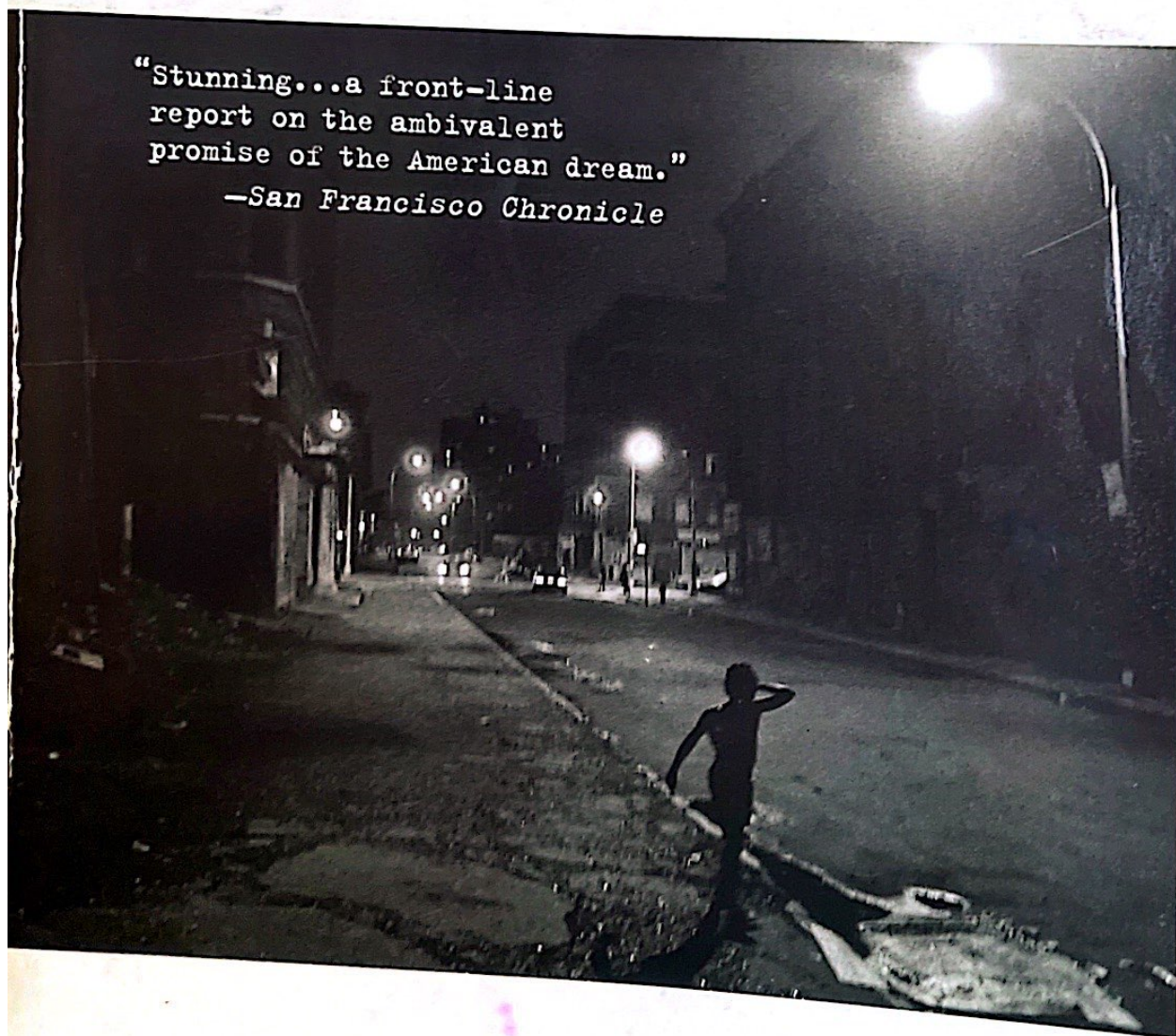


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

DROWN

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Junot
Díaz

JUNOT DÍAZ

DROWN

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Ysrael

Fiesta, 1980

Aurora

Aguantando

Drown

Boyfriend

Edison, New Jersey

How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl,
Whitegirl, or Halfie

No Face

Negocios

FIESTA, 1980

Mami's youngest sister—my tía Yrma—finally made it to the United States that year. She and tío Miguel got themselves an apartment in the Bronx, off the Grand Concourse and everybody decided that we should have a party. Actually, my pops decided, but everybody—meaning Mami, tía Yrma, tío Miguel and their neighbors—thought it a dope idea. On the afternoon of the party Papi came back from work around six. Right on time. We were all dressed by then, which was a smart move on our part. If Papi had walked in and caught us lounging around in our underwear, he would have kicked our asses something serious.

He didn't say nothing to nobody, not even my moms. He just pushed past her, held up his hand when she tried to talk to him and headed right into the shower. Rafa gave me the look and I gave it back to him; we both knew Papi had been with that Puerto Rican woman he was seeing and wanted to wash off the evidence quick.

Mami looked really nice that day. The United States had finally put some meat on her; she was no longer the same flaca who had arrived here three years before. She had cut her hair short and was wearing tons of cheap-ass jewelry which on her didn't look too lousy. She smelled like herself, like the wind through a tree. She always waited until the last possible minute to put on her perfume because she said it was a waste to spray it on early and then have to spray it on again once you got to the party.

We—meaning me, my brother, my little sister and Mami—waited for Papi to finish his shower. Mami seemed anxious, in her usual dispassionate way. Her hands adjusted the buckle of her belt over and over again. That morning, when she had gotten us up for school, Mami told us that she wanted to have a good time at the party. I want to dance, she said, but now, with the sun sliding out of the sky like spit off a wall, she seemed ready just to get this over with.

Rafa didn't much want to go to no party either, and me, I never wanted to go anywhere with my family. There was a baseball game in the parking lot outside and we could hear our friends, yelling, Hey, and, Cabrón, to one another. We heard the pop of a ball as it sailed over the cars, the clatter of an aluminum bat dropping to the concrete. Not that me or Rafa loved baseball; we just liked playing with the local kids, thrashing them at anything they were doing. By the

sounds of the shouting, we both knew the game was close, either of us could have made a difference. Rafa frowned and when I frowned back, he put up his fist. Don't you mirror me, he said.

Don't you mirror me, I said.

He punched me—I would have hit him back but Papi marched into the living room with his towel around his waist, looking a lot smaller than he did when he was dressed. He had a few strands of hair around his nipples and a surly closed-mouth expression, like maybe he'd scalded his tongue or something.

Have they eaten? he asked Mami.

She nodded. I made you something.

You didn't let him eat, did you?

Ay, Dios mío, she said, letting her arms fall to her side.

Ay, Dios mío is right, Papi said.

I was never supposed to eat before our car trips, but earlier, when she had put out our dinner of rice, beans and sweet platanos, guess who had been the first one to clean his plate? You couldn't blame Mami really, she had been busy—cooking, getting ready, dressing my sister Madai. I should have reminded her not to feed me but I wasn't that sort of son.

Papi turned to me. Coño, muchacho, why did you eat?

Rafa had already started inching away from me. I'd once told him I considered him a low-down chicken-

shit for moving out of the way every time Papi was going to smack me.

Collateral damage, Rafa had said. Ever heard of it?

No.

Look it up.

Chickenshit or not, I didn't dare glance at him. Papi was old-fashioned; he expected your undivided attention when you were getting your ass whupped. You couldn't look him in the eye either—that wasn't allowed. Better to stare at his belly button, which was perfectly round and immaculate. Papi pulled me to my feet by my ear.

If you throw up—

I won't, I cried, tears in my eyes, more out of reflex than pain.

Ya, Ramón, ya. It's not his fault, Mami said.

They've known about this party forever. How did they think we were going to get there? Fly?

He finally let go of my ear and I sat back down. Madai was too scared to open her eyes. Being around Papi all her life had turned her into a major-league wuss. Anytime Papi raised his voice her lip would start trembling, like some specialized tuning fork. Rafa pretended that he had knuckles to crack and when I shoved him, he gave me a *Don't start* look. But even that little bit of recognition made me feel better.

I was the one who was always in trouble with my dad. It was like my God-given duty to piss him off, to

do everything the way he hated. Our fights didn't bother me too much. I still wanted him to love me, something that never seemed strange or contradictory until years later, when he was out of our lives.

By the time my ear stopped stinging Papi was dressed and Mami was crossing each one of us, solemnly, like we were heading off to war. We said, in turn, Bendición, Mami, and she poked us in our five cardinal spots while saying, Que Dios te bendiga.

This was how all our trips began, the words that followed me every time I left the house.

None of us spoke until we were inside Papi's Volkswagen van. Brand-new, lime-green and bought to impress. Oh, we were impressed, but me, every time I was in that VW and Papi went above twenty miles an hour, I vomited. I'd never had trouble with cars before—that van was like my curse. Mami suspected it was the upholstery. In her mind, American things—appliances, mouthwash, funny-looking upholstery—all seemed to have an intrinsic badness about them. Papi was careful about taking me anywhere in the VW, but when he had to, I rode up front in Mami's usual seat so I could throw up out a window.

¿Cómo te sientes? Mami asked over my shoulder when Papi pulled onto the turnpike. She had her hand on the base of my neck. One thing about Mami, her palms never sweated.

I'm OK, I said, keeping my eyes straight ahead. I

definitely didn't want to trade glances with Papi. He had this one look, furious and sharp, that always left me feeling bruised.

Toma. Mami handed me four mentas. She had thrown three out her window at the beginning of our trip, an offering to Eshú; the rest were for me.

I took one and sucked it slowly, my tongue knocking it up against my teeth. We passed Newark Airport without any incident. If Madai had been awake she would have cried because the planes flew so close to the cars.

How's he feeling? Papi asked.

Fine, I said. I glanced back at Rafa and he pretended like he didn't see me. That was the way he was, at school and at home. When I was in trouble, he didn't know me. Madai was solidly asleep, but even with her face all wrinkled up and drooling she looked cute, her hair all separated into twists.

I turned around and concentrated on the candy. Papi even started to joke that we might not have to scrub the van out tonight. He was beginning to loosen up, not checking his watch too much. Maybe he was thinking about that Puerto Rican woman or maybe he was just happy that we were all together. I could never tell. At the toll, he was feeling positive enough to actually get out of the van and search around under the basket for dropped coins. It was something he had once done to amuse Madai, but now it was habit. Cars behind us honked their horns and I slid down in my seat. Rafa didn't care; he grinned back at the other cars and waved.

His actual job was to make sure no cops were coming. Mami shook Madai awake and as soon as she saw Papi stooping for a couple of quarters she let out this screech of delight that almost took off the top of my head.

That was the end of the good times. Just outside the Washington Bridge, I started feeling woozy. The smell of the upholstery got all up inside my head and I found myself with a mouthful of saliva. Mami's hand tensed on my shoulder and when I caught Papi's eye, he was like, No way. Don't do it.

The first time I got sick in the van Papi was taking me to the library. Rafa was with us and he couldn't believe I threw up. I was famous for my steel-lined stomach. A third-world childhood could give you that. Papi was worried enough that just as quick as Rafa could drop off the books we were on our way home. Mami fixed me one of her honey-and-onion concoctions and that made my stomach feel better. A week later we tried the library again and on this go-around I couldn't get the window open in time. When Papi got me home, he went and cleaned out the van himself, an expression of askho on his face. This was a big deal, since Papi almost never cleaned anything himself. He came back inside and found me sitting on the couch feeling like hell.

It's the car, he said to Mami. It's making him sick.

This time the damage was pretty minimal, nothing Papi couldn't wash off the door with a blast of the hose. He

was pissed, though; he jammed his finger into my cheek, a nice solid thrust. That was the way he was with his punishments: imaginative. Earlier that year I'd written an essay in school called "My Father the Torturer," but the teacher made me write a new one. She thought I was kidding.

We drove the rest of the way to the Bronx in silence. We only stopped once, so I could brush my teeth. Mami had brought along my toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste and while every car known to man sped by us she stood outside with me so I wouldn't feel alone.

Tío Miguel was about seven feet tall and had his hair combed up and out, into a demi-fro. He gave me and Rafa big spleen-crushing hugs and then kissed Mami and finally ended up with Madai on his shoulder. The last time I'd seen Tío was at the airport, his first day in the United States. I remembered how he hadn't seemed all that troubled to be in another country.

He looked down at me. Carajo, Yuniór, you look horrible!

He threw up, my brother explained.

I pushed Rafa. Thanks a lot, ass-face.

Hey, he said. Tío asked.

Tío clapped a bricklayer's hand on my shoulder. Everybody gets sick sometimes, he said. You should have seen me on the plane over here. Dios mio! He rolled his Asian-looking eyes for emphasis. I thought we were all going to die.

Everybody could tell he was lying. I smiled like he was making me feel better.

Do you want me to get you a drink? Tío asked. We got beer and rum.

Miguel, Mami said. He's young.

Young? Back in Santo Domingo, he'd be getting laid by now.

Mami thinned her lips, which took some doing.

Well, it's true, Tío said.

So, Mami, I said. When do I get to go visit the D.R.?

That's enough, Yuniór.

