank you, señora. I just knew this little creature was innocent.

In the afternoon Daniela does her homework, and later she wanders over to the study. It's empty, and Daniela can hear her mother escorting a patient out the front door. Her mother returns to find Daniela sitting on her swivel chair. I didn't know you were in here, corazón. Are you upset about Paulina? I know you'll miss her. Daniela gazes at her mother. She has her baby now, she says. Still, she was part of the family, her mother looks through some papers abstractedly. No she wasn't, Daniela snaps. Her mother looks up, startled. What happened to Grandma? Daniela asks now. Daniela's mother releases the papers, walks a few steps and falls heavily onto the sofa. She places her elbows on her knees and blinks at the burgundy Kilim rug. What do you mean? She asks. Will we ever see her again? Daniela wants to know. Her mother keeps looking down. She tells Daniela that Grandma Alice is very sick, that she wouldn't want her granddaughters to see her like this. So she'll die and we won't get to say goodbye, Daniela crosses her arms. Her mother covers her face with her hands at this. Daniela gets up from the swivel chair and walks out of the study, down the long hallway and to her room. She sits next to the window, gazing at the grey roofs of the buildings and at the grey pigeons in the grey sky. She leans her forehead against the cold glass. She wishes she still liked candy. Without it there's too much empty space, too much empty time, and nothing to do.

Sacrifice

Before dawn, thickest darkness meanders through the house. It seeps into the drawers in the closets with the socks, slides down the drains in the bathroom sinks, trickles into the freezer where the local trout hardens into slabs. The darkness flows in waves in the bedrooms, from the doors to the open windows and back as they breathe in the heat. The parents in one room, in their white bed, the covers on the parquet floor. Next door the children sweat and breathe, sweat and breathe: the girl, five years old, frizzy black hair fanned on the pillow; the boy in the wooden crib, one round cheek pressed to the mattress, naked chubby legs twitching as he dreams of running in the garden, of finding cake under a rock. Downstairs in the kitchen, the rough stone floor crawls with ants carrying breadcrumbs and dry dead spiders. Cockroaches wiggle their antennae under the baby's highchair, caressing the cookie crumbs and bits of scrambled egg stuck between the square tiles. A daddy-long-legs hesitates above the fridge. A bulbous red ant circles the fruit bowl: the smell of ripe mango, of papery onions. Up the wall a scorpion pauses, motionless, as if listening for footsteps.

First light glints on the blue car in the open garage, warms the wood carving of Saint George and the Dragon on the front door. A childlike carving: Saint George in profile with a helmet of hair, lips a straight line. His horse a hobbyhorse with four straight legs, the flattened dragon beneath. The sun lights up the scaly dragon first, then the stiff horse, then the lifeless Saint George. Inside the house, the baby cries. The parents in their

bed stir. The mother groans. The father turns on his side and blinks, blinks as he pushes himself up. It's six, the mother says. The father pads out and down the hallway. He brings the baby back, damp in his white onesie. Were you hot? You're all sweaty, honey. The baby holds his arms out for his mother. The father lies down again, and all three doze for another half hour as the sun continues to rise, as Saint George's head and the orange shingles on the roof blaze up.

At seven the mother calls up from the kitchen. Breakfast! You'll be late for school! The pink stone floor is empty now, the insects that crawled over it two hours earlier gone. In the month they live there the family will never know that this frenzy, this feasting, happens every night below them as they sleep. Emma! Honey! From upstairs a shout, grumbling. She's coming! The father calls back. We can't find a shoe. The mother sighs, hands on her hips. Behind her the baby in his high chair eats. With great focus he places a clump of scrambled egg on his spoon with his chubby fingers, and then aims the spoon toward his open mouth. The smell of cooked eggs, of butter and soft, melted cheese. Suddenly a swish and the mother turns. A flash of white out the kitchen door. She cries out, runs to the terrace in time to see a cat leap down the stone wall with a white brick in its mouth, vaulting up and over to the vacant lot next door. Darned cat! She returns to the kitchen, where the baby whimpers. Cat, cat, he says. Did it scare you, honey? The father and daughter shuffle into the kitchen. That cat again, the mother says. It took the whole cheese. The father peers out the kitchen door. The panel I got yesterday? The mother nods. She's braiding the daughter's thick curls while the daughter eats her eggs. We have to keep the door shut, the father yawns. It was! The mother responds, still braiding. That cat knows how to open it. She ties a scrunchie around the end of the braid. We'll lock it, then,

the father says. Outside the window, the garden glistens with dew: the leaves on the trees slick, the grass pearled and hazy. That cat is planning a picnic, the mother says. The baked beets yesterday, now the cheese.

Out on the cobblestones, the door with Saint George wide open, the daughter whimpers because she doesn't want to go to school. Why, my love? The mother rubs her back. I want my old school. I don't like this school! The mother and father glance at each other above the daughters' head. I don't like it, Emma says again. It's boring and yesterday Lorenzo said our car is stinky. What is up with this Lorenzo? The mother bristles. First your lunch box is ugly, now your car stinks. No, the daughter corrects pedantically: a tiny professor, hands on her hips. He said it's old and *stinky*, not it stinks. Well, the mother says, he sounds like a little snob. What's a snob? Emma asks. We'll talk about it in the afternoon, the father says. The mother guides her wailing daughter into the car seat and buckles her up. Children have to go to school, she says. And parents have to work. The father gives the baby to the mother and walks to the driver's side, switches the engine on. She glances at her watch as they drive off: seven thirty. They'll barely make it.

In the garden, dew melts off the grass. The rosemary bush exudes a sharp medicinal scent. The thin, barren papaya sways—a straight stick with a fan of leaves at the top. The birds of paradise, in a spiky line on one side of the garden, rustle and shake as something—the cat or some other animal—scrambles beneath them. The mother washes dishes and the baby boy plays with a toy fire truck on the floor at her feet. Fayó, fayó! he shouts, rolling the truck on the pink stones. The mother rinses a plate. Their daughter will get used to this school; she's only been there a week. She says she wants her old school, but does she even

remember? It's been a year of online classes. The mother squeezes more dish soap onto the sponge: the scent of harsh lemons. The school here is unorthodox, yes, but there's nothing wrong with that. She scratches at a bit of melted cheese on a plate with her fingernail. Unorthodox but good, people said. Certainly expensive, the mother frowns. She rinses the last plate, dries her hands, and stares out at the garden, where birds swoop and land under the trees, pecking at the fallen fruit. At least here they have a garden. Here Emma plays with children her age, instead of staring at a computer all morning. Fayo! The baby shouts on the floor. Fayo!

While the baby takes his nap, sighing hot breaths, the blinds drawn against the midday glare, the mother in the small study next door fills out the school questionnaire. This should have been sent to the director last week, when Emma started. At the desk, a stranger's desk—the house came furnished with rustic wooden furniture—the mother looks for a pen: opening each small, dusty drawer, rough carvings of birds and suns and flowers on each drawer face. This was the best choice, the mother tells herself again as she rattles around the drawers: the village with its winding streets and lake and woods, this odd rented house at the top of a hill on the scruffy outskirts, and the schools open despite regulations. They'd discussed the move for months, for most of that first year of the pandemic. Vaguely at first: which friend or acquaintance had moved to which small town. Then, as online classes continued month after month, more seriously. Her husband thought it would be an adventure. She was frightened. She had been happy in the city before the lockdown: the corner stores and restaurants, their families nearby, their friends. Though much of that had been interrupted, it could exist again once this was over: this weightless limbo. If they left, she had the sense that everything she hoped would soon resume would vanish instead. A

good life was such a delicate, fragile object: like thin glass, a clumsy movement could shatter it.

Months of arguments, and then one day like any other she'd sat in the children's room, trying to send out work emails while Emma took her online class and interrupted every five minutes—Mommy, I need an eraser; Mommy, my pencil broke; Mommy, I can't hear the teacher—and she'd felt heat rising up her chest and neck, a suffocating ringing in her ear canals. She'd locked herself in her bedroom, kneeling on the green rug, wheezing. That evening she'd agreed to the move. Finally she finds her bundle of pens, held together with an elastic band, in one of the unpacked boxes under the window. She opens the manila folder. Was your child born by vaginal birth or by C-Section? How much did he weigh and measure? Outside on the street, beyond the gate, a car with a loudspeaker drives slowly by, blaring political slogans. The Orange Movement this time, promises of a bright future followed by a jingle. At the desk she grits her teeth: they'll wake the baby. So much for quiet village life. She turns to the questionnaire again. She corrects the question, adding an "s" to the "he." *She* measured forty-nine centimeters and weighted three and a half kilos. She was born by C-Section. Next question. If he was born by C-Section, explain why. She looks up, frowns. Why do they want to know? She turns back down, scans the other questions. Has your child ever taken medication? Does your child watch TV? Does he—she adds and s again—eat sugar, white bread, processed foods? Do you read to your child? If so, what books does he enjoy? She, she, she, the mother marks the document, annoyed. She folds the questionnaire in half. Maybe she can get away with never turning it in.

She opens her computer and is about to start working—she's translating a book on the Sandinistas—when her phone pings. The school director: Hope to see you at the class meeting tonight & to chat afterwards. The mother pauses. Does he want to chat about

something specific, or just check up on the new family? She writes back: of course, I'll be there. She silences the phone and turns it over, slides it to the far edge of the desk. She translates a sentence, goes on to the next one. She looks through the thesaurus: would the verb sacrifice be more accurate here, or the word renounce? The doorbell rings. She sighs, gets up. At the door a short, stocky man, arms crossed, glowering. Bushy eyebrows, greying hair, jeans and a red Spiderman t-shirt. Your music, he says. She blinks. What music? He motions behind him with his thumb. I'm your neighbor. The mother has noticed his house before: one of two facing them. A chain link fence left open half the time, broken furniture on the other side, and a yellow house set back from the street. Handsome pit bulls slinking in and out of the yard. She says it's nice to meet him, they're new here. Your music, he repeats. It's too loud. He turns back toward his house. She calls after him that it's not her music, she has no music on at all. He motions dismissively with his hand, not turning around, and pushes his fence open to go through.

She stays in her doorway, staring across at the two houses: the chain link fence and, beside it, the long metal gate to the house next to it. Perhaps the music came from that other house? But the street is quiet, just the birds and a car driving by at the corner. One of the neighbor's pit bulls, grey and sleek, watches her silently from across the street. After a moment she steps back inside, closes the front door. In the study: sacrifice or renounce? She translates the next line. It doesn't feel right. Deletes it, translates it again. The sentence after that seems off too. She switches the order of the clauses. She switches it back. The doorbell rings again. She hisses in frustration and stomps down the stairs. The same man at the door. I'm not playing music, she says. He glares at her defiantly. I can hear it, he answers. But there's no music. No music! She motions in the air around them. He scowls. You turn it off when I ring. She shakes her head. I promise I'm not playing music of any kind, sir. I'm

trying to work quietly, and not playing music. He puts his hands on his hips. Stupid American music, loud as it will go. When I ring the bell you turn it off. The mother shakes her head. I don't. And if the music was so loud, how come I heard the doorbell? He huffs and turns toward his house again, muttering. The mother slams the door and marches back up to the study. Her hands hover over the computer keys as she scans the last paragraph she worked on. From the children's room next door the baby cries out: Mommy! My tuock!