It's the only pussy you'll ever get, Rafa said to me in English.

Not counting your girlfriend, of course.

Rafa smiled. He had to give me that one.

Papi came in from parking the van. He and Miguel gave each other the sort of handshakes that would have turned my fingers into Wonder bread.

Coño, compa'i, ¿cómo va todo? they said to each other.

Tía came out then, with an apron on and maybe the longest Lee Press-On Nails I've ever seen in my life. There was this one guru motherfucker in the *Guinness Book of World Records* who had longer nails, but I tell you, it was close. She gave everybody kisses, told me and Rafa how guapo we were—Rafa, of course, believed her—told Madai how bella she was, but when she got to Papi, she froze a little, like maybe she'd seen a wasp on the tip of his nose, but then kissed him all the same.

Mami told us to join the other kids in the living room. Tío said, Wait a minute, I want to show you the apartment. I was glad Tía said, Hold on, because from what I'd seen so far, the place had been furnished in Contemporary Dominican Tacky. The less I saw, the better. I mean, I liked plastic sofa covers but damn, Tío and Tía had taken it to another level. They had a disco ball hanging in the living room and the type of stucco ceilings that looked like stalactite heaven. The sofas all had golden tassels dangling from their edges. Tía came out of the kitchen with some people I didn't know and by the time she got done introducing everybody, only Papi and Mami were given the guided tour of the four-room third-floor apartment. Me and Rafa joined the kids in the living room. They'd already started eating. We were hungry, one of the girls explained, a pastelito in hand. The boy was about three years younger than me but the girl who'd spoken, Leti, was my age. She and another girl were on the sofa together and they were cute as hell.

Leti introduced them: the boy was her brother Wilquins and the other girl was her neighbor Mari. Leti had some serious tetas and I could tell that my brother was going to gun for her. His taste in girls was predictable. He sat down right between Leti and Mari and by the way they were smiling at him I knew he'd do fine. Neither of the girls gave me more than a cursory one-two, which didn't bother me. Sure, I liked girls but I was always too terrified to speak to them unless we were arguing or I was calling them stupidos, which was

one of my favorite words that year. I turned to Wilquins and asked him what there was to do around here. Mari, who had the lowest voice I'd ever heard, said, He can't speak.

What does that mean?

He's mute.

I looked at Wilquins incredulously. He smiled and nodded, as if he'd won a prize or something.

Does he understand? I asked.

Of course he understands, Rafa said. He's not dumb.

I could tell Rafa had said that just to score points with the girls. Both of them nodded. Low-voice Mari said, He's the best student in his grade.

I thought, Not bad for a mute. I sat next to Wilquins. After about two seconds of TV Wilquins whipped out a bag of dominos and motioned to me. Did I want to play? Sure. Me and him played Rafa and Leti and we whupped their collective asses twice, which put Rafa in a real bad mood. He looked at me like maybe he wanted to take a swing, just one to make him feel better. Leti kept whispering into Rafa's ear, telling him it was OK.

In the kitchen I could hear my parents slipping into their usual modes. Papi's voice was loud and argumentative; you didn't have to be anywhere near him to catch his drift. And Mami, you had to put cups to your ears to hear hers. I went into the kitchen a few times—once so the tíos could show off how much bullshit I'd been able to cram in my head the last few years; another time for a bucket-sized cup of soda. Mami and Tía were

frying tostones and the last of the pastelitos. She appeared happier now and the way her hands worked on our dinner you would think she had a life somewhere else making rare and precious things. She nudged Tía every now and then, shit they must have been doing all their lives. As soon as Mami saw me though, she gave me the eye. Don't stay long, that eye said. Don't piss your old man off.

Papi was too busy arguing about Elvis to notice me. Then somebody mentioned María Montez and Papi barked, María Montez? Let me tell *you* about María Montez, compa'i.

Maybe I was used to him. His voice—louder than most adults'—didn't bother me none, though the other kids shifted uneasily in their seats. Wilquins was about to raise the volume on the TV, but Rafa said, I wouldn't do that. Muteboy had balls, though. He did it anyway and then sat down. Wilquins's pop came into the living room a second later, a bottle of Presidente in hand. That dude must have had Spider-senses or something. Did you raise that? he asked Wilquins and Wilquins nodded.

Is this your house? his pops asked. He looked ready to beat Wilquins silly but he lowered the volume instead.

See, Rafa said. You nearly got your ass *kicked*.

I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying to

cure me of my vomiting. It wasn't really working but I looked forward to our trips, even though at the end of each one I'd be sick. These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When we were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something.

Before each drive Mami would cross me.

Bendición, Mami, I'd say.

She'd kiss my forehead. Que Dios te bendiga. And then she would give me a handful of mentas because she wanted me to be OK. Mami didn't think these excursions would cure anything, but the one time she had brought it up to Papi he had told her to shut up, what did she know about anything anyway?

Me and Papi didn't talk much. We just drove around our neighborhood. Occasionally he'd ask, How is it?

And I'd nod, no matter how I felt.

One day I was sick outside of Perth Amboy. Instead of taking me home he went the other way on Industrial Avenue, stopping a few minutes later in front of a light blue house I didn't recognize. It reminded me of the Easter eggs we colored at school, the ones we threw out the bus windows at other cars.

The Puerto Rican woman was there and she helped me clean up. She had dry papery hands and when she rubbed the towel on my chest, she did it hard, like I was a bumper she was waxing. She was very thin and had a cloud of brown hair rising above her narrow face and the sharpest blackest eyes you've ever seen.

He's cute, she said to Papi.

Not when he's throwing up, Papi said.

What's your name? she asked me. Are you Rafa?

I shook my head.

Then it's Yuniior, right?

I nodded.

You're the smart one, she said, suddenly happy with herself. Maybe you want to see my books?

They weren't hers. I recognized them as ones my father must have left in her house. Papi was a voracious reader, couldn't even go cheating without a paperback in his pocket.

Why don't you go watch TV? Papi suggested. He was looking at her like she was the last piece of chicken on earth.

We got plenty of channels, she said. Use the remote if you want.

The two of them went upstairs and I was too scared of what was happening to poke around. I just sat there, ashamed, expecting something big and fiery to crash down on our heads. I watched a whole hour of the news before Papi came downstairs and said, Let's go.

About two hours later the women laid out the food and like always nobody but the kids thanked them. It must be some Dominican tradition or something. There was everything I liked—chicharrones, fried chicken, tostones, sancocho, rice, fried cheese, yuca, avocado, potato salad, a meteor-sized hunk of pernil, even a

tossed salad which I could do without—but when I joined the other kids around the serving table, Papi said, Oh no you don't, and took the paper plate out of my hand. His fingers weren't gentle.

What's wrong now? Tía asked, handing me another plate.

He ain't eating, Papi said. Mami pretended to help Rafa with the pernil.

Why can't he eat?

Because I said so.

The adults who didn't know us made like they hadn't heard a thing and Tío just smiled sheepishly and told everybody to go ahead and eat. All the kids—about ten of them now—trooped back into the living room with their plates a-heaping and all the adults ducked into the kitchen and the dining room, where the radio was playing loud-ass bachatas. I was the only one without a plate. Papi stopped me before I could get away from him. He kept his voice nice and low so nobody else could hear him.

If you eat anything, I'm going to beat you. ¿Entiendes?

I nodded.

And if your brother gives you any food, I'll beat him too. Right here in front of everybody. ¿Entiendes?

I nodded again. I wanted to kill him and he must have sensed it because he gave my head a little shove.

All the kids watched me come in and sit down in front of the TV.

What's wrong with your dad? Leti asked.

He's a dick, I said.

Rafa shook his head. Don't say that shit in front of people.

Easy for you to be nice when you're eating, I said.

Hey, if I was a pukey little baby, I wouldn't get no food either.

I almost said something back but I concentrated on the TV. I wasn't going to start it. No fucking way. So I watched Bruce Lee beat Chuck Norris into the floor of the Colosseum and tried to pretend that there was no food anywhere in the house. It was Tía who finally saved me. She came into the living room and said, Since you ain't eating, Yuniór, you can at least help me get some ice.

I didn't want to, but she mistook my reluctance for something else.

I already asked your father.

She held my hand while we walked; Tía didn't have any kids but I could tell she wanted them. She was the sort of relative who always remembered your birthday but who you only went to visit because you had to. We didn't get past the first-floor landing before she opened her pocketbook and handed me the first of three pastelitos she had smuggled out of the apartment.

Go ahead, she said. And as soon as you get inside make sure you brush your teeth.

Thanks a lot, Tía, I said.

Those pastelitos didn't stand a chance.

She sat next to me on the stairs and smoked her cigarette. All the way down on the first floor and we could still hear the music and the adults and the television. Tía looked a ton like Mami; the two of them were both short and light-skinned. Tía smiled a lot and that was what set them apart the most.

How is it at home, Yuniór?

What do you mean?

How's it going in the apartment? Are you kids OK?

I knew an interrogation when I heard one, no matter how sugar-coated it was. I didn't say anything. Don't get me wrong, I loved my tía, but something told me to keep my mouth shut. Maybe it was family loyalty, maybe I just wanted to protect Mami or I was afraid that Papi would find out—it could have been anything really.

Is your mom all right?

I shrugged.

Have there been lots of fights?

None, I said. Too many shrugs would have been just as bad as an answer. Papi's at work too much.

Work, Tía said, like it was somebody's name she didn't like.

Me and Rafa, we didn't talk much about the Puerto Rican woman. When we ate dinner at her house, the few times Papi had taken us over there, we still acted like nothing was out of the ordinary. Pass the ketchup, man. No sweat, bro. The affair was like a hole in our

living room floor, one we'd gotten so used to circumnavigating that we sometimes forgot it was there.

By midnight all the adults were crazy dancing. I was sitting outside Tía's bedroom—where Madai was sleeping—trying not to attract attention. Rafa had me guarding the door; he and Leti were in there too, with some of the other kids, getting busy no doubt. Wilquins had gone across the hall to bed so I had me and the roaches to mess around with.

Whenever I peered into the main room I saw about twenty moms and dads dancing and drinking beers. Every now and then somebody yelled, ¡Quisqueya! And then everybody else would yell and stomp their feet. From what I could see my parents seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Mami and Tía spent a lot of time side by side, whispering, and I kept expecting something to come of this, a brawl maybe. I'd never once been out with my family when it hadn't turned to shit. We weren't even theatrical or straight crazy like other families. We fought like sixth-graders, without any real dignity. I guess the whole night I'd been waiting for a blowup, something between Papi and Mami. This was how I always figured Papi would be exposed, out in public, where everybody would know.

You're a cheater!

But everything was calmer than usual. And Mami didn't look like she was about to say anything to Papi.

The two of them danced every now and then but they never lasted more than a song before Mami joined Tía again in whatever conversation they were having.

I tried to imagine Mami before Papi. Maybe I was tired, or just sad, thinking about the way my family was. Maybe I already knew how it would all end up in a few years, Mami without Papi, and that was why I did it. Picturing her alone wasn't easy. It seemed like Papi had always been with her, even when we were waiting in Santo Domingo for him to send for us.

The only photograph our family had of Mami as a young woman, before she married Papi, was the one that somebody took of her at an election party that I found one day while rummaging for money to go to the arcade. Mami had it tucked into her immigration papers. In the photo, she's surrounded by laughing cousins I will never meet, who are all shiny from dancing, whose clothes are rumpled and loose. You can tell it's night and hot and that the mosquitos have been biting. She sits straight and even in a crowd she stands out, smiling quietly like maybe she's the one everybody's celebrating. You can't see her hands but I imagined they're knotting a straw or a bit of thread. This was the woman my father met a year later on the Malecón, the woman Mami thought she'd always be.

Mami must have caught me studying her because she stopped what she was doing and gave me a smile, maybe her first one of the night. Suddenly I wanted to go over and hug her, for no other reason than I loved

her, but there were about eleven fat jiggling bodies between us. So I sat down on the tiled floor and waited.

I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew Rafa was kicking me and saying, Let's go. He looked like he'd been hitting those girls off; he was all smiles. I got to my feet in time to kiss Tía and Tío good-bye. Mami was holding the serving dish she had brought with her.

Where's Papi? I asked.

He's downstairs, bringing the van around. Mami leaned down to kiss me.

You were good today, she said.

And then Papi burst in and told us to get the hell downstairs before some pendejo cop gave him a ticket. More kisses, more handshakes and then we were gone.

I don't remember being out of sorts after I met the Puerto Rican woman, but I must have been because Mami only asked me questions when she thought something was wrong in my life. It took her about ten passes but finally she cornered me one afternoon when we were alone in the apartment. Our upstairs neighbors were beating the crap out of their kids, and me and her had been listening to it all afternoon. She put her hand on mine and said, Is everything OK, Yunion? Have you been fighting with your brother?

Me and Rafa had already talked. We'd been in the basement, where our parents couldn't hear us. He told me that yeah, he knew about her.

Papi's taken me there twice now, he said.
Why didn't you tell me? I asked.

What the hell was I going to say? *Hey, Yunion, guess what happened yesterday? I met Papi's sucia!*

I didn't say anything to Mami either. She watched me, very very closely. Later I would think, maybe if I had told her, she would have confronted him, would have done something, but who can know these things? I said I'd been having trouble in school and like that everything was back to normal between us. She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed and that was that.

We were on the turnpike, just past Exit 11, when I started feeling it again. I sat up from leaning against Rafa. His fingers smelled and he'd gone to sleep almost as soon as he got into the van. Madai was out too but at least she wasn't snoring.

In the darkness, I saw that Papi had a hand on Mami's knee and that the two of them were quiet and still. They weren't slumped back or anything; they were both wide awake, bolted into their seats. I couldn't see either of their faces and no matter how hard I tried I could not imagine their expressions. Neither of them moved. Every now and then the van was filled with the bright rush of somebody else's headlights. Finally I said, Mami, and they both looked back, already knowing what was happening.

AGUANTANDO

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1.

I lived without a father for the first nine years of my life. He was in the States, working, and the only way I knew him was through the photographs my moms kept in a plastic sandwich bag under her bed. Since our zinc roof leaked, almost everything we owned was water-stained: our clothes, Mami's Bible, her makeup, whatever food we had, Abuelo's tools, our cheap wooden furniture. It was only because of that plastic bag that any pictures of my father survived.

When I thought of Papi I thought of one shot specifically. Taken days before the U.S. invasion: 1965. I wasn't even alive then; Mami had been pregnant with my first never-born brother and Abuelo could still see well enough to hold a job. You know the sort of photograph I'm talking about. Scalloped edges, mostly brown in color. On the back my moms's cramped handwriting—the date, his name, even the street, one

over from our house. He was dressed in his Guardia uniform, his tan cap at an angle on his shaved head, an unlit Constitución squeezed between his lips. His dark unsmiling eyes were my own.

I did not think of him often. He had left for Nueva York when I was four but since I couldn't remember a single moment with him I excused him from all nine years of my life. On the days I had to imagine him—not often, since Mami didn't much speak of him anymore—he was the soldier in the photo. He was a cloud of cigar smoke, the traces of which could still be found on the uniforms he'd left behind. He was pieces of my friends' fathers, of the domino players on the corner, pieces of Mami and Abuelo. I didn't know him at all. I didn't know that he'd abandoned us. That this waiting for him was all a sham.

We lived south of the Cementerio Nacional in a wood-frame house with three rooms. We were poor. The only way we could have been poorer was to have lived in the campo or to have been Haitian immigrants, and Mami regularly offered these to us as brutal consolation.

At least you're not in the campo. You'd eat rocks then.

We didn't eat rocks but we didn't eat meat or beans, either. Almost everything on our plates was boiled: boiled yuca, boiled platano, boiled guineo, maybe with a piece of cheese or a shred of bacalao. On the best days the cheese and the platanos were fried. When me and

Rafa caught our annual case of worms it was only by skimping on our dinners that Mami could afford to purchase the Verminox. I can't remember how many times I crouched over our latrine, my teeth clenched, watching long gray parasites slide out from between my legs.

At Mauricio Baez, our school, the kids didn't bother us too much, even though we couldn't afford the uniforms or proper mascotas. The uniforms Mami could do nothing about but with the mascotas she improvised, sewing together sheets of loose paper she had collected from her friends. We each had one pencil and if we lost that pencil, like I did once, we had to stay home from school until Mami could borrow another one for us. Our profesor had us share school books with some of the other kids and these kids wouldn't look at us, tried to hold their breath when we were close to them.

Mami worked at Embajador Chocolate, putting in ten-, twelve-hour shifts for almost no money at all. She woke up every morning at seven and I got up with her because I could never sleep late, and while she drew the water out of our steel drum I brought the soap from the kitchen. There were always leaves and spiders in the water but Mami could draw a clean bucket better than anyone. She was a tiny woman and in the water closet she looked even smaller, her skin dark and her hair surprisingly straight and across her stomach and back the scars from the rocket attack she'd survived in 1965. None of the scars showed when she wore clothes,

though if you embraced her you'd feel them hard under your wrist, against the soft part of your palm.

Abuelo was supposed to watch us while Mami was at work but usually he was visiting with his friends or out with his trap. A few years back, when the rat problem in the barrio had gotten out of hand (Those malditos were running off with kids, Abuelo told me), he had built himself a trap. A destroyer. He never charged anyone for using it, something Mami would have done; his only commission was that he be the one to arm the steel bar. I've seen this thing chop off fingers, he explained to the borrowers but in truth he just liked having something to do, a job of some kind. In our house alone Abuelo had killed a dozen rats and in one house on Tunti, forty of these motherfuckers were killed during a two-night massacre. He spent both nights with the Tunti people, resetting the trap and burning the blood and when he came back he was grinning and tired, his white hair everywhere, and my mother had said, You look like you've been out getting ass.

Without Abuelo around, me and Rafa did anything we wanted. Mostly Rafa hung out with his friends and I played with our neighbor Wilfredo. Sometimes I climbed trees. There wasn't a tree in the barrio I couldn't climb and on some days I spent entire afternoons in our trees, watching the barrio in motion and when Abuelo was around (and awake) he talked to me about the good old days, when a man could still make

a living from his finca, when the United States wasn't something folks planned on.

Mami came home after sunset, just when the day's worth of drinking was starting to turn some of the neighbors wild. Our barrio was not the safest of places and Mami usually asked one of her co-workers to accompany her home. These men were young, and some of them were unmarried. Mami let them walk her but she never invited them into the house. She barred the door with her arm while she said good-bye, just to show them that nobody was getting in. Mami might have been skinny, a bad thing on the Island, but she was smart and funny and that's hard to find anywhere. Men were drawn to her. From my perch I'd watched more than one of these Porfirio Rubirosas say, See you tomorrow, and then park his ass across the street just to see if she was playing hard to get. Mami never knew these men were there and after about fifteen minutes of staring expectantly at the front of our house even the loneliest of these fulanos put their hats on and went home.

We could never get Mami to do anything after work, even cook dinner, if she didn't first sit awhile in her rocking chair. She didn't want to hear nothing about our problems, the scratches we'd put into our knees, who said what. She'd sit on the back patio with her eyes closed and let the bugs bite mountains onto her arms and legs. Sometimes I climbed the guanábana tree and when she'd open her eyes and catch me smiling down

on her, she'd close them again and I would drop twigs onto her until she laughed.

2.

When times were real flojo, when the last colored bill flew out Mami's purse, she packed us off to our relatives. She'd use Wilfredo's father's phone and make the calls early in the morning. Lying next to Rafa, I'd listen to her soft unhurried requests and pray for the day that our relatives would tell her to vete pa'l carajo but that never happened in Santo Domingo.

Usually Rafa stayed with our tíos in Ocoa and I went to tía Miranda's in Boca Chica. Sometimes we both went to Ocoa. Neither Boca Chica nor Ocoa were far but I never wanted to go and it normally took hours of cajoling before I agreed to climb on the autobus.

How long? I asked Mami truculently.

Not long, she promised me, examining the scabs on the back of my shaved head. A week. Two at the most.

How many days is that?

Ten, twenty.

You'll be fine, Rafa told me, spitting into the gutter.

How do you know? You a brujo?

Yeah, he said, smiling, that's me.

He didn't mind going anywhere; he was at that age when all he wanted was to be away from the family, meeting people he had not grown up with.

Everybody needs a vacation, Abuelo explained happily. Enjoy yourself. You'll be down by the water. And just think about all the food you'll eat.

I never wanted to be away from the family. Intuitively, I knew how easily distances could harden and become permanent. On the ride to Boca Chica I was always too depressed to notice the ocean, the young boys fishing and selling cocos by the side of the road, the surf exploding into the air like a cloud of shredded silver.

Tía Miranda had a nice block house, with a shingled roof and a tiled floor that her cats had trouble negotiating. She had a set of matching furniture and a television and faucets that worked. All her neighbors were administrators and *hombres de negocios* and you had to walk three blocks to find any sort of *colmado*. It was *that* sort of neighborhood. The ocean was never far away and most of the time I was down by the beach playing with the local kids, turning black in the sun.

Tía wasn't really related to Mami; she was my *madrina*, which was why she took me and my brother in every now and then. No money, though. She never loaned money to anyone, even to her drunkard of an ex-husband, and Mami must have known because she never asked. Tía was about fifty and rail-thin and couldn't put anything in her hair to make it forget itself; her perms never lasted more than a week before the enthusiasm of her kink returned. She had two kids of her own, Yennifer and Bienvenido, but she didn't dote

on them the way she doted on me. Her lips were always on me and during meals she watched me like she was waiting for the poison to take effect.

I bet this isn't something you've eaten lately, she'd say.

I'd shake my head and Yennifer, who was eighteen and bleached her hair, would say, Leave him alone, Mamá.

Tía also had a penchant for uttering cryptic one-liners about my father, usually after she'd downed a couple of shots of Brugal.

He took too much.

If only your mother could have noticed his true nature earlier.

He should see how he has left you.

The weeks couldn't pass quickly enough. At night I went down by the water to be alone but that wasn't possible. Not with the tourists making apes out of themselves, and with the tígueres waiting to rob them.

Las Tres Marías, I pointed out to myself in the sky. They were the only stars I knew.

But then one day I'd walk into the house from swimming and Mami and Rafa would be in the living room, holding glasses of sweet lemon-milk.

You're back, I'd say, trying to hide the excitement in my voice.

I hope he behaved himself, Mami would be saying to Tía. Her hair would be cut, her nails painted; she'd

have on the same red dress she wore on every one of her outings.

Rafa smiling, slapping me on the shoulder, darker than I'd last seen him. How ya doing, Yunion? You miss me or what?

I'd sit next to him and he'd put his arm around me and we'd listen to Tía telling Mami how well I behaved and all the different things I'd eaten.

3.

The year Papi came for us, the year I was nine, we expected nothing. There were no signs to speak of. Dominican chocolate was not especially in demand that season and the Puerto Rican owners laid off the majority of the employees for a couple of months. Good for the owners, un desastre for us. After that, Mami was around the house all the time. Unlike Rafa, who hid his shit well, I was always in trouble. From punching out Wilfredo to chasing somebody's chickens until they passed out from exhaustion. Mami wasn't a hitter; she preferred having me kneel on pebbles with my face against a wall. On the afternoon that the letter arrived, she caught me trying to stab our mango tree with Abuelo's machete. Back to the corner. Abuelo was supposed to make sure I served my ten minutes but he was too busy whittling to bother. He let me up after three minutes and I hid in the bedroom until he said, OK, in

a voice that Mami could hear. Then I went to the smokehouse, rubbing my knees, and Mami looked up from peeling platanos.

You better learn, muchacho, or you'll be kneeling the rest of your life.

I watched the rain that had been falling all day. No, I won't, I told her.

You talking back to me?

She whacked me on the nalgas and I ran outside to look for Wilfredo. I found him under the eaves of his house, the wind throwing pieces of rain onto his dark-dark face. We shook hands elaborately. I called him Muhammad Ali and he called me Sinbad; these were our Northamerican names. We were both in shorts; a disintegrating pair of sandals clung to his toes.

What you got? I asked him.

Boats, he said, holding up the paper wedges his father had folded for us. This one's mine.

What does the winner get?

A gold trophy, about this big.

OK, cabrón, I'm in. Don't let go before me.

OK, he said, stepping to the other side of the gutter. We had a clear run down to the street corner. No cars were parked on our side, except for a drowned Monarch and there was plenty of room between its tires and the curb for us to navigate through.

We completed five runs before I noticed that somebody had parked their battered motorcycle in front of my house.

Who's that? Wilfredo asked me, dropping his soggy boat into the water again.

I don't know, I said.

Go find out.

I was already on my way. The motorcycle driver came out before I could reach our front door. He mounted quickly and was gone in a cloud of exhaust.

Mami and Abuelo were on the back patio, conversating. Abuelo was angry and his cane-cutter's hands were clenched. I hadn't seen Abuelo bravo in a long time, not since his produce truck had been stolen by two of his old employees.

Go outside, Mami told me.

Who was that?

Did I tell you something?

Was that somebody we know?

Outside, Mami said, her voice a murder about to happen.

What's wrong? Wilfredo asked me when I rejoined him. His nose was starting to run.

I don't know, I said.

When Rafa showed himself an hour later, swaggering in from a game of pool, I'd already tried to speak to Mami and Abuelo like five times. The last time, Mami had landed a slap on my neck and Wilfredo told me that he could see the imprints of her fingers on my skin. I told it all to Rafa.

That doesn't sound good. He threw out his guttering cigarette. You wait here. He went around the back

and I heard his voice and then Mami's. No yelling, no argument.

Come on, he said. She wants us to wait in our room.

Why?

That's what she said. You want me to tell her no?

Not while she's mad.

Exactly.

I slapped Wilfredo's hand and walked in the front door with Rafa. What's going on?

She got a letter from Papi.

Really? Is there money?

No.

What does it say?

How should I know?

He sat down on his side of the bed and produced a pack of cigarettes. I watched him go through the elaborate ritual of lighting up—the flip of the thin cigarrillo into his lips and then the spark, a single practiced snap of the thumb.

Where'd you get that lighter?

Mi novia gave it to me.

Tell her to give me one.