After a snack they drive to school. A one-lane, two-way cobblestone street most of the way. Cars meeting head-on between the potholes and loose cobblestones must pause and maneuver. Sometimes they stall: neither wants to back up, or there are trucks blocking their way. She grips the wheel, tells herself to breathe. Breathe. She drives slowly. They pass empty lots, strewn with trash. Broken bicycles in front of one house, stray animals. They live in the cheap part of this expensive town, which is why their rental was affordable. The car behind her honks and she speeds up, gripping the wheel. Turning a corner, she narrowly misses the crumbling wall. The car behind her continues straight ahead, revving its engine. She breathes in relief, driving more slowly again. Maybe the cat who steals their food is the one crossing the street now: white, thin and rangy. Emma thinks they should feed it instead of chasing it away, but the mother doesn't want it near the children. It's feral, it might be diseased. In front of the corner store men with big bellies, clothes streaked with white paint, stand in the middle of the street, drinking soda. She waits for them to let her pass. They turn and stare. She smiles. One of them sneers, one of them smirks. Breathe, she tells herself. Breathe. They take their time, shuffle to the sliver of sidewalk. She drives by slowly, waves in thanks. This was their town, before the city people who have weekend houses here descended on it permanently: feudal landowners with jeeps and sailboats

moored at the yacht club. She merges onto the highway. The baby in the backseat stares out the window silently. She parks in the parking lot and walks with the baby in her arms to the gate: painted with purple flowers and green fairies, little silver bells strung along the top. She smiles at the other mothers waiting outside. They don't seem to notice, they're chatting. Are you coming to the meeting tonight? one asks. I hadn't seen her since high school, another says. At the corner, men in white button-down shirts and women in green uniforms—chauffeurs and nannies—wait to take their charges to their aerial silk and parkour classes.

On the way back the daughter tells them about her day. First we sang the morning song, she says. How does that go? The mother asks. The daughter can only remember parts. *We're grateful for the sun. We're grateful for our hands.* Then Mayumi combed our hair. The mother frowns. Again? She asks. Yes. They do that two times every day, the daughter answers. But they couldn't get the comb through so they sprayed water on my head. The mother is silent. And then? She asks after a while. Then we sang the song about the little elf. Then we went to feed the chickens, and we made vegetable soup and ate it. I chopped tomatoes. But I don't like Panchita. Who's Panchita? The mother asks. The goat, she stepped on my foot. And Lorenzo said it's because my shoes are stupid. The mother glares straight ahead as she merges onto the highway. Lorenzo again! Is he mean to everyone? No, Emma answers. Just to me, because I'm new. At the end Mayumi combed our hair again, and we sang the afternoon song. *The world is like a tree*, the daughter sings in a high, off-key voice. *With roots and branches and leaves.* Oh, and Mayumi said I can't bring cookies for my snack. Why? The mother asks. We can't eat white flour or

sugar. Tell her, the mother says, that we made them at home with whole-wheat flour and piloncillo.

At lunch the mother and father talk about the school. Fancy cars and nannies, the mother says as she serves the baby fish and mashed potatoes, and it's all women, did you notice? Not a single father picking up the kids. Are we in the nineteen-fifties again? It's not *all* women, the father frowns. Is it? The mother raises her eyebrows. Are there fathers when you drop her off in the morning? She asks. He shakes his head reluctantly. What's the nineteen fities? The daughter wants to know. The father starts to explain. Seventy years ago... On the terrace outside a flash of white—the cat—and the children both cry out. The daughter rushes to the window, presses her face against it. Is the door locked? The mother asks. The father goes over to the kitchen to lock it. Emma, the mother says, sit down, honey. The father returns, spoons more mashed potatoes onto the baby's plate. We knew it would be different, he says. The mother sighs. Emma, eat, she says. It's just confusing. That boy saying our car stinks: a five-year-old. But they're in a hippie farm school where they braid the kids' hair all day. And they're so... the mother shakes her head, eats a piece of lettuce. What? The father asks. I don't know. I can't describe it. They eat silently. I want my tuock, the baby says. Finish your food, the father spoons mashed potatoes into the baby's mouth. I liked school today, the daughter says. You did? The mother turns to her. We got the corn ready for the chickens, and Amalia calls them all Carlos. All the chickens are Carlos, Carlos, Carlos, she giggles.

Late afternoon and the cat has gotten into the kitchen again: she slinks around the perimeters of the room, presses her nose under the dishwasher and stares at the pantry

door, but there's nothing for her. The leftovers are in the fridge, the dishes washed, the trash taken out. Back outside, on the side terrace, the cat scratches a hole in the black trash bag, paws through, and finds the silvery fish skins, supple as cloth and glimmering gray and black in the afternoon light. She sniffs, tongue flicking, and then jerks forward, tearing at the fish skins with her teeth. The sun overhead starts to tilt down toward the front of the house and into the garden, warming the rambling rosemary, the thin papaya, the sharp birds of paradise, the kumquat tree: round orange fruit rotting at its base. The coffee plant, its large leaves glinting like metal, hunches under the young, willowy jacaranda in the corner. Look at this one! The daughter points to a long green insect. The baby shrieks. It won't hurt us, the father says. Don't touch, just look, he tells his daughter. It's a praying mantis. He gets closer and the baby in his arms shrieks again. It's harmless. It's scary, the daughter whispers. Its arms are like legs, Daddy, with knees. The praying mantis sits frozen on a branch: six skinny green legs bent as if about to pounce; small triangular head tilted, eyes on each side. It thinks we won't see it if it doesn't move, the father whispers.

Later, as the sun sets, Saint George and his flattened dragon sink into shadows: crevices under his chin and arms and under the horse's belly—deeper and dark, as if scooped out. The garden empty of people now, given over to the ants nibbling and the birds flapping and the cat licking her paws under the coffee plant after her meal. The light seeps slowly out, as if the thirsty earth under the grass had absorbed the sun all day and now, at the end, was sucking in the last of it, the dregs. In the bathroom the children take a shower, squealing and splashing. What do you want for dinner, the mother asks, sitting on the closed toilet lid and reading. I'll make it, the father calls from the bedroom. He's setting out their pajamas. You go on, he says. Are you sure? She asks. I can make it quickly before

I leave. No, no, he answers. Go on. In the bathroom the children have gone quiet. Where are you going, Mommy? The daughter asks. I'm going to your school, honey, for a meeting with the teacher. No! The daughter says firmly. Let Daddy go. You stay. The mother holds a towel up as her daughter comes out of the shower. Daddy will give you dinner and read to you. I'll come kiss you goodnight when I get back. The daughter wails. No, Mommy, no! The baby, imitating his sister, wails as well now, their cries rising up in the bathroom, mingling with the hot steam from the shower.

The mother leans forward as she drives, her chest almost pressed to the wheel. The streets are dim now, the very last of the light a whiteness sucked high into the sky. No lampposts on these streets, the car bumps and sways as she swerves around potholes. Breathe, breathe. Outside the corner store a group of youngsters drink beer and smoke. They let her pass without glancing at her. She breathes. By the time she reaches the highway it's completely dark. She merges, hands gripping the wheel as the cars zoom by. If she were to keep driving, this highway would take her all the way back to the city in two hours, back to their neighborhood, the leafy streets, their little blue and white house, her own desk, her bookshelves, the neat rows of glass jars with spices and dried herbs in the kitchen. But it's all in boxes now, in storage for the year. And here you have a garden, she tells herself. Here you have fresh herbs, you can cut them whenever you want: rosemary, mint, cilantro, lemongrass for tea, basil.

In her daughter's classroom twelve mothers stand in a circle, holding hands. In the middle of the circle Mayumi, the teacher, short and plump, claps out a rhythm, and the mothers stroll around the circle, singing. *Here I am, walking on the sea. Here I am, running on the sea.* Mayumi spots her and gestures. The mother comes forward and joins

the circle. Limp dry hand on her left, warm grip on her right, bouncing to the rhythm. She walks around with them but doesn't sing. The classroom has no furniture, just yellow rugs on the floor, and toys and cushions pushed up against the walls. No tiny tables and chairs, no children's drawings, no alphabet in bright, primary colors. The children are not taught to read or write until the second grade here. If we start stimulating their minds too young, the director had explained a couple of weeks earlier, during the interview, it can affect their development later on. Well, why not? She and her husband had commented in the car on the way back. It'll be a new experience for Emma: on the farm with the animals.

In a corner of the classroom the director and his wife sit on folding chairs, gazing at the singing mothers. Why don't they join the circle? Is there some rule about this? Finally the singing stops and the mothers sit on the floor. The director's wife comes forward, thin with spiky brown hair, and speaks in a soft voice about the four temperaments. Then Mayumi enacts one of the story songs that the children are learning: the one about the elf. Mayumi scampers about inside the circle of mothers. She hovers over an imaginary flower and delicately peels back the petals. Now the floor is open. A mother gets up: nervous, squeaky voice. Her son is being bullied. She won't name names, but there's hitting and taunts about his lisp. Here the director's wife stands again. The matter is being dealt with, she says. The bully's mother has been talked to, and in any case, that family is leaving soon. Exclamations all around: clearly the mothers know whom she's referring to. Yes, the director's wife confirms: leaving at the end of the month. They weren't a good fit for our school, they were not adapting to the philosophy. Murmurs of agreement. Sometimes this happens: it's not for everyone. Not for everyone—the director's wife repeats, shaking her head regretfully—what we do here.

Now another mother, blond hair rippling down her back, gets up. For those who don't know me, she says, I'm Viviana, Vivi, the liaison mother this year. Hello, Vivi, the other mothers chorus. I'm concerned, Vivi says, about sugar. We all know how bad it is for our children's developing brains, and though it's not allowed in school, at most of the birthday parties—I won't name names either, she smiles—there's a piñata with all kinds of fluorescent candy. This goes against our core values. We must be vigilant and coherent. Viviana joins her hands in prayer, bows over them with eyes closed. She sits. Thank you for bringing this up, Vivi, the director's wife says. The director—the only man there, the mother now realizes—still sits in the corner, silent. To conclude, his wife says, Mayumi will lead us in the bird song. The mothers get up again and hold hands.