Here. He tossed it to me. You can have it if you shut up.

Yeah?

See. He reached to take it. You already lost it.

I shut my mouth and he settled back down on the bed.

Hey, Sinbad, Wilfredo said, his head appearing in our window. What's going on?

My father wrote us a letter!

Rafa rapped me on the side of my head. This is a *family* affair, Yuniór. Don't blab it all over the place.

Wilfredo smiled. I ain't going to tell anybody.

Of course you're not, Rafa said. Because if you do I'll chop your fucking head off.

I tried to wait it out. Our room was nothing more than a section of the house that Abuelo had partitioned off with planks of wood. In one corner Mami kept an altar with candles and a cigar in a stone mortar and a glass of water and two toy soldiers we could not touch ever and above the bed hung our mosquito netting, poised to drop on us like a net. I lay back and listened to the rain brushing back and forth across our zinc roof.

Mami served dinner, watched as we ate it, and then ordered us back into our room. I'd never seen her so blank-faced, so stiff, and when I tried to hug her she pushed me away. Back to bed, she said. Back to listening to the rain. I must have fallen asleep because when I woke up Rafa was looking at me pensively and it was dark outside and nobody else in the house was awake.

I read the letter, he told me quietly. He was sitting cross-legged on the bed, his ribs laddering his chest in shadows. Papi says he's coming.

Really?

Don't believe it.

Why?

It ain't the first time he's made that promise, Yunion.

Oh, I said.

Outside Señora Tejada started singing to herself, badly.

Rafa?

Yeah?

I didn't know you could read.

I was nine and couldn't even write my own name.

Yeah, he said quietly. Something I picked up. Now go to bed.

4.

Rafa was right. It wasn't the first time. Two years after he left, Papi wrote her saying he was coming for us and like an innocent Mami believed him. After being alone for two years she was ready to believe anything. She showed everybody his letter and even spoke to him on the phone. He wasn't an easy man to reach but on this occasion she got through and he reassured her that yes, he was coming. His word was his bond. He even spoke to us, something that Rafa vaguely remembers, a lot of crap about how much he loved us and that we should take care of Mami.

She prepared a party, even lined up to have a goat there for the slaughtering. She bought me and Rafa new clothes and when he didn't show she sent everybody

home, sold the goat back to its owner and then almost lost her mind. I remember the heaviness of that month, thicker than almost anything. When Abuelo tried to reach our father at the phone numbers he'd left none of the men who'd lived with him knew anything about where he had gone.

It didn't help matters that me and Rafa kept asking her when we were leaving for the States, when Papi was coming. I am told that I wanted to see his picture almost every day. It's hard for me to imagine myself this way, crazy about Papi. When she refused to show me the photos I threw myself about like I was on fire. And I screamed. Even as a boy my voice carried farther than a man's, turned heads on the street.

First Mami tried slapping me quiet but that did little. Then she locked me in my room where my brother told me to cool it but I shook my head and screamed louder. I was inconsolable. I learned to tear my clothes because this was the one thing I had whose destruction hurt my mother. She took all my shirts from my room, left me only with shorts which were hard to damage with bare fingers. I pulled a nail from our wall and punched a dozen holes in each pair, until Rafa cuffed me and said, Enough, you little puto.

Mami spent a lot of time out of the house, at work or down by the Malecón, where she could watch the waves shred themselves against the rocks, where men offered cigarettes that she smoked quietly. I don't know how long this went on. Months, maybe three. Then,

one morning in early spring, when the amapolas were flushed with their flame leaves, I woke up and found Abuelo alone in the house.

She's gone, he said. So cry all you want, malcriado.

I learned later from Rafa that she was in Ocoa with our tíos.

Mami's time away was never discussed, then or now. When she returned to us, five weeks later, she was thinner and darker and her hands were heavy with calluses. She looked younger, like the girl who had arrived in Santo Domingo fifteen years before, burning to be married. Her friends came and sat and talked and when Papi's name was mentioned her eyes dimmed and when his name left, the darkness of her ojos returned and she would laugh, a small personal thunder that cleared the air.

She didn't treat me badly on her return but we were no longer as close; she did not call me her Prieto or bring me chocolates from her work. That seemed to suit her fine. And I was young enough to grow out of her rejection. I still had baseball and my brother. I still had trees to climb and lizards to tear apart.

5.

The week after the letter came I watched her from my trees. She ironed cheese sandwiches in paper bags for our lunch, boiled platanos for our dinner. Our dirty clothes were pounded clean in the concrete trough on

the side of the outhouse. Every time she thought I was scrabbling too high in the branches she called me back to the ground. You ain't Spiderman, you know, she said, rapping the top of my head with her knuckles. On the afternoons that Wilfredo's father came over to play dominos and talk politics, she sat with him and Abuelo and laughed at their campo stories. She seemed more normal to me but I was careful not to provoke her. There was still something volcanic about the way she held herself.

On Saturday a late hurricane passed close to the Capital and the next day folks were talking about how high the waves were down by the Malecón. Some children had been lost, swept out to sea and Abuelo shook his head when he heard the news. You'd think the sea would be sick of us by now, he said.

That Sunday Mami gathered us on the back patio. We're taking a day off, she announced. A day for us as a family.

We don't need a day off, I said and Rafa hit me harder than normal.

Shut up, OK?

I tried to hit him back but Abuelo grabbed us both by the arm. Don't make me have to crack your heads open, he said.

She dressed and put her hair up and even paid for a concho instead of crowding us into an autobus. The driver actually wiped the seats down with a towel while we waited and I said to him, It don't look dirty, and he

said, Believe me, muchacho, it is. Mami looked beautiful and many of the men she passed wanted to know where she was heading. We couldn't afford it but she paid for a movie anyway. *The Five Deadly Venoms*. Kung fu movies were the only ones the theaters played in those days. I sat between Mami and Abuelo. Rafa moved to the back, joining a group of boys who were smoking, and arguing with them about some baseball player on Licey.

After the show Mami bought us flavored ices and while we ate them we watched the salamanders crawling around on the sea rocks. The waves were tremendous and some parts of George Washington were flooded and cars were churning through the water slowly.

A man in a red guayabera stopped by us. He lit a cigarette and turned to my mother, his collar turned up by the wind. So where are you from?

Santiago, she answered.

Rafa snorted.

You must be visiting relatives then.

Yes, she said. My husband's family.

He nodded. He was dark-skinned, with light-colored spots about his neck and hands. His fingers trembled slightly as he worked the cigarette to his lips. I hoped he'd drop his cigarette, just so I could see what the ocean would do to it. We had to wait almost a full minute before he said buenos días and walked away.

What a crazy, Abuelo said.

Rafa lifted up his fist. You should have given me the

signal. I would have kung-fu-punched him in the head.

Your father came at me better than that, Mami said.

Abuelo stared down at the back of his hands, at the long white hairs that covered them. He looked embarrassed.

Your father asked me if I wanted a cigarette and then he gave me the whole pack to show me that he was a big man.

I held on to the rail. Here?

Oh no, she said. She turned around and looked out over the traffic. That part of the city isn't here anymore.

6.

Rafa used to think that he'd come in the night, like Jesus, that one morning we'd find him at our breakfast table, unshaven and smiling. Too real to be believed. He'll be taller, Rafa predicted. Northamerican food makes people that way. He'd surprise Mami on her way back from work, pick her up in a German car. Say nothing to the man walking her home. She would not know what to say and neither would he. They'd drive down to the Malecón and he'd take her to see a movie, because that's how they met and that's how he'd want to start it again.

I would see him coming from my trees. A man with swinging hands and eyes like mine. He'd have gold on his fingers, cologne on his neck, a silk shirt, good leather shoes. The whole barrio would come out to greet him.

He'd kiss Mami and Rafa and shake Abuelo's reluctant hand and then he'd see me behind everyone else. What's wrong with that one? he'd ask and Mami would say, He doesn't know you. Squatting down so that his pale yellow dress socks showed, he'd trace the scars on my arms and on my head. Yuniór, he'd finally say, his stubbled face in front of mine, his thumb tracing a circle on my cheek.

HOW TO DATE A BROWNGIRL,
BLACKGIRL, WHITEGIRL,
OR HALFIE

Wait for your brother and your mother to leave the apartment. You've already told them that you're feeling too sick to go to Union City to visit that tía who likes to squeeze your nuts. (He's gotten big, she'll say.) And even though your moms knows you ain't sick you stuck to your story until finally she said, Go ahead and stay, malcriado.

Clear the government cheese from the refrigerator. If the girl's from the Terrace stack the boxes behind the milk. If she's from the Park or Society Hill hide the cheese in the cabinet above the oven, way up where she'll never see. Leave yourself a reminder to get it out before morning or your moms will kick your ass. Take down any embarrassing photos of your family in the campo, especially the one with the half-naked kids dragging a goat on a rope leash. The kids are your cousins and by now they're old enough to understand why you're doing what you're doing. Hide the pictures of yourself with an Afro. Make sure the bathroom is

presentable. Put the basket with all the crapped-on toilet paper under the sink. Spray the bucket with Lysol, then close the cabinet.

Shower, comb, dress. Sit on the couch and watch TV. If she's an outsider her father will be bringing her, maybe her mother. Neither of them want her seeing any boys from the Terrace—people get stabbed in the Terrace—but she's strong-headed and this time will get her way. If she's a whitegirl you know you'll at least get a hand job.

The directions were in your best handwriting, so her parents won't think you're an idiot. Get up from the couch and check the parking lot. Nothing. If the girl's local, don't sweat it. She'll flow over when she's good and ready. Sometimes she'll run into her other friends and a whole crowd will show up at your apartment and even though that means you ain't getting shit it will be fun anyway and you'll wish these people would come over more often. Sometimes the girl won't flow over at all and the next day in school she'll say sorry, smile and you'll be stupid enough to believe her and ask her out again.

Wait and after an hour go out to your corner. The neighborhood is full of traffic. Give one of your boys a shout and when he says, Are you still waiting on that bitch? say, Hell yeah.

Get back inside. Call her house and when her father picks up ask if she's there. He'll ask, Who is this? Hang up. He sounds like a principal or a police chief, the sort

of dude with a big neck, who never has to watch his back. Sit and wait. By the time your stomach's ready to give out on you, a Honda or maybe a Jeep pulls in and out she comes.

Hey, you'll say.

Look, she'll say. My mom wants to meet you. She's got herself all worried about nothing.

Don't panic. Say, Hey, no problem. Run a hand through your hair like the whiteboys do even though the only thing that runs easily through your hair is Africa. She will look good. The white ones are the ones you want the most, aren't they, but usually the out-of-towners are black, blackgirls who grew up with ballet and Girl Scouts, who have three cars in their driveways. If she's a halfie don't be surprised that her mother is white. Say, Hi. Her moms will say hi and you'll see that you don't scare her, not really. She will say that she needs easier directions to get out and even though she has the best directions in her lap give her new ones. Make her happy.

You have choices. If the girl's from around the way, take her to El Cibao for dinner. Order everything in your busted-up Spanish. Let her correct you if she's Latina and amaze her if she's black. If she's not from around the way, Wendy's will do. As you walk to the restaurant talk about school. A local girl won't need stories about the neighborhood but the other ones might. Supply the story about the loco who'd been storing canisters of tear gas in his basement for years,

how one day the canisters cracked and the whole neighborhood got a dose of the military-strength stuff. Don't tell her that your moms knew right away what it was, that she recognized its smell from the year the United States invaded your island.

Hope that you don't run into your nemesis, Howie, the Puerto Rican kid with the two killer mutts. He walks them all over the neighborhood and every now and then the mutts corner themselves a cat and tear it to shreds, Howie laughing as the cat flips up in the air, its neck twisted around like an owl, red meat showing through the soft fur. If his dogs haven't cornered a cat, he will walk behind you and ask, Hey, Yunion, is that your new fuckbuddy?

Let him talk. Howie weighs about two hundred pounds and could eat you if he wanted. At the field he will turn away. He has new sneakers, and doesn't want them muddy. If the girl's an outsider she will hiss now and say, What a fucking asshole. A homegirl would have been yelling back at him the whole time, unless she was shy. Either way don't feel bad that you didn't do anything. Never lose a fight on a first date or that will be the end of it.

Dinner will be tense. You are not good at talking to people you don't know. A halfie will tell you that her parents met in the Movement, will say, Back then people thought it a radical thing to do. It will sound like something her parents made her memorize. Your brother once heard that one and said, Man, that sounds

like a whole lot of Uncle Tomming to me. Don't repeat this.

Put down your hamburger and say, It must have been hard.

She will appreciate your interest. She will tell you more. Black people, she will say, treat me real bad. That's why I don't like them. You'll wonder how she feels about Dominicans. Don't ask. Let her speak on it and when you're both finished eating walk back into the neighborhood. The skies will be magnificent. Pollutants have made Jersey sunsets one of the wonders of the world. Point it out. Touch her shoulder and say, That's nice, right?

Get serious. Watch TV but stay alert. Sip some of the Bermúdez your father left in the cabinet, which nobody touches. A local girl may have hips and a thick ass but she won't be quick about letting you touch. She has to live in the same neighborhood you do, has to deal with you being all up in her business. She might just chill with you and then go home. She might kiss you and then go, or she might, if she's reckless, give it up, but that's rare. Kissing will suffice. A whitegirl might just give it up right then. Don't stop her. She'll take her gum out of her mouth, stick it to the plastic sofa covers and then will move close to you. You have nice eyes, she might say.

Tell her that you love her hair, that you love her skin, her lips, because, in truth, you love them more than you love your own.

She'll say, I like Spanish guys, and even though you've never been to Spain, say, I like you. You'll sound smooth.

You'll be with her until about eight-thirty and then she will want to wash up. In the bathroom she will hum a song from the radio and her waist will keep the beat against the lip of the sink. Imagine her old lady coming to get her, what she would say if she knew her daughter had just lain under you and blown your name, pronounced with her eighth-grade Spanish, into your ear. While she's in the bathroom call one of your boys and say, Lo hice, loco. Or just sit back on the couch and smile.

But usually it won't work this way. Be prepared. She will not want to kiss you. Just cool it, she'll say. The halfie might lean back, breaking away from you. She will cross her arms, say, I hate my tits. Stroke her hair but she will pull away. I don't like anybody touching my hair, she will say. She will act like somebody you don't know. In school she is known for her attention-grabbing laugh, as high and far-ranging as a gull, but here she will worry you. You will not know what to say.

You're the only kind of guy who asks me out, she will say. Your neighbors will start their hyena calls, now that the alcohol is in them. You and the blackboys.

Say nothing. Let her button her shirt, let her comb her hair, the sound of it stretching like a sheet of fire between you. When her father pulls in and beeps, let

her go without too much of a good-bye. She won't want it. During the next hour the phone will ring. You will be tempted to pick it up. Don't. Watch the shows you want to watch, without a family around to debate you. Don't go downstairs. Don't fall asleep. It won't help. Put the government cheese back in its place before your moms kills you.

NEGOCIOS

My father, Ramón de las Casas, left Santo Domingo just before my fourth birthday. Papi had been planning to leave for months, hustling and borrowing from his friends, from anyone he could put the bite on. In the end it was just plain luck that got his visa processed when it did. The last of his luck on the Island, considering that Mami had recently discovered he was keeping with an overweight puta he had met while breaking up a fight on her street in Los Millonitos. Mami learned this from a friend of hers, a nurse and a neighbor of the puta. The nurse couldn't understand what Papi was doing loafing around her street when he was supposed to be on patrol.

The initial fights, with Mami throwing our silverware into wild orbits, lasted a week. After a fork pierced him in the cheek, Papi decided to move out, just until things cooled down. He took a small bag of clothes and broke out early in the morning. On his second night away from the house, with the puta asleep at his side,

Papi had a dream that the money Mami's father had promised him was spiraling away in the wind like bright bright birds. The dream blew him out of bed like a gunshot. Are you OK? the puta asked and he shook his head. I think I have to go somewhere, he said. He borrowed a clean mustard-colored guayabera from a friend, put himself in a concho and paid our abuelo a visit.

Abuelo had his rocking chair in his usual place, out on the sidewalk where he could see everyone and everything. He had fashioned that chair as a thirtieth-birthday present to himself and twice had to replace the wicker screens that his ass and shoulders had worn out. If you were to walk down to the Duarte you would see that type of chair for sale everywhere. It was November, the mangoes were thudding from the trees. Despite his dim eyesight, Abuelo saw Papi coming the moment he stepped onto Sumner Welles. Abuelo sighed, he'd had it up to his cojones with this spat. Papi hiked up his pants and squatted down next to the rocking chair.

I am here to talk to you about my life with your daughter, he said, removing his hat. I don't know what you've heard but I swear on my heart that none of it is true. All I want for your daughter and our children is to take them to the United States. I want a good life for them.

Abuelo searched his pockets for the cigarette he had just put away. The neighbors were gravitating towards the front of their houses to listen to the exchange. What

about this other woman? Abuelo said finally, unable to find the cigarette tucked behind his ear.

It's true I went to her house, but that was a mistake. I did nothing to shame you, viejo. I know it wasn't a smart thing to do, but I didn't know the woman would lie like she did.

Is that what you said to Virta?

Yes, but she won't listen. She cares too much about what she hears from her friends. If you don't think I can do anything for your daughter then I won't ask to borrow that money.

Abuelo spit the taste of car exhaust and street dust from his mouth. He might have spit four or five times. The sun could have set twice on his deliberations but with his eyes quitting; his farm in Azua now dust and his familia in need, what could he really do?

Listen Ramón, he said, scratching his arm hairs. I believe you. But Virta, she hears the chisme on the street and you know how that is. Come home and be good to her. Don't yell. Don't hit the children. I'll tell her that you are leaving soon. That will help smooth things between the two of you.

Papi fetched his things from the puta's house and moved back in that night. Mami acted as if he were a troublesome visitor who had to be endured. She slept with the children and stayed out of the house as often as she could, visiting her relatives in other parts of the Capital. Many times Papi took hold of her arms and pushed her against the slumping walls of the house,

thinking his touch would snap her from her brooding silence, but instead she slapped or kicked him. Why the hell do you do that? he demanded. Don't you know how soon I'm leaving?

Then go, she said.

You'll regret that.

She shrugged and said nothing else.

In a house as loud as ours, one woman's silence was a serious thing. Papi slouched about for a month, taking us to kung fu movies we couldn't understand and drilling into us how much we'd miss him. He'd hover around Mami while she checked our hair for lice, wanting to be nearby the instant she cracked and begged him to stay.

One night Abuelo handed Papi a cigar box stuffed with cash. The bills were new and smelled of ginger. Here it is. Make your children proud.

You'll see. He kissed the viejo's cheek and the next day had himself a ticket for a flight leaving in three days. He held the ticket in front of Mami's eyes. Do you see this?

She nodded tiredly and took up his hands. In their room, she already had his clothes packed and mended.

She didn't kiss him when he left. Instead she sent each of the children over to him. Say good-bye to your father. Tell him that you want him back soon.

When he tried to embrace her she grabbed his upper arms, her fingers like pincers. You had best remember

where this money came from, she said, the last words they exchanged face-to-face for five years.

He arrived in Miami at four in the morning in a roaring poorly booked plane. He passed easily through customs, having brought nothing but some clothes, a towel, a bar of soap, a razor, his money and a box of Chiclets in his pocket. The ticket to Miami had saved him money but he intended to continue on to Nueva York as soon as he could. Nueva York was the city of jobs, the city that had first called the Cubanos and their cigar industry, then the Bootstrap Puerto Ricans and now him.

He had trouble finding his way out of the terminal. Everyone was speaking English and the signs were no help. He smoked half a pack of cigarettes while wandering around. When he finally exited the terminal, he rested his bag on the sidewalk and threw away the rest of the cigarettes. In the darkness he could see little of Northamerica. A vast stretch of cars, distant palms and a highway that reminded him of the Máximo Gómez. The air was not as hot as home and the city was well lit but he didn't feel as if he had crossed an ocean and a world. A cabdriver in front of the terminal called to him in Spanish and threw his bag easily in the back seat of the cab. A new one, he said. The man was black, stooped and strong.

You got family here?

Not really.

How about an address?

Nope, Papi said. I'm here on my own. I got two hands and a heart as strong as a rock.

Right, the taxi driver said. He toured Papi through the city, around Calle Ocho. Although the streets were empty and accordion gates stretched in front of storefronts Papi recognized the prosperity in the buildings and in the tall operative lampposts. He indulged himself in the feeling that he was being shown his new digs to ensure that they met with his approval. Find a place to sleep here, the driver advised. And first thing tomorrow get yourself a job. Anything you can find.

I'm here to work.

Sure, said the driver. He dropped Papi off at a hotel and charged him five dollars for half an hour of service. Whatever you save on me will help you later. I hope you do well.

Papi offered the driver a tip but the driver was already pulling away, the dome atop his cab glowing, calling another fare. Shouldering his bag, Papi began to stroll, smelling the dust and the heat filtering up from the pressed rock of the streets. At first he considered saving money by sleeping outside on a bench but he was without guides and the inscrutability of the nearby signs unnerved him. What if there was a curfew? He knew that the slightest turn of fortune could dash him. How many before him had gotten this far only to get sent back for some stupid infraction? The sky was sud-

denly too high. He walked back the way he had come and went into the hotel, its spastic neon sign obtrusively jutting into the street. He had difficulty understanding the man at the desk, but finally the man wrote down the amount for a night's stay in block numbers. Room cuatro-cuatro, the man said. Papi had as much difficulty working the shower but finally was able to take a bath. It was the first bathroom he'd been in that hadn't curled the hair on his body. With the radio tuned in and incoherent, he trimmed his mustache. No photos exist of his mustache days but it is easily imagined. Within an hour he was asleep. He was twenty-four. He didn't dream about his familia and wouldn't for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the many wrecks about our island, stacked high as sugar cane.

Even on his first disorienting morning, as an aged Latina snapped the sheets from the bed and emptied the one piece of scrap paper he'd thrown in the trash can, Papi pushed himself through the sit-ups and push-ups that kept him kicking ass until his forties.

You should try these, he told the Latina. They make work a lot easier.

If you had a job, she said, you wouldn't need exercise.

He stored the clothes he had worn the day before in his canvas shoulder bag and assembled a new outfit. He used his fingers and water to flatten out the worst of the

wrinkles. During the years he'd lived with Mami, he'd washed and ironed his own clothes. These things were a man's job, he liked to say, proud of his own upkeep. Razor creases on his pants and resplendent white shirts were his trademarks. His generation had, after all, been weaned on the sartorial lunacy of the Jefe, who had owned just under ten thousand ties on the eve of his assassination. Dressed as he was, trim and serious, Papi looked foreign but not *mojado*.

That first day he chanced on a share in an apartment with three Guatemalans and his first job washing dishes at a Cuban sandwich shop. Once an old gringo diner of the hamburger-and-soda variety, the shop now filled with *Óyeme's* and the aroma of *lechón*. Sandwich pressers clamped down methodically behind the front counter. The man reading the newspaper in the back told Papi he could start right away and gave him two white ankle-length aprons. Wash these every day, he said. We stay clean around here.

Two of Papi's flatmates were brothers, Stefan and Tomás Hernández. Stefan was older than Tomás by twenty years. Both had families back home. Cataracts were slowly obscuring Stefan's eyes; the disease had cost him half a finger and his last job. He now swept floors and cleaned up vomit at the train station. This is a lot safer, he told my father. Working at a *fábrica* will kill you long before any *tíguere* will. Stefan had a passion for the track and would read the forms, despite his brother's warnings that he was ruining what was left of

his eyes, by bringing his face down to the type. The tip of his nose was often capped in ink.

Eulalio was the third apartment-mate. He had the largest room to himself and owned the rusted-out Duster that brought them to work every morning. He'd been in the States close to two years and when he met Papi he spoke to him in English. When Papi didn't answer, Eulalio switched to Spanish. You're going to have to practice if you expect to get anywhere. How much English do you know?

None, Papi said after a moment.

Eulalio shook his head. Papi met Eulalio last and liked him least.

Papi slept in the living room, first on a carpet whose fraying threads kept sticking to his shaved head, and then on a mattress he salvaged from a neighbor. He worked two long shifts a day at the shop and had two four-hour breaks in between. On one of the breaks he slept at home and on the other he would handwash his aprons in the shop's sink and then nap in the storage room while the aprons dried, amidst the towers of El Pico coffee cans and sacks of bread. Sometimes he read the Western dreadfuls he was fond of—he could read one in about an hour. If it was too hot or he was bored by his book, he walked the neighborhoods, amazed at streets unblocked by sewage and the orderliness of the cars and houses. He was impressed with the transplanted Latinas, who had been transformed by good diets and beauty products unimagined back home.

They were beautiful but unfriendly women. He would touch a finger to his beret and stop, hoping to slip in a comment or two, but these women would walk right on by, grimacing.

He wasn't discouraged. He began joining Eulalio on his nightly jaunts to the bars. Papi would have gladly shared a drink with the Devil rather than go out alone. The Hernández brothers weren't much for the outings; they were hoarders, though occasionally they cut loose, blinding themselves on tequila and beers. The brothers would stumble home late, stepping on Papi, howling about some morena who had spurned them to their faces.

Eulalio and Papi went out two, three nights a week, drinking rum and stalking. Whenever he could, Papi let Eulalio do the buying. Eulalio liked to talk about the finca he had come from, a large plantation near the center of his country. I fell in love with the daughter of the owner and she fell in love with me. Me, a peon. Can you believe that? I would fuck her on her own mother's bed, in sight of the Holy Mother and her crucified Son. I tried to make her take down that cross but she wouldn't hear of it. She loved it that way. She was the one who lent me the money to come here. Can you believe that? One of these days, when I got a little money on the side I'm going to send for her.

It was the same story, seasoned differently, every night. Papi said little, believed less. He watched the women who were always with other men. After an

hour or two, Papi would pay his bill and leave. Even though the weather was cool, he didn't need a jacket and liked to push through the breeze in shortsleeved shirts. He'd walk the mile home, talking to anyone who would let him. Occasionally drunkards would stop at his Spanish and invite him to a house where men and women were drinking and dancing. He liked those parties far better than the face-offs at the bars. It was with these strangers that he practiced his fledgling English, away from Eulalio's gleeful criticisms.