On the front patio the women stand in groups, chatting. The mother smiles tentatively; no one smiles back. Someone calls from behind. You're Emma's mom? Welcome! It's Andy, the mother of the boy who was being bullied. It's nice to have more girls in the class, there are so many boys, she says. And they're all boy boys, you know? Except for my Mateo. Soon she's gushing about her yoga class and about how wonderful it is to have moved to the town. The city is unsustainable. Unsustainable! And this school, she sighs happily: it's just incredible. On another level, you know? She crosses her arms now, eyes narrowed. I like Vivi, she whispers. A good liaison mother. Knows *a lot* about the philosophy. But this candy thing: at Lorenzo's birthday party last month there was a huge piñata. Andy spreads her arms to show the amount of candy. Enough sugar to keep the town dentist busy forever, she smirks. Oh, the mother tilts her head, Lorenzo is Vivi's son? Andy nods. A little brat, she whispers.

The director is walking toward them, Vivi in tow. So glad you could join us! He calls out. When he's closer he turns to Andy with a meaningful look. She giggles nervously and rushes out the gate, waving goodbye. The director wants to know what the mother thought of the meeting. You're not used to it, he says. But it's fascinating stuff, you'll see: you'll be hooked in no time. Vivi behind him nods gravely. Any questions, he adds, ask Vivi: she's our absolute expert. Vivi smiles. The patio is dim, the only light a lamppost beyond the gate, on the street. Above them scraps of colorful cloth flap and flutter on the tree branches. Something we meant to say, the director murmurs softly now. Something Mayumi mentioned. Is this about the cookies? The mother asks. Cookies? The director frowns, puzzled. No, no... no one cares about cookies. It's... something else. The mother searches his face. Some of Emma's comments, he continues. She told the kids yesterday that humans are animals, and it upset them. The mother stares. Animals? Yes, he nods. This goes against our philosophy. But... but we *are* animals, the mother frowns. Aren't we? We're fauna. The teacher shakes his head and laughs faintly: a forced little laugh. Vivi takes a step forward. We recommend you read up on this, she says. Our leader made a complete distinction between human ego and animal ego, she gestures toward her left and then toward her right with graceful hands. The animal ego is collective and communal, so you see... she trails off. Ego? The mother echoes. Vivi nods. The patio is empty now, all the other mothers have crossed the street to the parking lot. Clouds over the moon and crickets chirping. Emma has to let herself learn, the director says. She has to listen, and this week she wasn't listening. She was quite insistent, he chuckles. She's got spirit—I'll give her that. If you need any help with the concepts, Vivi says, I'm right here. I've taught many of the new families. A wonderful idea, the director pats Vivi's shoulder. He turns to face the

mother again. Encourage Emma to open up to the philosophy. And it wouldn't hurt if you look into it as well.

At home everyone is asleep: the children sweating in the heat, drops caught on Emma's upper lip and the baby's skin glistening as he breathes softly in his white onesie. Her husband has drifted off in bed with his book open on his lap and the reading lamp still on. She pries the book from his hands, switches the light off. He sighs in his sleep and turns over. The mother goes down to the kitchen, fumbles behind the rice cooker in the pantry until she finds her cigarettes. Out on the street she lights up and exhales smoke. She strolls slowly on the cobblestones as bats fly overhead—flapping pieces of night that have detached from the black cloth of the sky. What if the pandemic lasts for decades, so that this one-year arrangement becomes permanent? These broken streets and the neighbor hearing non-existent music and that school: she doesn't think she can sing around a circle at parent meetings for very long. Her husband would say: focus on the good things: Emma is on a farm, feeding chickens and watering cucumbers. Heaven, for a five-year-old. But what about the rest of us? The mother asks her husband in her head as she smokes, pacing. And what if it's the wrong thing: what if Emma grows up thinking that animals have collective egos?

It takes her a moment to hear the crying on the street—a baby starting to whimper. She leans forward. There it is again, a soft sobbing, plaintive. She puts her cigarette out on the ground. The whimpering grows louder, high and wet. The cobblestone street is dim, long shadows stretching toward her from the neighbor's yard across the street, where a single yellow bulb casts its soft light. The town finally quiet: the deep, dark quiet of a small village, of the valley given over to the insects and owls. The whimpers seem to come from

the neighbor's house. She crosses, tentative steps toward the chain link fence. Inside the yard: a motorcycle and a pink armchair, the stuffing ripped out. A rusty shovel on the ground, and walking toward her, the same pit-bull from earlier, grey and handsome, emerging from the darkness. Was this creature the one whimpering like an infant? The mother stares at the dog. The dog stares back, silent, nose inches from the wire mesh. Collective egos, Vivi had said. Communal egos. Does she mean that what happens to one dog, happens to all of them? Suddenly the pit bull tips its head up and barks, startling the mother. The dog keeps barking as the mother backs away. From inside the yellow house, a voice: shut up! The front door bangs open and the neighbor flings himself out, still in his Spiderman t-shirt. When he sees her he stops. The dog, he says. Won't shut up. I've had a headache all month. His face crumples in pain and he covers it with one hand. He goes back inside, slamming the door. The mother, in the middle of the cobblestone street now, stares at the pit-bull again. It has stopped barking and is looking beyond her. It starts to whimper—that same high, moist sound—and its glossy grey skin trembles as it stares fixedly. She turns around, toward where he's looking. Just outside the door across—her front door, the front door with the wood carving of Saint George that she left half-open a moment ago—another pit-bull. She gasps. This second dog stands motionless, in profile, tan with a white chest. Breathe, the mother tells herself. Breathe. Suddenly it turns toward her, showing the far side of its face: torn off, raw and orange, the skin hanging down, the glistening pink muscle exposed. Blood dripping from the gaping wound. The mother, clutching at the air, sways. The tan dog turns away from her and takes a step forward: into the yellow glow spilling from inside the hall. Behind her the whining grows more urgent but she barely hears it. The tan dog takes another step forward. At the threshold he turns toward her once more, the wound glinting silvery white in the light so that it seems to be

missing half its face. She tries to suck air in. Across, the dog lowers his head away and slips into the house. And now she's running, she's shouting, she's tripping, palms on the cobblestones, drops of blood, Saint George's dragon smeared red, she's getting up, she's screaming in through the door.

Names

I'm eleven and we're at Revolución Pacífica summer camp. The girls' dormitory and the boys' dormitory: endless rooms with mattresses on the hardwood floor and nothing else. In the green kitchen downstairs, two wrinkled women steam buckets of vegetables and brown rice for lunch. From the farm next door we hear the roosters, the cows. Once a week our scalps are scrubbed with flea shampoo. Hippie camp in the state of Michoacán, four hours by train from our apartment in Mexico City. Our mother heard about it from an acquaintance in her Radical Justice group. No way was she going to send us to that monstrously bourgeois, American imperialist camp in Colorado that my best friend from school goes to. The first morning they give us raw cow's milk and I spit it all over the floor: it tastes like the smell of manure.

During meals the monitors talk about the environment: water conservation, recycling and the joys of austerity. My mother will be ecstatic when she hears. Discipline and austerity are her favorite words. But we're kids, and there are a hundred of us in a rambling old house in the warm, lush state of Michoacán. Hiding behind the avocado trees in the vast garden, swinging from the rope swings under the jacaranda, chasing the cats, stealing grainy chocolate from the top shelf in the pantry: two of my friends holding me up, my butt on their shoulders, on their heads, giggles and shrieks.

Martin, my brother, two years older, reads and broods in the boys' dorm. He doesn't like hippie camp and hippie camp doesn't like him. He has no friends and he's always the last to be chosen for sports teams. When the monitors manage to lure him out of the dormitory, away from *The Count of Monte Christo*, he scowls and rolls his eyes in scorn. *Idiots*, he mutters under his breath. Don't they know that he's a genius? That he's above all this?

On Olympics day my friends and I pass the baton and beat the boys and win the prize—picture frames made by the monitors out of sheets of balsa wood with dried flowers stuck on with glue. The kids who didn't participate—the man-child, the girl who has asthma, and the boy with the broken foot—get prizes too: whole-wheat raisin cookies in the shape of hearts. The boy with the broken foot throws his in the trash and the monitors scold him: he's squandering the earth's gifts. Silly monitors, with their tie-dye overalls and bowl cuts. Don't they realize that they're hopelessly lame? Lame but lovable, we decide. Harmless. At night my friend Laura listens to the Backstreet Boys on her walkman, though it's not allowed. Martin overhears her talking about it at lunch and tells on her, and the monitors confiscate her CDs. The senior monitor lectures: *what values are these Boys teaching? They're not even real musicians.* That night Laura breaks into the senior monitor's office and steals the CDs back. We wait, cringing. Days go by; no one reprimands her. They probably don't even realize the CDs are gone. At night we lie on our mattresses side by side, one earpiece each, and listen to the Boys crooning about heartbreak and mistakes, about wanting something a certain way. *What do you think they mean by 'it?'* Laura asks, mystified. "I want it that way," the song goes. I shrug in the dark. *Boobs?* I say.

On weekdays we choose workshops to attend. My friends and I go to candy making, to pan dulce, to bookbinding. In the candy workshop the candy maker rolls out snakes of soft, sticky caramel with leather gloves, and then snips it with scissors into bite-sized pieces that clatter into the jar as the candy immediately hardens. In pan dulce we make conchas, round dough with a layer of sugar and butter on top that we crisscross with forks before putting them in the oven. They grow, the dough sponging, the icing splitting into toasted squares as it bakes. In bookbinding we use needle and thread and cowhide for the covers. It smells like animal hair and rotting meat: a salty, rich decay. Meanwhile Martin goes to farm workshop at the farm next door. *Mother is right*, he says: *when the revolution comes, no one in the city will know how to grow vegetables, how to slaughter a cow. Schmucks*, he says. *They'll all starve, and you with them.* That day the farmer kills a chicken and the body runs frantically, spurting blood from the severed neck, before crashing against a wall and collapsing. Martin throws up and vows never to eat chicken again, and everyone talks about his breakdown at dinner. *Bourgeois sensibilities*, I hiss when I bump into him on the verandah before lights out. *When the revolution comes, and there's nothing but chicken, what will you do? Will you starve?* He growls and slaps the back of my head twice, hard.

I have another brother, older than Martin, but I've never met him. He was born sick, Mother says, and sent to live in Querétaro with a family who could take care of him. What sickness does he have? Mother won't say. Father takes my hand between both of his, his forehead wrinkled in a way that reminds me of trees, of branches and roots. *Your brother David*, Father says, *has a very special mind.* No one explains what this means,

or why we can't see him. Everyone knows about David, but they don't say anything. Not even Grandma—when I ask her she shushes me and closes her eyes.

Mother and Father leave us with Grandma one weekend a month to go visit David. When they get back Mother locks herself in the master bedroom and lies in bed in the dark. Sometimes it's a migraine, sometimes her back—the accident was almost ten years ago but she's still in constant pain. Meanwhile Father watches TV and cries. In my room I try to imagine my other brother. Nicer than Martin for sure, but that's easy. Everyone is nicer than Martin. He's kind and friendly, my brother David. He jokes with me, buys me candy behind Mother's back. He tells me I'm his beloved little sister, his pet, his closest friend.