At the apartment, he'd lie down on his mattress, stretching out his limbs to fill it as much as he could. He abstained from thoughts of home, from thoughts of his two bellicose sons and the wife he had nicknamed Melao. He told himself, Think only of today and tomorrow. Whenever he felt weak, he'd take from under the couch the road map he bought at a gas station and trace his fingers up the coast, enunciating the city names slowly, trying to copy the awful crunch of sounds that was English. The northern coast of our island was visible on the bottom right-hand corner of the map.

He left Miami in the winter. He'd lost his job and gained a new one but neither paid enough and the cost of the living room floor was too great. Besides, Papi had figured out from a few calculations and from talking to the gringa downstairs (who now understood him) that Eulalio wasn't paying culo for rent. Which explained why he had so many fine clothes and didn't work

nearly as much as the rest. When Papi showed the figures to the Hernández brothers, written on the border of a newspaper, they were indifferent. He's the one with the car, they said, Stefan blinking at the numbers. Besides, who wants to start trouble here? We'll all be moving on anyway.

But this isn't right, Papi said. I'm living like a dog for this shit.

What can you do? Tomás said. Life smacks everybody around.

We'll see about that.

There are two stories about what happened next, one from Papi, one from Mami: either Papi left peacefully with a suitcase filled with Eulalio's best clothes or he beat the man first, and then took a bus and the suitcase to Virginia.

Papi logged most of the miles after Virginia on foot. He could have afforded another bus ticket but that would have bitten into the rent money he had so diligently saved on the advice of many a veteran immigrant. To be homeless in Nueva York was to court the worst sort of disaster. Better to walk 380 miles than to arrive completely broke. He stored his savings in a fake alligator change purse sewn into the seam of his boxer shorts. Though the purse blistered his thigh, it was in a place no thief would search.

He walked in his bad shoes, froze and learned to distinguish different cars by the sounds of their motors.

The cold wasn't as much a bother as his bags were. His arms ached from carrying them, especially the meat of his biceps. Twice he hitched rides from truckers who took pity on the shivering man and just outside of Delaware a K-car stopped him on the side of I-95.

These men were federal marshals. Papi recognized them immediately as police; he knew the type. He studied their car and considered running into the woods behind him. His visa had expired five weeks earlier and if caught, he'd go home in chains. He'd heard plenty of tales about the Northamerican police from other illegals, how they liked to beat you before they turned you over to la migra and how sometimes they just took your money and tossed you out toothless on an abandoned road. For some reason, perhaps the whipping cold, perhaps stupidity, Papi stayed where he was, shuffling and sniffing. A window rolled down on the car. Papi went over and looked in on two sleepy blancos.

You need a ride?

Jes, Papi said.

The men squeezed together and Papi slipped into the front seat. Ten miles passed before he could feel his ass again. When the chill and the roar of passing cars finally left him, he realized that a fragile-looking man, handcuffed and shackled, sat in the back seat. The small man wept quietly.

How far you going? the driver asked.

New York, he said, carefully omitting the Nueva and the Yol.

We ain't going that far but you can ride with us to Trenton if you like. Where the hell you from pal?

Miami.

Miami. Miami's kind of far from here. The other man looked at the driver. Are you a musician or something?

Jes, Papi said. I play the accordion.

That excited the man in the middle. Shit, my old man played the accordion but he was a Polack like me. I didn't know you spiks played it too. What kind of polkas do you like?

Polkas?

Jesus, Will, the driver said. They don't play polkas in Cuba.

They drove on, slowing only to unfold their badges at the tolls. Papi sat still and listened to the man crying in the back. What is wrong? Papi asked. Maybe sick?

The driver snorted. Him sick? We're the ones who are about to puke.

What's your name? the Polack asked.

Ramón.

Ramón, meet Scott Carlson Porter, murderer.

Murderer?

Many many murders. Mucho murders.

He's been crying since we left Georgia, the driver explained. He hasn't stopped. Not once. The little pussy cries even when we're eating. He's driving us nuts.

We thought maybe having another person inside

with us would shut him up—the man next to Papi shook his head—but I guess not.

The marshals dropped Papi off in Trenton. He was so relieved not to be in jail that he didn't mind walking the four hours it took to summon the nerve to put his thumb out again.

His first year in Nueva York he lived in Washington Heights, in a roachy flat above what's now the Tres Mariás restaurant. As soon as he secured his apartment and two jobs, one cleaning offices and the other washing dishes, he started writing home. In the first letter he folded four twenty-dollar bills. The trickles of money he sent back were not premeditated like those sent by his other friends, calculated from what he needed to survive; these were arbitrary sums that often left him broke and borrowing until the next payday.

The first year he worked nineteen-, twenty-hour days, seven days a week. Out in the cold he coughed explosively, feeling as if his lungs were tearing open from the force of his exhales and in the kitchens the heat from the ovens sent pain corkscrewing into his head. He wrote home sporadically. Mami forgave him for what he had done and told him who else had left the barrio, via coffin or plane ticket. Papi's replies were scribbled on whatever he could find, usually the thin cardboard of tissue boxes or pages from the bill books at work. He was so tired from working that he mis-

spelled almost everything and had to bite his lip to stay awake. He promised her and the children tickets soon. The pictures he received from Mami were shared with his friends at work and then forgotten in his wallet, lost between old lottery slips.

The weather was no good. He was sick often but was able to work through it and succeeded in saving up enough money to start looking for a wife to marry. It was the old routine, the oldest of the postwar maromas. Find a citizen, get married, wait, and then divorce her. The routine was well practiced and expensive and riddled with swindlers.

A friend of his at work put him in touch with a portly balding blanco named el General. They met at a bar. El General had to eat two plates of greasy onion rings before he talked business. Look here friend, el General said. You pay me fifty bills and I bring you a woman that's interested. Whatever the two of you decide is up to you. All I care is that I get paid and that the women I bring are for real. You get no refunds if you can't work something out with her.

Why the hell don't I just go out looking for myself?

Sure, you can do that. He patted vegetable oil on Papi's hand. But I'm the one who takes the risk of running into Immigration. If you don't mind that then you can go out looking anywhere you want.

Even to Papi fifty bucks wasn't exorbitant but he was reluctant to part with it. He had no problem buying rounds at the bar or picking up a new belt when the

colors and the moment suited him but this was different. He didn't want to deal with any more change. Don't get me wrong: it wasn't that he was having fun. No, he'd been robbed twice already, his ribs beaten until they were bruised. He often drank too much and went home to his room, and there he'd fume, spinning, angry at the stupidity that had brought him to this freezing hell of a country, angry that a man his age had to masturbate when he had a wife, and angry at the blinkered existence his jobs and the city imposed on him. He never had time to sleep, let alone to go to a concert or the museums that filled entire sections of the newspapers. And the roaches. The roaches were so bold in his flat that turning on the lights did not startle them. They waved their three-inch antennas as if to say, Hey puto, turn that shit off. He spent five minutes stepping on their carapaced bodies and shaking them from his mattress before dropping into his cot and still the roaches crawled on him at night. No, he wasn't having fun but he also wasn't ready to start bringing his family over. Getting legal would place his hand firmly on that first rung. He wasn't so sure he could face us so soon. He asked his friends, most of whom were in worse financial shape than he was, for advice.

They assumed he was reluctant because of the money. Don't be a pendejo, hombre. Give fulano his money and that's it. Maybe you make good, maybe you don't. That's the way it is. They built these barrios out of bad luck and you got to get used to that.

He met el General across from the Boricua Cafeteria and handed him the money. A day later the man gave him a name: Flor de Oro. That isn't her real name of course, el General assured Papi. I like to keep things historical.

They met at the cafeteria. Each of them had an empanada and a glass of soda. Flor was businesslike, about fifty. Her gray hair coiled in a bun on top of her head. She smoked while Papi talked, her hands speckled like the shell of an egg.

Are you Dominican? Papi asked.

No.

You must be Cuban then.

One thousand dollars and you'll be too busy being an American to care where I'm from.

That seems like a lot of money. Do you think once I become a citizen I could make money marrying people?

I don't know.

Papi threw two dollars down on the counter and stood.

How much then? How much do you have?

I work so much that sitting here is like having a week's vacation. Still I only have six hundred.

Find two hundred more and we got a deal.

Papi brought her the money the next day stuffed in a wrinkled paper bag and in return was given a pink receipt. When do we get started? he asked.

Next week. I have to start on the paperwork right away.

He pinned the receipt over his bed and before he went to sleep, he checked behind it to be sure no roaches lurked. His friends were excited and the boss at the cleaning job took them out for drinks and appetizers in Harlem, where their Spanish drew more looks than their frumpy clothes. Their excitement was not his; he felt as if he'd moved too precipitously. A week later, Papi went to see the friend who had recommended el General.

I still haven't gotten a call, he explained. The friend was scrubbing down a counter.

You will. The friend didn't look up. A week later Papi lay in bed, drunk, alone, knowing full well that he'd been robbed.

He lost the cleaning job shortly thereafter for punching the friend off a ladder. He lost his apartment and had to move in with a familia and found another job frying wings and rice at a Chinese take-out joint. Before he left his flat, he wrote an account of what had happened to him on the pink receipt and left it on the wall as a warning to whatever fool came next to take his place. Ten cuidado, he wrote. These people are worse than sharks.

He sent no money home for close to six months. Mami's letters would be read and folded and tucked into his well-used bags.

Papi met her on the morning before Christmas, in a laundry, while folding his pants and knotting his damp socks. She was short, had daggers of black hair pointing down in front of her ears and lent him her iron. She was originally from La Romana, but like so many Dominicans had eventually moved to the Capital.

I go back there about once a year, she told Papi. Usually around Pascua to see my parents and my sister.

I haven't been home in a long long time. I'm still trying to get the money together.

It will happen, believe me. It took me years before I could go back my first time.

Papi found out she'd been in the States for six years, a citizen. Her English was excellent. While he packed his things in his nylon bag, he considered asking her to the party. A friend had invited him to a house in Corona, Queens, where fellow Dominicans were celebrating la Noche Buena together. He knew from a past party that up in Queens the food, dancing and single women came in heaps.

Four children were trying to pry open the plate at the top of a dryer to reach the coin mechanism underneath. My fucking quarter is stuck, a kid was shouting. In the corner, a student, still in medical greens, was trying to read a magazine and not be noticed but as soon as the kids were tired of the machine, they descended on him, pulling at his magazine and pushing

their hands into his pockets. He began to shove back.

Hey, Papi said. The kids threw him the finger and ran outside. Fuck all spiiks! they shrieked.

Niggers, the medical student muttered. Papi pulled the drawstring shut on his bag and decided against asking her. He knew the rule: Strange is the woman who goes strange places with a complete stranger. Instead, Papi asked her if he could practice his English on her one day. I really need to practice, he said. And I'd be willing to pay you for your time.

She laughed. Don't be ridiculous. Stop by when you can. She wrote her number and address in crooked letters.

Papi squinted at the paper. You don't live around here?

No but my cousin does. I can give you her number if you want.

No, this will be fine.

He had a grand time at the party and actually avoided the rum and the six-packs he liked to down. He sat with two older women and their husbands, a plate of food on his lap (potato salad, pieces of roast chicken, a stack of tostones, half an avocado and a tiny splattering of mondongo out of politeness to the woman who'd brought it) and talked about his days in Santo Domingo. It was a lucid enjoyable night that would stick out in his memory like a spike. He swaggered home around one o'clock, bearing a plastic bag loaded with food and a loaf of telera under his arm. He gave

the bread to the shivering man sleeping in the hallway of his building.

When he called Nilda a few days later he found out from a young girl who spoke in politely spaced words that she was at work. Papi left his name and called back that night. Nilda answered.

Ramón, you should have called me yesterday. It was a good day to start since neither of us had work.

I wanted to let you celebrate the holiday with your family.

Family? she clucked. I only have a daughter here. What are you doing now? Maybe you want to come over.

I wouldn't want to intrude, he said because he was a sly one, you had to admit that.

She owned the top floor of a house on a bleak quiet street in Brooklyn. The house was clean, with cheap bubbled linoleum covering the floors. Nilda's taste struck Ramón as low-class. She threw together styles and colors the way a child might throw together paint or clay. A bright orange plaster elephant reared up from the center of a low glass table. A tapestry of a herd of mustangs hung opposite vinyl cutouts of African singers. Fake plants relaxed in each room. Her daughter Milagros was excruciatingly polite and seemed to have an endless supply of dresses more fit for quinceañeras than everyday life. She wore thick plastic glasses and sat in front of the television when Papi visited, one skinny leg crossed over the other. Nilda had

a well-stocked kitchen and Papi cooked for her, his stockpile of Cantonese and Cuban recipes inexhaustible. His *ropa vieja* was his best dish and he was glad to see he had surprised her. I should have you in my kitchen, she said.