During the school year I spend most afternoons with my grandmother. We cut out images we like from her old French magazines, and then we stick them onto a white cardboard on her kitchen wall. I choose a bouquet of peonies, a woman with a long, glossy red dress, low at the neck and with a slit up to her waist, and a bowl of steaming ravioli, dollops of cream on top. Grandma chooses a gold bracelet, a picture of an empty tropical beach, and another of the moon, stained like blue cheese with dark and light patches. Also a strawberry tart, the upright strawberries, little red hills, gleaming on the pastry. *What do you want for dinner?* Grandma asks. *Chicken nuggets*, I answer, spreading glue with my fingers on the cardboard. *Just don't tell your mom*, Grandma says. I nod: *Imperialist American crap*. Grandma chuckles. *And for dessert*, she says, *that disgustingly decadent, bourgeois travesty: ice cream!*

While we eat, Grandmother tells me about her older brother Joseph, who died of tuberculosis in Belgium after the war. *He'd carry me to school on his back when it snowed, so I wouldn't get my stockings wet. He was always in love with the most*

beautiful girls, but they never looked at him. He wasn't handsome, poor boy. Nose like mine: long Jewish nose. Terrible skin. He'd ask me to carry notes to the pretty girls, and they laughed at him. Strange that he survived the whole thing, died when it was over.

While I'm at Grandma's, Martin is at home practicing the violin or reading his physics books. He will be a great scientist some day. His discoveries will change the world. They'll save us from our descent into bourgeois horror, into the plastic-strewn, pollution-clogged, cancerous world that capitalism has created. *Don't distract him*, Mother says. *Better if you go to Grandma's*, she adds as we finish a lunch of lentil soup, steamed spinach and tofu. She marches out of the kitchen with a tray on which she's placed oatmeal crackers and a pitcher of water for Martin. Water is good for the brain, she always says. Father and I wash the dishes before we leave, singing made-up songs about kangaroos. We're the dumb ones, the clumsy ones—the best thing we can do is get out of their way. Mother and Martin are the sharp, radical, brilliant revolutionaries. But Mother has her back problems, wears a brace when it gets bad, has had dozens of surgeries. She has migraines and arthritis when it gets damp, which it does all summer in the city, from May to October. She could have done so much, if not for the accident. She could have done all that Martin will now do.

I was four and Mom was taking me to the park. *Stay next to me*, she said as she locked the front door. But I was rebellious, impatient. *You were terrible as a child*, Mother says, sighing and shaking her head. *We had to watch you constantly, always getting into trouble*. That day I ran into the street, whooping. Mom screamed and

dropped her keys. She lunged and pushed me to the opposite sidewalk and safety, and the car hit her instead. The driver backed up to the corner and sped away. Someone called an ambulance. Five fractures in her hips, cracked ribs, a broken shoulder. While we waited, I sat on the sidewalk and cried. *Stay where you are*, my mother kept saying, lying in a broken heap in the middle of the street. *Don't move, stay right there. And for once, you obeyed*, my mother says. *You sat there in your little orange skirt and those blue plastic boots you loved, and you cried and cried but you didn't move, even when it began to rain.* I don't remember much but Dad says the nurses fawned over me at the hospital later, while we waited for Mom to come out of surgery. All I remember, if I think very hard, is Mom's face, one cheek on the asphalt, getting rained on and shouting: *don't move, don't move.*

The next summer I'm back at hippie summer camp. Martin stays home: he has his violin recitals and his mathematics books. This time I take singing: traditional Mexican songs like Adelita and La Bruja and also songs about Jesus in Latin. With my friend Laura we go to carpentry workshop and to tortilla making. We wash the dry corn kernels, boil them with lye, rinse them, grind them and press the dough with a tortilla press between sheets of clear plastic. Our tortillas come out oblong and thick, and the master artisan—a round woman as short as we are, grey braids on either side of her face—chuckles and rolls the dough back into a ball, which she deftly presses into perfect thin circles like crepes. She throws them on the comal, where their beige color deepens and they puff up. At the end of class we roll them up and eat them hot, with a sprinkle of salt. In carpentry we're making a stool. We sand, we varnish. We use hammer and nails to join the legs. A boy accidentally hammers his thumb and is taken to the infirmary, face bright red, glistening with snot and

tears. His thumb is dark purple, the size of a small potato. The next day his parents come to take him away and they shout at the camp director on the terrace: *what kind of place is this?*

Next night is disco night for the older kids, twelve to fifteen. This is the first year we're old enough to go. Laura lets me borrow her lipstick, and I coil my hair up into donuts. The disco night is held in what used to be a wine cellar, when a rich family owned the house. Then the hippie owner of hippie camp tried making cheese there, but it probably didn't work because now the cellar is empty, usually locked, though the dank space still smells like spoiled milk. The monitors have hung up colored ribbons on the ceiling and a tiny disco ball. Laura and I and our friends talk and giggle and glance at the boys. We drink apple juice and eat carrot sticks. Soon there's dancing. Carlos asks me to dance: he's very serious as he thumps his feet and moves his shoulders to the rhythm of the music. After a few songs we go up the stone stairs to the garden and sit on the grass. Fireflies float, switching on and off in the dark. *Do you want to be my girlfriend?* He asks. I nod. He leans over and smacks my lips with his: soft and small. Later that night, on my mattress in the girls' dorm, the other girls breathing and sighing in their sleep all around me, I wonder what this means. Do I love him? Will we get married some day?

It happens on the last day of camp. I'm walking down the verandah after having washed my lunch dishes, humming a song I like from class about a witch who sucks people to death. We eat our meals in the verandah: there are tables along one side, against the wall of the old house, and on the other side the wood planks border the sloping lawn. On the far table sit the man-child and his caretaker. I stop humming. The monitors have told us to be

kind to the man-child, whom they call Tinito, but also to keep our distance. I'll have to get past them to go up to the dorms, though, and so I keep walking, and as I get closer I smile—I'm scared of the man child, but I don't want to seem rude. I smile and smile, and as soon as I've walked past, letting my face relax, I feel a tremendous shove against my side, a push so strong that I'm hurled off the verandah and for a long moment I'm flying in the air, gliding above the grass that gets closer and closer to my face, until I crash onto the lawn with a heave that knocks the breath out of me, and I roll down, down, down the garden, twigs and stones tearing at my skin, leaves and branches and earth and grass whirling dizzily, and finally I smash against the trunk of the flame tree, my wrist snapping like a chicken bone.

The man-child's caretaker apologizes when I get back from the Red Cross: ***I must have been looking the other way.*** He's near tears as he helps me zip up my suitcase. ***Tinito isn't usually aggressive.***

Back at home, my mother wants to sue hippie camp. ***I send you there whole, and you come back with a broken wrist and a black eye. How will you do anything? How will you write your homework? And these ridiculous monitors: they should be more careful.*** Mom doesn't know about the man-child—when the camp director called, she said only that a boy had pushed me. All summer there was trouble, parents coming to pick up their kids, threatening to shut the place down. I don't tell my mother the truth either. I'm ashamed: that phony smile. Who do I think I am, feeling sorry for him?

At the end of the year mother has another surgery and six months of physical therapy. She's learning to walk again, Dad says. We spend most of the December vacation at Grandma's, Martin reading in the study and Grandma and I in the kitchen, making chicken soup and watching Christmas movies on her small box television.

"Did I ruin Mom's life?" I ask.

Grandma sighs, an onion in one hand and the knife in the other. "We're always ruining each other's lives. Every day," she says. "That's what humans do."

"Martin didn't ruin her life. She loves him."

"You were four years old; you didn't know better. And she ran to save you because she loves you so much. It wasn't *you* who ruined her life, it was that car."

"They should have sent me away." I cross my arms, glowering at the yellow tiles on the floor. "To Querétaro."

Grandmother looks up sharply from chopping. "Don't ever," she points at me with the knife, "say that again."

By March Mother can walk once more. There's no way she'll let me go to hippie camp in the summer, but it might not even exist by then. It's been in the news: one of the monitors touched a boy and the camp director is in custody and the hippie owner fled the country. I thought I'd miss Laura and Carlos, but I barely remember them; they've barely existed during the school year. Still, when summer comes I'm bored and Martin and I fight constantly. He's fifteen, learning to drive, and one afternoon he takes my new silver walkman, the one Grandma gave me, the one Mother disapproves of but has let me keep, and he drives the car wheels over it in our driveway. In my room, windows open as I read, I hear the crunch. In retaliation, I pee in his bed, under the covers. That night I hear his

growl of disgust through the wall between our bedrooms. The war continues, escalates: he sends my diary by mail to the boy I like from school. I cut off pieces of his hair and eyebrows while he sleeps at night, so that he wakes up looking like an abused teddy bear. We go on and on, relentless, until one morning Father gets a phone call early and rushes out of the house. Grandma has had an embolism. An hour later he calls from the hospital: Grandma is dead. She went quickly, didn't suffer. In the living room, while mother makes phone calls on the beige couch, I glance at Martin. He stares back at me, mute. All hostilities stop.

That night, in bed in the dusky half-light, Grandma flutters above me on the ceiling, her gray dress flapping, spinning slowly around the room with her arms spread out and her eyes closed. I ask her things. About her childhood in Belgium, about her parents, about her kind brother Joseph. About Grandpa and their move to Mexico. *What was it like when you got here?* My voice sounds strange in the dark room. Grandma doesn't answer and doesn't open her eyes: she keeps whirling above the bed, smiling.

After the funeral, as we sit shiva in Grandma's apartment, father cries and talks, cries and talks for seven days straight:

"My mother was a fighter. In Belgium during the war, it wasn't easy, I can tell you. They hid in an abandoned house, Nazis crawling all over. Stayed locked in that house for three years. Three years! Only their mother went out to get food. One day my mother and her father, her beloved Papa, had had enough. Imagine being locked up for three years. The pandemic was nothing," Father snorts. "But they were desperate, they went out. A Gestapo car starts tailing them. Slowly, slowly. All the way around one block and then

another. Her Papa almost collapsed. She held his arm, she told him to keep walking. We're out strolling. Don't look back. Don't go faster. Keep walking. Laugh. They walked and walked, and soon the Gestapo car sped up and left. My grandfather's face had swollen blue from fear. A strong woman," Father says, shaking his head. "And once the war was over, her brother... She had a difficult brother. He could be very cruel. He'd tease her about her nose; called her long-nose. Once, when he was angry, he snipped her silk dresses to bits."

"Wait," I say from the orange couch, speaking out loud without realizing it. "Her brother Joseph?"

"Yes, Joseph," Father tells me; at which point I realize I've spoken aloud, six or seven of my parents' friends turning to me, and I shrink down, my face hot.

"She loved him anyway," Father continues. "And after the war, the horror but also just the boredom of being locked in a house together day after day... While they were locked up Joseph killed her pet goat. And after all of that, he disowned his family, converted to Catholicism, started studying to be a priest, and then a few months later killed himself. Hung himself up with a rope. And the Nazis had murdered all her friends, all her cousins. But she didn't want to be sad all her life. She didn't want to be angry. Forgive and forget, she always said. Forgive and forget." Father bows his head, eyes closed, a tiny smile on his lips. He looks up. "Always happy. Didn't know how to hold a grudge." Father presses his fingers to his eyes and sobs. My mother beside him reaches out to rub his back.

"Why did she lie?" I ask my father later that night, when everyone has gone home. "About Joseph."

Father still sits on the floor of Grandma's living room, his white button-down shirt torn at the front. "She didn't," Father bristles. "It's true."

"He killed her pet goat. And he didn't die of TB."

"She wanted to remember the good. We should learn from her."

That night in bed Grandma swoops above me, her grey dress billowing. She didn't forget the bad—she wasn't stupid, and her memory was perfect. *Right, Grandma?* I tip my chin up to her. She drifts around the room, oblivious, eyes closed. And she wasn't always happy, like Dad keeps insisting. Sometimes she was sad. Sometimes she wouldn't talk all afternoon, moving around her kitchen, boiling pasta in total silence. *Has he forgotten you already?*

Near the end of Martin's second year of high school there's drama at home. Martin hasn't been accepted at his top choice for boarding school in England next year. I retrieve his rejection letter from the recycling bin and tape it up on my wall. Martin gives me a look that I've never seen before and locks himself in his room. Is he crying? Have I gone too far? I wait for hours and then days, but he doesn't retaliate. By the third day I wordlessly take the letter down and put it back in the recycling. Meanwhile, Mother has migraines. *What's the use of all those surgeries,* she moans, *if I can't get up? The pain, it won't let me get up.* She stays in her room with the lights out and the blinds drawn, and doesn't eat the tofu Dad makes for her.

Martin comes into my room and sits on the chair.

"What stupid thing are you reading now?"

"Who said you could come in, asshole?"

We're silent. I lie on the bed and pretend to read, he gazes out the window.

"You know our brother?" Martin finally says.

"David?"

"He's named Martin too."

"No, he's not." His name is David. The few times our parents refer to him—when they go visit, not every month anymore but maybe three or four times a year, leaving us at home with our aunt's phone number taped to the fridge and our neighbor checking in—on those occasions they say *David*. They say: *Mother and I are going to visit David. No alcohol*, Father turns to me. *No friends coming over*. They don't say any of this for Martin's benefit. He has no friends, and no interest in alcohol. I, on the other hand, was caught swigging from a bottle of cherry Bacardí with my friend María last month. Dad: *You're only fourteen! Do we have to start saving for rehab?* Mom: *You always were a little rebel, a little terror*. Me: *Then send me to Querétaro! This house is a prison!*

"They lied," Martin says. "David is his middle name."

"That's not lying."

"It is. Because his first name is Martin, and that's the one that counts. Martin David Stein." Martin gazes out the window again—that frown like our father's: folds and bumps, tree roots. "It's probably hereditary."

"What is?"

"Mental handicap, you idiot," Martin turns back toward me.

I lower the book and tip my head back onto the pillows. I knew it was something like this, but our parents never talk about David, or very little, and his condition has never been clearly spelled out for me. So I guess he can't carry me on his shoulders, can he, Grandma? Can't carry me like Joseph carried you, so your stockings would stay dry. Grandma floats near the ceiling, smiling with her eyes closed. It never snows here anyway.

"The same name," Martin muses. "Martin Stein. Martin D. Stein."

I'm silent.

"They wanted to replace him. To try again. But I failed too." Martin looks down at his lap, morose.

"You'll get in somewhere," I say. I still feel bad about the rejection letter. Maybe I always will.

"What if I don't? What if every school rejects me and Mom has migraines forever?"

"You're the smartest kid in school."

"We probably saw him." Martin frowns at his green-socked feet.

"Who?"

"David. At hippie camp."

"What?"

"At hippie camp."

I swallow. My entire back is suddenly humming, high-pitched but soundless. "How, at hippie camp?"

"They sent him every summer. They wanted him to have the experiences we had."

"No they didn't," my voice comes out aggressive. "He was on a farm with a family."

"They sent him once a year, with his nurse."

"What do you mean, the same experiences?" I sit up on the bed. "He doesn't even live with us! I've never even seen him!"

"They called, that year I didn't go. Mom and Dad were out. Are you a relative of Martin David Stein? He's got an upset tummy and we're wondering if we should send him to a local doctor."

I'm shaking my head. "No. No, they didn't." I get up. "We should look for pictures."

"There aren't any."

"How do you know?"

"I've searched."

"What?" I ask. "When?"

"Always," Martin says. "I've been looking all my life."

My brother is the man-child, I tell Grandma up on the ceiling. It's dark, past midnight, and she's a bat gliding around the room. My brother David—my brother Martin David Stein—was the one who pushed me that last summer at hippie camp. Didn't like my face, my fake smile, and sent me crashing against the flame tree so hard that I broke my wrist. Tinito must have been his nickname: Martin, Martincito, Tinito. My grandmother swoops above, silent, her expression invisible in the dark. Did he recognize me? Maybe he knew who I was, his little sister, and I smiled, and he hated me. Maybe he'd been waiting for years to meet his siblings, the normal ones who lived with Mom and Dad, the lucky ones.

I come home from school one Monday to find Mother and Father crying in the kitchen. I've just started high school and Martin is away at boarding school in Canada. In the end he got into his second choice, and even gave me a goodbye present: his copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. On the inside cover he'd written in pencil: *I know I suck as a brother, but you suck as a little sister. Take care, Martin.*

Mom and Dad are sitting across from each other at the kitchen table, heads bowed, holding hands over the sun-colored laminate. Tears sliding down their cheeks, swollen eyelids, red noses. I stand at the doorway.

"What happened?"

Mother wipes at her face with her hands, holds back a sob. Father stands and comes to me, enfolds me in his arms.

"Is it Martin?"

"No, honey," he mutters against my skull. "It's David. We need to tell you something." Father leans back now and holds my shoulders in his hands, staring straight into my face searchingly. "David, your brother, died last night."

Martin doesn't come back for the funeral; he has exams. I stand between Mom and Dad at the cemetery. It's a sunny day, blinding light on the marble slabs, the grass yellow and dry. Just us and the Rabbi there, and Grandma hovering over the open grave. In his prayers the Rabbi calls him Martin David Stein while Mother and Father cry silently. When it's over we each throw a shovelful of soil onto the coffin, and the Rabbi shakes our hands before he leaves. Grandma speaks down to the closed casket: *they're ashamed*, she says. *They didn't know how to love you*. She flips over in the air and hangs upside down, her grey dress falling over her face, knobby legs and crotch in her beige pantyhose exposed, black patent-leather shoes pointing toward the sun.

"I want to say something."

Mother and Father glance over at me, surprised.

"Of course," Dad says.

I take a step forward, toward the open grave.

"I didn't know you. And if I had, I don't know if I would have loved you."

Grandma, still upside down, begins to spin like a top, the skirt of her dress rippling and swirling around her head and torso.

"Maybe none of us know how to love each other," I add.

Grandma stops spinning and flips back up, the grey fabric falling around her legs. She looks straight at me, her eyes expressionless, and then she turns and floats away, over the graves and the cypresses and pines of the cemetery, toward the gate.

Little Bird

Stirring the chile poblano soup at the stove, Alma looks up and out the window. She breathes in sharply. One of those things: one of those plates. It wasn't there a minute ago, at the base of the jacaranda. She leans forward: is that a dead bird? There have been dead animals before—rats, insects—but never birds. Alma spends all day every day in the kitchen and yet she's never seen who leaves the things. They simply appear under the jacaranda, once or twice a week, as if they'd sprung up from the very earth. Spells, magic, brujería: she doesn't know what to call them. White plastic like the ones they give out for cake at parties, a mound of black modeling clay in the center, and stuck to the clay: shards of thin glass, feathers, seashells. Also, when she's gone outside to clear them away: crushed white worms, flecks of nail varnish like drops of blood. It's been months of those plates, almost a year. Alma at the side window keeps stirring the soup. Might be neighborhood kids, pulling pranks. Now that dead sparrow nestled against the black clay: small and grey, with a darker tail and folded wings. Did they kill the little thing? So fragile and whole, as if it were about to take a tiny warm breath.

Early afternoon on a Tuesday, the street lined with parked cars, dogs barking and a lawnmower somewhere farther off. Alma tastes the soup and turns the stove off. Beyond the sidewalk, across the quiet side street, the neighbor's garage groans open and the neighbor drives in, calling through the open car window that he's home for lunch, as he does every day at two. Alma goes back to the sink to start on the dishes. She'll have to toss the dead bird in the trash before Miss Clara sees it. Sometimes the plates are already there in the

morning when Alma walks in through the back: she'll cross the garage from the servant's quarters, through the cool cleansed morning air, her hair in a damp grey braid, stained concrete under her shoes. She'll slip behind the two cars—the one Manuel drives large and burgundy, Mr. Marcos' small and black—and into the quiet kitchen, and before she even washes her hands she's at the window and a new plate. Other times the plates appear in the afternoon, when she returns to the kitchen with her tray, clearing up after lunch. Or in the early evening, dishes clean and put away, she'll turn to the stove to heat water for her instant coffee and there'll be a flash out of the corner of her eye and a new thing on the grass, and yet not a soul out on the narrow side street. If only I'd glanced to my left a minute ago, Alma will shake her head, fetching her jar of powdered coffee from under the sink. If only I'd made my coffee two minutes sooner, if only there had been fewer dishes to wash. Back at the stove, Alma pours the chile poblano soup into the tureen: the scent of almonds and garlic beneath the roasted peppers. She puts the lid on the steaming porcelain bowl and looks up again. That dead sparrow outside the window, eyelids like perfect crescents. A sudden jolt of pain in her sternum. The soft curve of the bird's body, the head tucked down. Alma shuts her eyes.

*

It turns out, Miss Clara says later that afternoon, that her mother, who lives a few blocks away and whom she visited that morning, knows the neighbors. Or at least, knows who the neighbors are—that man who comes home for lunch every day at two and announces it to the whole street; to his wife, whose face they've never seen.

"My mother used to know *her* mother," Miss Clara says. She's nursing the baby at the pink kitchen table, grazing the baby's cheek with her stubby fingers. "She says there's something strange about the husband, but she can't remember what. Have you heard?"

"No, Miss—Mrs. Clara."

"It's like she's hiding. The wife."

Alma slices a tomato in four and pushes the seeds out with her fingers. They've discussed this before: they see the husband every day and the children often, but not the wife.

"Do you think she's disabled?"

"I wouldn't know, Miss—Mrs. Clara."

Alma scrapes the chopped tomatoes into a bowl. The new neighbors arrived a year and a half ago, right around the time that Mrs. Lucy, Alma's former mistress, passed away. Soon after, Mrs. Lucy's grandson moved in with his pregnant wife, Miss Clara. And now here they are, Alma sighs, chopping the cilantro. Here they are, gossiping about the neighbors like a pair of silly hens.