She liked to talk about the restaurant she owned and her last husband, who had a habit of hitting her and expecting that all his friends be fed for free. Nilda wasted hours of their study time caught between the leaves of tome-sized photo albums, showing Papi each stage of Milagros's development as if the girl were an exotic bug. He did not mention his own familia. Two weeks into his English lessons, Papi kissed Nilda. They were sitting on the plastic-covered sofa, in the next room a game show was on the TV, and his lips were greasy from Nilda's *pollo guisado*.

I think you better leave, she said.

You mean now?

Yes, now.

He drew on his windbreaker as slowly as he could, expecting her to recant. She held open the door and shut it quickly after him. He cursed her the entire train ride back into Manhattan. The next day at work, he told his co-workers that she was insane and had a snake coiled up in her heart. I should've known, he said bitterly. A week later he was back at her house, grating coconuts and talking in English. He tried again and again she had him leave.

Each time he kissed her she threw him out. It was a

cold winter and he didn't have much of a coat. Nobody bought coats then, Papi told me, because nobody was expecting to stay that long. So I kept going back and any chance I got I kissed her. She would tense up and tell me to leave, like I'd hit her. So I would kiss her again and she'd say, Oh, I really think you better leave now. She was a crazy lady. I kept it up and one day she kissed me back. Finally. By then I knew every maldito train in the city and I had this big wool coat and two pairs of gloves. I looked like an Eskimo. Like an American.

Within a month Papi moved out of his apartment into her house in Brooklyn. They were married in March.

Although he wore a ring, Papi didn't act the part of the husband. He lived in Nilda's house, shared her bed, paid no rent, ate her food, talked to Milagros when the TV was broken and set up his weight bench in the cellar. He regained his health and liked to show Nilda how his triceps and biceps could gather in prominent knots with a twist of his arm. He bought his shirts in size medium so he could fill them out.

He worked two jobs close to her house. The first soldering at a radiator shop, plugging holes mostly, the other as a cook at a Chinese restaurant. The owners of the restaurant were Chinese-Cubans; they cooked a better arroz negro than pork fried rice and loved to spend the quiet hours between lunch and dinner slap-

ping dominos with Papi and the other help on top of huge drums of shortening. One day, while adding up his totals, Papi told these men about his familia in Santo Domingo.

The chief cook, a man so skinny they called him Needle, soured. You can't forget your familia like that. Didn't they support you to send you here?

I'm not forgetting them, Papi said defensively. Right now is just not a good time for me to send for them. You should see my bills.

What bills?

Papi thought a moment. Electricity. That's very expensive. My house has eighty-eight light bulbs.

What kind of house are you living in?

Very big. An antique house needs a lot of bulbs, you know.

Come mierda. Nobody has that many light bulbs in their house.

You better do more playing and less talking or I'm going to have to take all your money.

These harangues must not have bothered his conscience much because that year he sent no money.

Nilda learned about Papi's other familia from a chain of friends that reached back across the Caribe. It was inevitable. She was upset and Papi had to deliver some of his most polished performances to convince her that he no longer cared about us. He'd been fortunate in that when Mami reached back across a similar chain of im-

migrants to locate Papi in the north, he'd told her to direct her letters to the restaurant he was working at and not to Nilda's home.

As with most of the immigrants around them, Nilda was usually at work. The couple saw each other mostly in the evenings. Nilda not only had her restaurant, where she served a spectacular and popular sancocho with wedges of cold avocado, but she also pushed her tailoring on the customers. If a man had a torn work shirt or a pant cuff soiled in machine oil, she'd tell him to bring it by, that she'd take care of it, cheap. She had a loud voice and could draw the attention of the entire eatery to a shabby article of clothing and few, under the combined gaze of their peers, could resist her. She brought the clothes home in a garbage bag and spent her time off sewing and listening to the radio, getting up only to bring Ramón a beer or change the channel for him. When she had to bring money home from the register, her skills at secreting it away were uncanny. She kept nothing but coins in her purse and switched her hiding place each trip. Usually she lined her bra with twenty-dollar bills as if each cup was a nest but Papi was amazed at her other ploys. After a crazy day of mashing platanos and serving the workers, she sealed nearly nine hundred dollars in twenties and fifties in a sandwich bag and then forced the bag into the mouth of a Malta bottle. She put a straw in there and sipped on it on her way home. She never lost a brown penny in the time she and Papi were together. If she wasn't too

tired she liked to have him guess where she was hiding the money and with each wrong guess he'd remove a piece of her clothing until the cache was found.

Papi's best friend at this time, and Nilda's neighbor, was Jorge Carretas Lugones, or Jo-Jo as he was commonly known in the barrio. Jo-Jo was a five-foot-tall Puerto Rican whose light skin was stippled with moles and whose blues eyes were the color of larimar. On the street, he wore a pava, angled in the style of the past, carried a pen and all the local lotteries in his shirt pockets, and would have struck anyone as a hustler. Jo-Jo owned two hot dogs carts and co-owned a grocery store that was very prosperous. It had once been a tired place with rotting wood and cracked tiles but with his two brothers he'd pulled the porquería out and rebuilt it over the four months of one winter, while driving a taxi and working as a translator and letter-writer for a local patrón. The years of doubling the price on toilet paper, soap and diapers to pay the loan sharks were over. The coffin refrigerators lining one wall were new, as were the bright green lottery machine and the revolving racks of junk food at the end of each short shelf. He was disdainful of anyone who had a regular crowd of parasites loafing about their stores, discussing the taste of yuca and their last lays. And though this neighborhood was rough (not as bad as his old barrio in San Juan where he had seen all his best friends lose fingers in machete fights), Jo-Jo didn't need to put a grate over his store. The local kids left him alone and

instead terrorized a Pakistani family down the street. The family owned an Asian grocery store that looked like a holding cell, windows behind steel mesh, door reinforced with steel plates.

Jo-Jo and Papi met at the local bar regularly. Papi was the man who knew the right times to laugh and when he did, everyone around him joined in. He was always reading newspapers and sometimes books and seemed to know many things. Jo-Jo saw in Papi another brother, a man from a luckless past needing a little direction. Jo-Jo had already rehabilitated two of his siblings, who were on their way to owning their own stores.

Now that you have a place and papers, Jo-Jo told Papi, you need to use these things to your advantage. You have some time, you don't have to break your ass paying the rent, so use it. Save some money and buy yourself a little business. I'll sell you one of my hot dog carts cheap if you want. You can see they're making steady plata. Then you get your familia over here and buy yourself a nice house and start branching out. That's the American way.

Papi wanted a negocio of his own, that was his dream, but he balked at starting at the bottom, selling hot dogs. While most of the men around him were two-times broke, he had seen a few, fresh off the boat, shake the water from their backs and jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow up-

ward crawl through the mud. What it would be and when it would come, he did not know.

I'm looking for the right investment, he told Jo-Jo. I'm not a food man.

What sort of man are you then? Jo-Jo demanded. You Dominicans got restaurants in your blood.

I know, Papi said, but I am not a food man.

Worse, Jo-Jo spouted a hard line on loyalty to familia which troubled Papi. Each scenario his friend proposed ended with Papi's familia living safely within his sight, showering him with love. Papi had difficulty separating the two threads of his friend's beliefs, that of negocios and that of familia, and in the end the two became impossibly intertwined.

With the hum of his new life Papi should have found it easy to bury the memory of us but neither his conscience, nor the letters from home that found him wherever he went, would allow it. Mami's letters, as regular as the months themselves, were corrosive slaps in the face. It was now a one-sided correspondence, with Papi reading and not mailing anything back. He opened the letters wincing in anticipation. Mami detailed how his children were suffering, how his littlest boy was so anemic people thought he was a corpse come back to life; she told him about his oldest son, playing in the barrio, tearing open his feet and exchanging blows with his so-called friends. Mami refused to talk about her condition. She called Papi a desgraciado and a puto of the highest order for aban-

doning them, a traitor worm, an eater of pubic lice, a cockless, ball-less cabrón. He showed Jo-Jo the letters, often at drunken bitter moments, and Jo-Jo would shake his head, waving for two more beers. You, my compadre, have done too many things wrong. If you keep this up, your life will spring apart.

What in the world can I do? What does this woman want from me? I've been sending her money. Does she want me to starve up here?

You and I know what you have to do. That's all I can say, otherwise I'd be wasting my breath.

Papi was lost. He would take long perilous night walks home from his jobs, sometimes arriving with his knuckles scuffed and his clothes disheveled. His and Nilda's child was born in the spring, a son, also named Ramón, cause for fiesta but there was no celebration among his friends. Too many of them knew. Nilda could sense that something was wrong, that a part of him was detained elsewhere but each time she brought it up Papi told her it was nothing, always nothing.

With a regularity that proved instructional, Jo-Jo had Papi drive him to Kennedy to meet one or the other of the relatives Jo-Jo had sponsored to come to the States to make it big. Despite his prosperity, Jo-Jo could not drive and did not own a car. Papi would borrow Nilda's Chevy station wagon and would fight the traffic for an hour to reach the airport. Depending on the season, Jo-Jo would bring either a number of coats or a cooler of beverages taken from his shelves—a rare

treat since Jo-Jo's cardinal rule was that one should never prey on one's own stock. At the terminal, Papi would stand back, his hands pressed in his pockets, his beret plugged on tight, while Jo-Jo surged forward to greet his familia. Papi's English was good now, his clothes better. Jo-Jo would enter a berserk frenzy when his relatives stumbled through the arrival gate, dazed and grinning, bearing cardboard boxes and canvas bags. There would be crying and abrazos. Jo-Jo would introduce Ramón as a brother and Ramón would be dragged into the circle of crying people. It was a simple matter for Ramón to rearrange the faces of the arrivals and see his wife and his children there.

He began again to send money to his familia on the Island. Nilda noticed that he began to borrow from her for his tobacco and to play the lotteries. Why do you need my money? she complained. Isn't that the reason you're working? We have a baby to look after. There are bills to pay.

One of my children died, he said. I have to pay for the wake and the funeral. So leave me alone.

Why didn't you tell me?

He put his hands over his face but when he removed them she was still staring skeptically.

Which one? she demanded. His hand swung clumsily. She fell down and neither of them said a word.

Papi landed a union job with Reynolds Aluminum in West New York that paid triple what he was making

at the radiator shop. It was nearly a two-hour commute, followed by a day of tendon-ripping labor, but he was willing—the money and the benefits were exceptional. It was the first time he had moved outside the umbra of his fellow immigrants. The racism was pronounced. The two fights he had were reported to the bosses and they put him on probation. He worked through that period, got a raise and the highest performance rating in his department and the shittiest schedule in the entire fábrica. The whites were always dumping their bad shifts on him and on his friend Chuito. Guess what, they'd say, clapping them on the back. I need a little time with my kids this week. I know you wouldn't mind taking this or that day for me.

No, my friend, Papi would say. I wouldn't mind. Once Chuito complained to the bosses and was written up for detracting *from the familial spirit of the department*. Both men knew better than to speak up again.

On a normal day Papi was too exhausted to visit with Jo-Jo. He'd enjoy his dinner and then settle down to watch Tom and Jerry, who delighted him with their violence. Nilda, watch this, he'd scream and she'd dutifully appear, needles in mouth, baby in her arms. Papi would laugh so loud that Milagros upstairs would join in without even seeing what had occurred. Oh, that's wonderful, he'd say. Would you look at that! They're *killing* each other!

One day, he skipped his dinner and a night in front

of the TV to drive south with Chuito into New Jersey to a small town outside of Perth Amboy. Chuito's Gremlin pulled into a neighborhood under construction. Huge craters had been gouged in the earth and towering ziggurats of tan bricks stood ready to be organized into buildings. New pipes were being laid by the mile and the air was tart with the smell of chemicals. It was a cool night. The men wandered around the pits and the sleeping trucks.

I have a friend who is doing the hiring for this place, Chuito said.

Construction?

No. When this neighborhood goes up they'll need superintendents to watch over things. Keep the hot water running, stop a leaking faucet, put new tile in the bathroom. For that you get a salary and free rent. That's the kind of job worth having. The towns nearby are quiet, lots of good gringos. Listen Ramón, I can get you a job here if you like. It would be a good place to move. Out of the city, safety. I'll put your name at the top of the list and when this place is done you'll have a nice easy job.

This sounds better than a dream.

Forget dreams. This is real, compadre.

The two men inspected the site for about an hour and then headed back toward Brooklyn. Papi was silent. A plan was forming. Here was the place to move his familia if it came from the Island. Quiet and close to his job. Most important, the neighborhood would

not know him or the wife he had in the States. When he reached home that night he said nothing to Nilda about where he had been. He didn't care that she was suspicious and that she yelled at him about his muddy shoes.

Papi continued to send money home and in Jo-Jo's lockbox he was saving a tidy sum for plane tickets. And then one morning, when the sun had taken hold of the entire house and the sky seemed too thin and blue to hold a cloud, Nilda said, I want to go to the Island this year.

Are you serious?

I want to see my viejos.

What about the baby?

He's never gone, has he?

No.

Then he should see his patria. I think it's important.

I agree, he said. He tapped a pen on the wrinkled place mat. This sounds like you're serious.

I think I am.

Maybe I'll go with you.

If you say so. She had reason to doubt him; he was real good at planning but real bad at doing. And she didn't stop doubting him either, until he was on the plane next to her, rifling anxiously through the catalogs, the vomit bag and the safety instructions.