"We might go to Acapulco next weekend," Miss Clara says.

"That'll be nice." Alma peels an onion. Miss Clara has said this before: the little family is constantly planning trips to the beach. In the end Mr. Marcos cancels and Miss Clara stays home with the baby, crying her eyes out. The girl spends far too much time at home. She should get Manuel to take the burgundy car out and drive her to the beauty parlor, or to that fancy new mall in Polanco. What would the master's grandmother say if she came back from the dead and saw her kitchen now? Miss Clara prattling about each of her baby's gurgles and farts while Alma tries to work.

"Oh, and Marcos won't be back for dinner."

"Very well." Alma rinses her hands at the sink.

"So just me and Chloe. Won't we, muffin? Just you and me for dinner, pumpkin."

Alma opens the fridge. That childish voice Miss Clara uses to speak to the baby: perhaps it's why Alma can only think of Miss Clara—Mrs. Clara—as a girl, though she's technically an adult, a mother. But she's just past thirty, half Alma's age, and terribly innocent. Untouched in the way that these white girls are untouched, as if their skin let it show through: that blankness of unburdened lives, their biggest problems the diets they're on or the sleepless nights of new motherhood. The color of a vanilla milkshake, Miss Clara's skin—sweet and bland. Alma reaches into the fridge for the butter dish.

"Any new plates today?" Miss Clara asks.

"No, Miss Clara. Not today," Alma lies. She regrets having shown Miss Clara the things. Now she asks about them constantly and frets, the thought like a fly drowning in the vanilla milkshake of her life. Best if she doesn't know about that dead sparrow. Earlier Alma had gone outside with a trash bag and as she'd lifted the plate, the bird had rolled off the white plastic and down to the grass. She had picked it up with her bare hand—stiff and surprisingly light, as if it were hollow. Those closed eyes, that soft feathery head. Should she bury the little thing? At the bottom of the garden, under the mound near the eucalyptus tree. Alma had scowled at herself—what a silly thought: as if that could make a difference to a dead animal—and had tossed the bird into the bag with the shards of glass.

"Maybe they're meant for the neighbors. For Mr. I'm-home-for-lunch."

"Don't think about them, Miss Clara." Alma looks up from mincing a jalapeño at Miss Clara's strained face. "Silly pranks."

"But they could. I mean, who says they're for us?"

Alma turns back down to the jalapeño. She won't state the obvious—why worry the child? She won't say the plates are on our side of the street. She won't say they started appearing the week you moved in.

*

Manuel, the chauffer, complains that he's bored. Mr. Marcos takes his own car to work in the mornings and Miss Clara rarely goes out. When she does it's to her mother's house nearby, and on those occasions she takes the stroller and walks, gurgling and smiling at the baby as she goes.

"At least you get a break," says Esmeralda.

They've just finished lunch in the kitchen before Miss Clara and Mr. Marcos eat in the informal dining room at three, both Alma and Esmeralda serving and clearing. *How strange*, Miss Clara had once laughed, *two people tending to us when there are only two of us*.

"Is it too much for you, Lady Esmeralda?" Manuel in the kitchen roughly grabs Esmeralda's wrist and kisses the back of her hand with a loud smack. Esme snatches her arm away, hissing, flushed. Manuel chuckles and leans back in his chair. He sticks a finger in his mouth to pick at something in his teeth.

Across from them, Alma pushes the last of her rice onto her fork with a rolled up tortilla. He hasn't changed much, Manuel, in the many years she's known him. That same impish expression but grown old now, wrinkles and sagging jowls. And always the theatrics: he should have been an actor.

"I do fifty times more than you do," Esmeralda snaps, furious. "She says she's going to buy cloth diapers, because of the environment, and who do you think will have to scrape the shit off of them?" She crosses her arms over her large breasts, young round face glaring. Esmeralda has only been at the house for three years, while Alma and Manuel were hired the same week Mrs. Lucy and Mr. Carlos moved in, two decades ago.

"Boohoo. Countess Esme has to work."

"If you're so bored, wash the dishes. Or scrub one of those onesies with the puke on them."

"Women's work," Manuel huffs.

Esmeralda has nothing to say to this. She glares at the beige tiled floor, at the pink laminate table, at her empty plate with traces of tomato sauce and a few stray grains of rice.

Alma stands and takes her dishes to the sink. She turns back for the pot of leftover chicken. Manuel keeps picking at his teeth.

"Gross," Esmeralda hisses. "At least go outside to do that."

Manuel smiles unpleasantly. "Fine, my Lady of Ecatepec. Rather be anywhere else." He stands, gives Esmeralda a mock bow, and slinks out through the back door.

Esmeralda washes up, still hissing, while Alma assembles the stuffed zucchini and puts them in the oven. Lately Manuel is even more clownish than usual: must be nervous about keeping his job. He'd gotten along fine with the old masters—Mr. Carlos tolerated him, Mrs. Lucy found him amusing—but these youngsters don't really need a chauffeur, and Alma has seen Mr. Marcos roll his eyes in exasperation behind Manuel's back.

"Rude man," Esmeralda mutters. She dries her hands on the yellow kitchen towel. "Treats me like an idiot. And you never say anything; you just sit there."

Alma sets the oven timer and turns to Esmeralda, hands on her hips.

"If you want to quarrel like children, fine. Don't drag me into it. I mind my own business."

*

"Did you see his face?" Miss Clara asks. Wednesday morning, she's nursing the baby at the pink table again.

Alma suppresses a sigh. "I did, Miss Clara."

She's asking about that robbery, twenty years ago. Yesterday Miss Clara and Mr. Marcos argued about the gun in the study drawer again. He promised, for the tenth time, to get rid of it, but he won't: he'll forget.

"I would have been terrified."

Alma doesn't respond. At the fridge she takes out the melon and prosciutto: Mr. Carlos' favorite appetizer. She brings the melon up to her nose—brine and honeyed flowers, a whiff of cognac. Behind her Miss Clara gives a little yelp. **No biting**, she says, as if a five-month-old creature could understand. Miss Clara must know that the baby isn't eating the whole time—that she's being used as an enormous human pacifier. But she says she doesn't want to hire a nanny, that this huge house with its staff of three is more than enough. Esmeralda, who loves children, has told Miss Clara that she'll watch Chloe, but Miss Clara smiles and says **thank you Esme, you have enough work**. Anyone can see that the girl is terrified of being a mother, terrified of that little baby. Petrified of what will happen if she isn't with the creature every second of her life.

"An actual bullet in his leg," Miss Clara murmurs. "Marcos says his grandpa never got over it."

Alma pushes the prosciutto florets closer together to fit one last piece. If she'd been alone, she'd have eaten it.

"What did the police do?"

Alma shrugs. "Made a mess of the flower beds in the garden. The thief was never in the garden; he came in through the front."

The baby squirms and sniffles and Miss Clara holds her up against her shoulder, leaving one small white breast uncovered. Alma averts her eyes. Miss Clara parades her pink nipples, tiny raspberries wet with milk, as if she were proving something to the world.

Alma covers the leftover half-sun of melon in plastic wrap and puts it back in the fridge. In forty years of work, Alma never held positions in households with small children: they could be so disruptive. But now Mrs. Lucy dying, and her grandson moving in with his wife and baby, and Alma too old for a new job.

"Does this little bird need a diaper change?" Miss Clara sniffs the baby's bum. "Yes you do, muffin. Yes you do." She carries the child out, cooing down the hall and up the stairs.

Once she's alone Alma sits at the table and drinks a glass of water. She closes her eyes for a minute: red and orange behind her eyelids, brown spots quivering. Yes, she saw the thief's face, but she can't remember it. An unremarkable face, round and brown, small black eyes—minutes later she'd already forgotten it. The gun went off half-an-hour after she got home that Sunday: the staff's day off, Mrs. Lucy out with friends, Alma back early because her new shoes were giving her blisters. The thief had probably climbed over the gate, or perhaps Manuel had left the garage open that morning. He'd been so forgetful back then, twenty years ago, such a scatterbrain: in his early thirties and too busy chasing girls and cheating on his poor wife to think of practical things, of garage doors and locks and keys. Eventually his wife had found out and left him, but Manuel still keeps a picture of her in his room beside the garage.

A tree falling, a car tire exploding as Alma lay in bed leafing through a magazine, band-aids on her blisters. Soon she was running barefoot down the hallway toward the master bedroom and the thief was running in the opposite direction, a pillowcase dangling from one hand. Alma screamed and pressed her back to the wall. The thief didn't stop—panic in his black eyes. And in that vast closet with its white walls and white doors and white paneling, Mr. Carlos gasping on the floor. Alma had fallen to her knees, transfixed by

the bloody stains on the carpet, and at first she hadn't understood what Mr. Carlos was saying: *call and ambulance, call an ambulance!* The thief had shot him just above the ankle. He'd taken Mr. Carlos' collector's watches and thrown them into an empty pillowcase, and had then forced him at gunpoint to open the safe with Mrs. Lucy's jewels.

Alma gets up and places her empty water glass in the sink. The thief, as he'd rushed off, had dropped the gun on the carpet in the hallway. *At least I got something for my trouble*, Mr. Carlos said when he returned from the hospital on his crutches. *If he comes back for more, I'll put a bullet in him.* Alma squeezes drops of disinfectant over the cilantro soaking in a bowl; she takes a couple of limes from the fridge and slices them in half. Behind her the door opens and she glances back: that needy, frightened smile. Alma never knows if she wants to smack Miss Clara, or comfort her, or both.

"What was he like, Grandpa Carlos?" Miss Clara settles at the table again with the baby draped over her shoulder.

"Always polite." Alma slices an avocado in two now. "A very decent man."

Avocado and cilantro soup after the melon and prosciutto, followed by Veracruz style fish with rice.

"Marcos says they didn't get along. Always fighting," Miss Clara muses, tapping the baby's back.

Alma, dropping avocado flesh into the blender, doesn't answer. What does the child expect her to say? All her life she's been discreet, she's avoided gossip and conflict. She's not about to start now, because Miss Clara is bored.

"You may want to take the baby to the living room." Alma motions toward the blender.

"Oh, don't worry, Alma. The book says they should get used to noises."

Alma presses her lips closed and turns the blender on to high, as loud as it will go, eyes fixed on it as the avocado whirls and blends into the water and yogurt, darker flecks of green from the cilantro in the pastel mixture. It's true that they'd constantly argued, Mr. Carlos and Mrs. Lucy. When they weren't fighting, it was often as not because they'd stopped speaking. Serving lunch on those occasions, she and Marta—the housekeeper before Esmeralda—had tried to get plates on and off the table as quickly as possible. The dining room plunged in a heavy stillness as Alma came out with her tray, the clink of dishes, and suddenly one of their voices: *What's for dessert, Alma?* And nothing more, not a word between them. But what these youngsters don't understand—Alma turns the blender off, tastes the soup: more salt, more lime—what they're too naive to know is that this is how all relationships end up, if they manage to last. Alma turns the blender back on, back off, tastes it again. Into the fridge so it'll be nice and cool for lunch.

"No Acapulco after all," Miss Clara behind her says. "Marcos has a work thing."

"That's too bad." Alma shuts the fridge door.

"Maybe next month." Miss Clara frowns at the floor.

Alma rinses apples at the sink now: apple pie for dessert. Behind her the baby babbles and shrieks on Miss Clara's lap. There'll be no peace in a few months, when Chloe starts to crawl.

"He wants us to go to a therapist."

Alma turns around. "Are you ill, Miss Clara?"

"A psychologist." She pauses. "Couples therapy."

Alma purses her lips.

"He says I'm a mother and I have to accept it."

Accept it? The girl hasn't just accepted it: she's become consumed by it. She's a human pacifier, a human crib. Alma turns back to the sink. None of her business, what Mr. Marcos says to his little wife.

*

On Thursday, instead of a plate with crushed worms and broken snail shells, a dead hen under the jacaranda: neck snapped.

"Will you tell Mr. Marcos?" Esmeralda asks, biting her lip. The three are at the kitchen table, finishing their enchiladas.

"He knows about the plates." Manuel shrugs. "Doesn't care."

"It's creepy." Esmeralda shivers.

Alma chews a bite of enchilada in silence. It takes more than roaming the neighborhood collecting dead insects to kill a hen. Probably not children pulling pranks, then.

"Maybe they're for you, Lady Esme." Manuel grins. "From the Prince of Ecatepec."

Esmeralda gets up and stomps to the sink, lets her fork and knife clatter against the metal. She turns to face Manuel. "Or for you."

"Hilarious." Manuel stretches his legs under the table.

"From your poor wife."

He springs up now, fists at his sides. "Shut it." He takes two slow steps toward Esmeralda. "Shut up, fat cow."

Esmeralda breathes in and out loudly.

"You're jealous," Manuel smiles a twisted smile. "No one wants you."

"I wouldn't get closer," Esmeralda whispers. "I'll tell the master."

"He hates you. Can't even look at your fat face."

Esmeralda starts to cry.

"Yeah, go on, put on a show," Manuel sneers. "Countess Piggy." He stomps across the kitchen and out the back door.

Alma gets up from the table, grunting, old bones snapping. She walks over to the sink and pats Esmeralda's shoulder. "Don't listen to him."

Esmeralda sniffles, hands over her face.

"Go and rest your eyes, I'll finish up here."

"Horrible man. I'm telling the masters." Esmeralda whimpers. "And you just sit there!"

She storms off and Alma stays in the kitchen, clearing up. Manuel and Esmeralda may fight like cats and dogs, but at night she can hear them through the thin wall that separates her room from Esme's. Sighs, whispers. Fumbles and the creak of the bed. Some couples fight so that they can make up later. In any case, Alma will be serving alone today. At the sink she gazes out the window at the cars rushing past—red, white, grey—at a servant girl on the sidewalk, pulling a dog by its leash. That strangled hen: who would do something so strange? Maybe Esme is right: they're for Manuel. Not from his sweet, shy wife, but from one of the girls he cheated on her with: an ex-lover with a grudge. Alma shakes her head and turns down toward the dishes. One of these days she'll sit in the kitchen for twenty-four hours, from dusk till dawn and dusk again, to catch them.

*

"The husband is abusive," Miss Clara whispers. "Mr. I'm-home-for-lunch." She's nursing the baby again, late afternoon on Friday, Alma washing dishes. "He doesn't hit her, exactly."

What, then? Alma rinses a salad plate. What can a woman complain of if her husband is still there, pays the bills, and doesn't slap her around?

"Mom talked to her friend Graciela, who knows her mother: they were at school together. The neighbor is like... like a prisoner."

Alma scrubs at the pie platter: white with blue flowers, gold on the scalloped rim. Behind her Chloe gurgles. Is there some polite way to tell Miss Clara that the kitchen is no place for a baby? Sharp knives and gas in the oven and the burners on the stove.

"He started out nice. Too nice, Graciela says," Miss Clara is still talking about the neighbors. "He'd bring flowers: one bouquet for her, one for her mother. Cigars and whisky for the dad. Then they got married and everything changed. Or no," Miss Clara stops, hesitates.

Alma dries her hands with a kitchen towel. That Miss Clara should have fixated on these particular neighbors—a man who keeps to the exact same schedule week after week and a woman who barely exists—shows just how empty her days are.

"Was it after the honeymoon? Or when they started having kids?" Miss Clara shakes her head. "Anyway, he changed. She had to be home when he got back from work. He monitored her phone."

Alma starts drying the dishes now, stacking them carefully on the kitchen counter.

"Then he wouldn't let her see certain friends. Then *all* her friends. And then her parents. They're atheists, and he's very religious: Opus Dei or something. He said they were a bad influence and they weren't allowed to see the kids. They've got six, I think."

"Five, Miss Clara." Alma sometimes sees them, the neighbors' little children, when they get home from school: four girls and a boy in grey and navy uniforms, brown hair

gelled perfectly in place, stepping out of the van demurely as the chauffeur holds the door open and their mother—a flash of a hand, a faint melodic voice—greeted them at the door.

"Five," Miss Clara agrees. "The grandparents only saw the two eldest as babies, and they haven't talked to their daughter in eight years." The baby starts to whimper and Miss Clara automatically opens her blouse: that small white udder.

Alma turns down toward the soup bowl in her hands, wipes the thin circumference dry.

"Can you imagine?" Miss Clara looks up again.

"Very sad," Alma murmurs. At the open drawer, she dries each fork and spoon before placing them in their compartments. Two houses side-by-side, mirrors of each other. In one a woman trapped by her husband, in the other a woman trapped by a baby.

"I hope I see her one day." Miss Clara twists her face over her shoulder, toward the window. "I wonder what she looks like."

Alma dries the last knife and puts it in its place. She must look like anybody else, Alma thinks but doesn't say as she pushes the silverware drawer shut. Like any woman in this whole wide world.

*

Still dark in her small room, yet something has woken Alma. Next door a little cry from Esmeralda, as if she's gotten a nice surprise, and the bed creaking. Manuel grunting, a soft thump against the floor. Alma turns on her side in bed. Those two: why do they pretend to dislike each other? But maybe they dislike each other as well; maybe the desire and spite have melded into one single thing, one single creature, writhing next door. Alma sighs. Impossible, at her age, to go back to sleep now: four in the morning, the witching hour. She closes her eyes. That morning, as they'd tidied up after breakfast, Esme had said

that she wanted to have a family, that she'd go back to her village and settle down soon. She hated the city, hated this lonely life. Next door the lock clicks open, a whoosh and the door slips shut. With how she and Manuel are carrying on, Esme will be pregnant soon enough, and then what will she do. *And what about you, Miss Alma?* Esmeralda had asked as she'd wiped a skillet dry, young face smiling. *Did you ever want kids?* Alma had told the girl to mind her own business, and Esme had stomped out of the kitchen, miffed.

Alma turns to her other side in bed, eyes still closed. Forty-seven years earlier and it had taken two full days of labor: her mother and the midwife taking turns to nap, Alma—seventeen years old, still in the village, the boy she'd lain with long gone—moaning and walking the room in a trance. Her belly huge and hard and hot. The contractions had started early in the morning, but soon it was afternoon. Soon the light mellowed to dusk, followed by blue half-light, and then dense, black night and the naked bulb on the ceiling. Then suddenly birds out the window, Alma squatting again, her mother, bleary-eyed, holding her elbows. Cold grey light, another day beginning. How many days had gone by? Soon it was afternoon again, soon night, as if with every breath the hours were slipping but also stretching, eternal. And yet at the end of it all: silence. Her mother sobbing soundlessly, the midwife turning away. The two little bodies folded into themselves, heads curled forward, grey skin. Wrinkled eyelids closed into crescents. They had wrapped them in a white cloth and had buried them, both boys, under the mound of dry grass by the almond tree.

*

Next morning Alma washes the breakfast dishes—Saturday, the young masters gone to their therapy, slippery suds on Alma's hands and the scent of sharp lemon soap. Movement outside the window: the neighbors' kids filing into their van. Pink and yellow

party dresses and a white guayabera for the boy, their father behind them: black hair stiff as plastic, linen trousers, one fine eyebrow cocked toward the empty street. Mr. I'm-home-for-lunch pausing, waiting for the trees and sidewalk to tell him how handsome he is before the chauffeur opens the door and he steps into the black van. They drive off, the street quiet. He must be an unusually cruel man to keep his wife home on a day like this, the sun out and the warm breeze. But maybe it's something else: maybe she chooses to stay. Alma turns away from the window, fetches flour and sugar from the cupboard, butter from the fridge. She measures and weighs, glass bowls of different sizes on the counter. A few minutes later, as she's rolling out the dough for the mango tart, another flash out of the corner of her eye and Alma looks up. A new plate at the base of the jacaranda but also, for the first time, a person. Alma gasps and leans forward. A woman walking away. Tall and slim in tight jeans and pink high heels. Across the street the woman turns and glances toward the plate. Then, with a flick of her dark glossy head, she struts back into her house through the side door. Alma stays at the window. Mrs. I'm-home-for-lunch. Dark eyes, full lips, high cheekbones. A movie-star face to match her perfect body; to match her movie-star husband. Not like any other woman in the world, after all. Perhaps that's why she never leaves the house: too perfect to come into contact with the ordinary air.

Alma glances down. On the white plastic plate beneath the window: candy wrappers, drab bird feathers and a head broken off from a doll's body—plastic face the size of a fist, oversized blue eyes, synthetic blond hair tangled into clumps on the black modeling clay. The neighbor must have seen Mr. Marcos and Miss Clara leaving earlier and thought the house was empty. All along it's been her, the hermit. Not children pulling pranks or one of Manuel's former girlfriends. But why? That severed doll's head. Alma blinks and it's the neighbor's face. She blinks again and it's Miss Clara's pink face. She turns away and walks

over to the kitchen table, heart beating in her ears. She closes her eyes. When she opens them again minutes later she's decided not to tell Miss Clara: it'll upset her. *Are they for me? Does she hate me? She doesn't even know me.* Alma can hear the dismay in her voice, can see the hurt in her eyes. But maybe Mrs. I'm-home-for-lunch sees Miss Clara walking down the street with the stroller, cooing at the baby, and can't bear so much blank innocence. Or it could be something else: she might have gotten it into her head that her husband and Miss Clara are having an affair. The women with the worst husbands are often the ones most afraid of losing them.

Should Alma do something: tell Mr. Marcos or Manuel? Or she could mind her own business: let the crazy lady leave her plates week after week, strange and disturbing, yet ultimately harmless.

*

"Alma?"

Alma straightens up on the wrought iron chair, blinks. Her chin feels damp with saliva and she quickly wipes at it with the back of her hand, embarrassed.

"Don't get up," Miss Clara says.

"Miss—Mrs. Cla—Mrs. Clara," Alma stutters. "I was sewing. The light." She motions to her lap but the pile of napkins has fallen to the ground. Miss Clara bends down to retrieve them. Earlier, after taking the mango tart out of the oven, Alma had gone out to the garden to mend the lace table-napkins in the sunlight. She must have fallen asleep.

"Inappropriate, please excuse—" Alma accepts the napkins back.

"Oh Alma, who cares?" Miss Clara slumps heavily on the wrought iron chair next to her. Alma keeps blinking, her vision still blurry, the garden a haze of green and sunlight.

"It's nice here," Miss Clara says.

"The baby, Miss Clara?"

"With Esme."

Alma glances toward Miss Clara and back to the garden. The therapy must have been good for her.

"I thought it would be different," Miss Clara says. "I don't know what I thought." She sighs heavily.

"Did Mr. Marcos come back with you, Miss Clara?"

"He said he needed space. Saturday, and he can't spend ten minutes with us." Miss Clara glares across the garden. "We were supposed to be equal, you know? We'd take turns cooking and washing dishes. But then Chloe was born, and a switch flipped."

Alma looks up at a squirrel leaping from branch to branch on the eucalyptus. Why is it that people have children at all? It suddenly seems so pointless—that useless burden of love and pain.

"He says his job actually pays enough for us to live on." Miss Clara sniffles. She takes one of the napkins from Alma's lap and dabs her eyes with it. "What did you think: that we'd live on the peanuts you make? He's doing it for me, for the baby. But I didn't ask for this." Miss Clara sobs once, softly, and presses the napkin to her eyes. "Sorry, Alma."

"I'll give you a moment, Miss Clara." Alma pushes herself up.

"No, stay!" Miss Clara flings one arm out. "Please."

Alma sits down again.

"I don't want to be alone," Miss Clara mutters, frowning at the azaleas. "I'm always alone." She's fiddling with the napkin on her lap, pulling at the loose threads so that it unravels further. It'll be more work to fix.

"That therapist was so weird. A total hippie: purple tie-dye dress and hairy armpits. She said men have roles and women have roles, and I can't pretend I didn't know." Miss Clara sniffles.

Alma reaches out and pats Miss Clara's shoulder.

"Thank you, Alma. You're the only one who listens. Sometimes I think you're my only friend." Miss Clara blows her nose into the frayed napkin. "I hated her. She and Marcos were a team, bullying me. He said he wants three kids, and if I don't, we should just split up now. We're just stuff he owns: a house, a car, a wife, three kids. And this place, it's ridiculous." She shakes her head mournfully. "He's with his friend Monchis. See?" Miss Clara turns to Alma again. "He can't even spend one morning with Chloe. If I could come home late and smile at the baby for ten seconds, I'd want three kids too. Or ten, or twenty!"

"It's normal to quarrel," Alma says tentatively. She has no real advice to give. She never married, and the only time she held her babies, they were already dead.

"I won't be like his grandparents. I'd rather be alone."

They're silent, Miss Clara glaring at the azaleas and Alma smoothing out the napkins on her lap. Maybe the girl will divorce: people do that so easily, these days. Alma wants to say something, something about life and pain and their inextricability. But as she's about to open her mouth, a sharp cry comes from inside the house. Raised voices: Manuel and Esmeralda. Alma and Miss Clara turn to each other, alarmed. More shouting, and Esmeralda sobbing. A sharp cry from Manuel. They stand up quickly and rush into the house, cross the large dining room, past the kitchen door, to the formal living room.

Esmeralda in the middle of the white carpet shakes with sobs, a gun in her outstretched hand. She's pointing it straight at Manuel across from her. He's behind the couch, arms lifted and hovering in midair. That gun: the one the thief shot Mr. Carlos in

the leg with, thirty years ago. The gun that Mr. Marcos keeps forgetting in the study drawer.

"Where's the baby?" Miss Clara gasps at Esmeralda.

"Sleeping," Esmeralda manages between sobs.

For a moment no one says anything. Esmeralda keeps sobbing, the gun in her hand shaking but pointed right at Manuel, at his heart. Manuel breathes in and out noisily, hands still hovering. Miss Clara turns from one to the other, fingers pressed to her lips, eyes wide.

"She's crazy," Manuel finally says, hoarsely.

"Shut up!" Esmeralda screams. "I'll kill you!"

"Call the police." Manuel's eyes are riveted on Esmeralda and the gun.

"What's happening?" Miss Clara croaks, hands still up by her mouth.

"I'll kill him, Miss Clara, I swear." Esmeralda sobs.

"Esme, please." Miss Clara breathes in and out loudly, lowering her hands.

Upstairs the baby starts crying. Miss Clara glances at the stairs anxiously and back toward Esmeralda. "Put the gun down," she says, voice trembling.

Esmeralda shakes her head. "No, Miss Clara. I can't."

"Put the gun down," Miss Clara says more firmly.

"I'm sorry, Miss Clara," Esmeralda's voice cracks. "I can't take it."

"Breath, Esme." Miss Clara takes a slow step toward Esmeralda. "Tell me what's wrong. We can fix it."

Esmeralda wails once and swallows back sobs. They wait.

"He comes into my room," Esmeralda finally says, glancing at Miss Clara beseechingly, eyes red and face blotchy. "He forces me. I lock the door but he has a wire

thing. He makes me," Esmeralda whimpers. "He puts his thing in my mouth, Miss Clara. I can't..." Esmeralda sobs, "I can't take it anymore!" She roars.

"She's lying!" Manuel shouts quickly. "She's nuts! Look at her."

"And he calls me Countess Esme. After what he does to me." Esmeralda sobs brokenly.

"She's lost it!" Manuel gives out a shrill, nervous giggle.

"I'll kill him," Esmeralda wails.

"Esme, give me the gun," Miss Clara says. She's taken another step forward and holds her hand out. "We'll call the police. You'll tell them."

"No." Esmeralda still points the gun at Manuel.

"Please," Miss Clara begs. "He'll be punished."

Esme shakes her head vehemently. "He won't." She lifts the gun a little higher.

"Esme..." Alma, who hasn't spoken, whispers hoarsely.

"Nuts," Manuel chirps manically. "She's lost it."

"Esme," Alma says again.

"Don't!" Miss Clara cringes, hands up by her face again.

Esmeralda winces at the impending shock and fires the gun. It clicks. She looks at it, eyes wide. Again she aims straight at Manuel's chest and presses the trigger. Click. A sharp, torn cry of anguish and Esmeralda drops the gun. It falls on the white carpet and bounces with a soft thud. Esmeralda looks up wildly. Another anguished cry, deeper and hoarse. She spins around and lunges across the foyer and toward the front door, which she yanks open. She runs out and down the sidewalk, her movements lopsided, leaning further and further right with each bound, as if tipping over toward the street and the cars. Upstairs the baby is still crying.

*

Hours later, Alma walks the neighborhood: long empty blocks, cars rushing past, the air that had been steeped with sun in the afternoon—saturated with yellow light—beginning to thin out and fade now that evening is falling. Tree branches turning black, the stone walls that protect the neighbors' gardens and mansions deepening. Miss Clara called the police earlier but they never came. In the meantime Manuel escaped, leaving all his things in the small room he lived in for twenty years: old sneakers, his brown turtleneck sweater, the framed photo of his wife in a puffy dress on their wedding day. They won't see him again. He'll change his name, or move up north. He'll keep forcing young girls, opening their locked doors with wire hangers, and later smirking and bowing in the daylight. But how could Alma have known? Those nights when she heard them on the other side of the wall—she thought the skirmishes in the kitchen were a part of their games. Girls are often attracted to fools, and Esmeralda never said anything. Probably too ashamed, poor child. Probably terrified. Should she have realized? Alma walks another block. She minds her own business, but should she have asked?

She's the only one who could have prevented it—what happened to Esmeralda—if she'd said something twenty years ago, after the robbery. Alma had walked back from the bus stop in her new shoes, and by the time she reached the gate the balls of her feet were sore. At the corner Manuel had been talking to a short stocky man—round face, black eyes. As she'd hobbled nearer they'd both twisted away from her, and before she'd turned the corner Manuel had called her name softly and had lifted a warning finger: a threatening finger. The other man had his back to her; running down the hallway toward Mr. Carlos half-an-hour later she'd barely realized that it was the same round face, the same black eyes. A word from her and Manuel would have been sent to jail back then, and Esmeralda would

never have met him. She might have had other things happen to her—things were always happening to young women—but she would have been spared Manuel forcing her, Manuel kissing her hand with a sneer and bowing.

Alma walks another block, another long metal gate with locks, warnings of electric shock, alarm systems. Darker now, the grass a black carpet. They won't find Esmeralda, even if Alma walks these blocks for weeks and Miss Clara drives her car round and round, the baby wailing in the backseat. But at least they're doing something, Miss Clara had said before she drove off. Who knew the child had it in her? Alma crosses to the opposite sidewalk. Miss Clara ordering Esmeralda to give her the gun. Later she'd turned to Manuel and, amidst his protestations, had raised one hand: *save it for the police*. Perhaps she's growing up, Miss Clara. Perhaps she's been growing up all this time.

Alma turns right at the next corner, time to go home. She shivers in the cool evening breeze, wraps her cardigan around her, and before she reaches the jacaranda she's noticed it: the plate with the severed doll's head. She had meant to throw it out earlier but had nodded off on the terrace and later, in the afternoon's drama, had forgotten. Alma mutters under her breath: crazy lady next door. She goes over to the dry grass and picks it up, and then walks further down the block, to the neighbor's house. She leans down and places it on their doormat. Tomorrow, when Mr. I'm-home-for-lunch leaves for mass with his five little creatures, he'll step on it. One foot out the door, smug chin up, and suddenly something crunching under his shoe. He'll stare, confused and dismayed, perhaps even frightened. Or maybe it will be the wife—that ghost—leaving the house through the front door for once in her life, high heel sinking into the clunky modeling clay as she stares at that petrified doll's face in incomprehension before it dawns on her: someone knows. How troubled does a person have to be to strangle a hen, to rip out moth wings? To place a dead

sparrow on a plate for a neighbor one has never met? Troubled and desperate. Troubled and unhinged and broken.

Alma walks back across the side street. Her kitchen in the dim glow of the lamppost: she has looked out of that window so many times. And now she's looking in as she walks back, and she can almost see something: a shadow, vaporous and refracted by the reflection on the glass. A ghost. Alma's own ghost. She can see herself: Alma in the soft kitchen light leaning down to fetch her jar of instant coffee and, as she straightens up, a flash out of the corner of her eye. Alma inside turns and takes two quick steps forward to peer out into the shadows. Someone is crossing the side street, someone is near the jacaranda. She blinks, straining to see into the dusky street. Out on the sidewalk, Alma walks past the kitchen window and to the garage gate to let herself in. Meanwhile, Alma inside keeps staring out into the darkness, muttering, shifting her gaze: too late, again, to see the shadow that just slipped by.