He was in Santo Domingo for five days. He stayed at Nilda's familia's house on the western edge of the city.

It was painted bright orange with an outhouse slumped nearby and a pig pushing around in a pen. Homero and Josefa, tíos of Nilda, drove home with them from the airport in a cab and gave them the "bedroom." The couple slept in the other room, the "living room."

Are you going to see them? Nilda asked that first night. They were both listening to their stomachs struggling to digest the heaping meal of yuca and hígado they had eaten. Outside, the roosters were pestering each other.

Maybe, he said. If I get the time.

I know that's the only reason you're here.

What's wrong with a man seeing his familia? If you had to see your first husband for some reason, I'd let you, wouldn't I?

Does she know about me?

Of course she knows about you. Not like it matters now. She's out of the picture completely.

She didn't answer him. He listened to his heart beating, and began to sense its slick contours.

On the plane, he'd been confident. He'd talked to the vieja near the aisle, telling her how excited he was. It is always good to return home, she said tremulously. I come back anytime I can, which isn't so much anymore. Things aren't good.

Seeing the country he'd been born in, seeing his people in charge of everything, he was unprepared for it. The air whooshed out of his lungs. For nearly four years he'd not spoken his Spanish loudly in front of the

Northamericans and now he was hearing it bellowed and flung from every mouth.

His pores opened, dousing him as he hadn't been doused in years. An awful heat was on the city and the red dust dried out his throat and clogged his nose. The poverty—the unwashed children pointing sullenly at his new shoes, the familias slouching in hovels—was familiar and stifling.

He felt like a tourist, riding a guagua to Boca Chica and having his and Nilda's photograph taken in front of the Alcázar de Colón. He was obliged to eat two or three times a day at various friends of Nilda's familia; he was, after all, the new successful husband from the North. He watched Josefa pluck a chicken, the wet plumage caking her hands and plastering the floor, and remembered the many times he'd done the same, up in Santiago, his first home, where he no longer belonged.

He tried to see his familia but each time he set his mind to it, his resolve scattered like leaves before a hurricane wind. Instead he saw his old friends on the force and drank six bottles of Brugal in three days. Finally, on the fourth day of his visit, he borrowed the nicest clothes he could find and folded two hundred dollars into his pocket. He took a guagua down Sumner Welles, as Calle XXI had been renamed, and cruised into the heart of his old barrio. Colmados on every block and billboards plastering every exposed wall or board. The children chased each other with hunks of cinder block from nearby buildings—a few threw rocks

at the guagua, the loud pings jerking the passengers upright. The progress of the guagua was frustratingly slow, each stop seemed spaced four feet from the last. Finally, he disembarked, walking two blocks to the corner of XXI and Tunti. The air must have seemed thin then, and the sun like a fire in his hair, sending trickles of sweat down his face. He must have seen people he knew. Jayson sitting glumly at his colmado, a soldier turned grocer. Chicho, gnawing at a chicken bone, at his feet a row of newly shined shoes. Maybe Papi stopped there and couldn't go on, maybe he went as far as the house, which hadn't been painted since his departure. Maybe he even stopped at our house and stood there, waiting for his children out front to recognize him.

In the end, he never visited us. If Mami heard from her friends that he was in the city, with his other wife, she never told us about it. His absence was a seamless thing to me. And if a strange man approached me during my play and stared down at me and my brother, perhaps asking our names, I don't remember it now.

Papi returned home and had trouble resuming his routine. He took a couple of sick days, the first three ever, and spent the time in front of the television and at the bar. Twice he turned down negocios from Jo-Jo. The first ended in utter failure, cost Jo-Jo "the gold in his teeth," but the other, the FOB clothing store on Smith Street, with the bargain basement buys, the enormous

bins of factory seconds and a huge layaway shelf, pulled in the money in bags. Papi had recommended the location to Jo-Jo, having heard about the vacancy from Chuito, who was still living in Perth Amboy. London Terrace Apartments had not yet opened.

After work Papi and Chuito caroused in the bars on Smith and Elm Streets and every few nights Papi stayed over in Perth Amboy. Nilda had continued to put on weight after the birth of the third Ramón and while Papi favored heavy women, he didn't favor obesity and wasn't inclined to go home. Who needs a woman like you? he told her. The couple began to fight on a regular schedule. Locks were changed, doors were broken, slaps were exchanged but weekends and an occasional weekday night were still spent together.

In the dead of summer, when the potato-scented fumes from the diesel forklifts were choking the warehouses, Papi was helping another man shove a crate into position when he felt a twinge about midway up his spine. Hey asshole, keep pushing, the other man grunted. Pulling his work shirt out of his Dickies, Papi twisted to the right, then to the left and that was it, something snapped. He fell to his knees. The pain was so intense, shooting through him like fireballs from Roman candles, that he vomited on the concrete floor of the warehouse. His co-workers moved him to the lunchroom. For two hours he tried repeatedly to walk and failed. Chuito came down from his division, con-

cerned for his friend but also worried that this unscheduled break would piss off his boss. How are you? he asked.

Not so good. You have to get me out of here. You know I can't leave.

Then call me a cab. Just get me home. Like anyone wounded, he thought home could save him.

Chuito called him the taxi; none of the other employees took time to help him walk out.

Nilda put him in bed and had a cousin manage the restaurant. Jesús, he moaned to her. I should've slowed down a little. Just a little bit longer and I would've been home with you. Do you know that? A couple of hours more.

She went down to the botánica for a poultice and then down to the bodega for aspirin. Let's see how well the old magic works, she said, smearing the poultice onto his back.

For two days he couldn't move, not even his head. He ate very little, strictly soups she concocted. More than once he fell asleep and woke up to find Nilda out, shopping for medicinal teas, and Milagros over him, a grave owl in her large glasses. Mi hija, he said. I feel like I'm dying.

You won't die, she said.

And what if I do?

Then Mama will be alone.

He closed his eyes and prayed that she would be

gone and when he opened them, she was and Nilda was coming in through the door with another remedy, steaming on a battered tray.

He was able to sit up and call in sick by himself on the fourth day. He told the morning-shift manager that he couldn't move too well. I think I stay in bed, he said. The manager told him to come in so he could receive a medical furlough. Papi had Milagros find the name of a lawyer in the phone book. He was thinking lawsuit. He had dreams, fantastic dreams of gold rings and a spacious house with caged tropical birds in its rooms, a house awash with sea winds. The woman lawyer he contacted only worked divorces but she gave him the name of her brother.

Nilda wasn't optimistic about his plan. Do you think the gringo will part with his money like that? The reason they're so pale is because they're terrified of not having any plata. Have you even spoken to the man you were helping? He's probably going to be a witness for the company so that he won't lose his job the same way you're going to lose yours. That maricón will probably get a raise for it, too.

I'm not an illegal, he said. I'm protected.

I think it's better if you let it drop.

He called Chuito to sound him out. Chuito wasn't optimistic either. The boss knows what you're trying to yank. He no like it, compadre. He say you better get back to work or you're quitted.

His courage failing, Papi started pricing a consultation with an independent doctor. Very likely, his father's foot was hopping about in his mind. His father, José Edilio, the loudmouthed ball-breaking vagrant who had never married Papi's mother but nevertheless had given her nine children, had attempted a similar stunt when he worked in a hotel kitchen in Río Piedras. José had accidentally dropped a tin of stewed tomatoes on his foot. Two small bones broke but instead of seeing a doctor, José kept working, limping around the kitchen. Every day at work, he'd smile at his fellow workers and say, I guess it's time to take care of that foot. Then he'd smash another can on it, figuring the worse it was, the more money he'd get when he finally showed the bosses. It saddened and shamed Papi to hear of this while he was growing up. The old man was rumored to have wandered the barrio he lived in, trying to find someone who would take a bat to the foot. For the old man that foot was an investment, an heirloom he cherished and burnished, until half of it had to be amputated because the infection was so bad.

After another week and with no calls from the lawyers, Papi saw the company doctor. His spine felt as if there were broken glass inside of it but he was given only three weeks of medical leave. Ignoring the instructions on the medication, he swallowed ten pills a day for the pain. He got better. When he returned to the job he could work and that was enough. The bosses

were unanimous, however, in voting down Papi's next raise. They demoted him to the rotating shift he'd been on during the first days of the job.

Instead of taking his licks, he blamed it on Nilda. Puta, was what he took to calling her. They fought with renewed vigor; the orange elephant was knocked over and lost a tusk. She kicked him out twice but after probationary weeks at Jo-Jo's allowed him to return. He saw less of his son, avoiding all of the daily routines that fed and maintained the infant. The third Ramón was a handsome child who roamed the house restlessly, tilted forward and at full speed, as if he were a top that had been sent spinning. Papi was good at playing with the baby, pulling him by his foot across the floor and tickling his sides, but as soon as the third Ramón started to fuss, playtime was over. Nilda, come and tend to this, he'd say.

The third Ramón resembled Papi's other sons and on occasion he'd say, Yuniór, don't do that. If Nilda heard these slips she would explode. Maldito, she'd cry, picking up the child and retreating with Milagros into the bedroom. Papi didn't screw up too often but he was never certain how many times he'd called the third Ramón with the second son Ramón in mind.

With his back killing him and his life with Nilda headed down the toilet, Papi began more and more to regard his departure as inevitable. His first familia was the logical destination. He began to see them as his saviors, as a regenerative force that could redeem his for-

tunes. He said as much to Jo-Jo. Now you're finally talking sense, panín, Jo-Jo said. Chuito's imminent departure from the warehouse also emboldened Ramón to act. London Terrace Apartments, delayed because of a rumor that it had been built on a chemical dump site, had finally opened.

Jo-Jo was only able to promise Papi half the money he needed. Jo-Jo was still throwing away money on his failed negocio and needed a little time to recover. Papi took this as a betrayal and said so to their friends. He talks a big game but when you're at the final inning, you get nada. Although these accusations filtered back to Jo-Jo and wounded him, he still loaned Papi the money without comment. That's how Jo-Jo was. Papi worked for the rest of it, more months than he expected. Chuito reserved him an apartment and together they began filling the place with furniture. He started taking a shirt or two with him to work, which he then sent to the apartment. Sometimes he'd cram socks in his pockets or put on two pairs of underwear. He was smuggling himself out of Nilda's life.

What's happening to your clothes? she asked one night.

It's that damn cleaners, he said. That bobo keeps losing my things. I'm going to have to have a word with him as soon as I get a day off.

Do you want me to go?

I can handle this. He's a very nasty guy.

The next morning she caught him cramming two

guayaberas in his lunch pail. I'm sending these to be cleaned, he explained.

Let me do them.

You're too busy. It's easier this way.

He wasn't very smooth about it.

They spoke only when necessary.

Years later Nilda and I would speak, after he had left us for good, after her children had moved out of the house. Milagros had children of her own and their pictures crowded on tables and walls. Nilda's son loaded baggage at JFK. I picked up the picture of him with his girlfriend. We were brothers all right, though his face respected symmetry.

We sat in the kitchen, in that same house, and listened to the occasional pop of a rubber ball being batted down the wide channel between the building fronts. My mother had given me her address (Give my regards to the puta, she'd said) and I'd taken three trains to reach her, walked blocks with her address written on my palm.

I'm Ramón's son, I'd said.

Hijo, I know who you are.

She fixed café con leche and offered me a Goya cracker. No thanks, I said, no longer as willing to ask her questions or even to be sitting there. Anger has a way of returning. I looked down at my feet and saw that the linoleum was worn and filthy. Her hair was white and cut close to her small head. We sat and drank

and finally talked, two strangers reliving an event—a whirlwind, a comet, a war—we'd both seen but from different faraway angles.

He left in the morning, she explained quietly. I knew something was wrong because he was lying in bed, not doing anything but stroking my hair, which was very long back then. I was a Pentecostal. Usually he didn't lay around in bed. As soon as he was awake he was showered and dressed and gone. He had that sort of energy. But when he got up he just stood over little Ramón. Are you OK? I asked him and he said he was just fine. I wasn't going to fight with him about it so I went right back to sleep. The dream I had is one I still think about. I was young and it was my birthday and I was eating a plate of quail's eggs and all of them were for me. A silly dream really. When I woke up I saw that the rest of his things were gone.

She cracked her knuckles slowly. I thought that I would never stop hurting. I knew then what it must have been like for your mother. You should tell her that.

We talked until it got dark and then I got up. Outside the local kids were gathered in squads, stalking in and out of the lucid clouds produced by the street-lamps. She suggested I go to her restaurant but when I got there and stared through my reflection in the glass at the people inside, all of them versions of people I already knew, I decided to go home.

December. He had left in December. The company

had given him a two-week vacation, which Nilda knew nothing about. He drank a cup of black café in the kitchen and left it washed and drying in the caddy. I doubt if he was crying or even anxious. He lit a cigarette, tossed the match on the kitchen table and headed out into the angular winds that were blowing long and cold from the south. He ignored the convoys of empty cabs that prowled the streets and walked down Atlantic. There were less furniture and antique shops then. He smoked cigarette after cigarette and killed his pack within the hour. He bought a carton at a stand, knowing how expensive they would be abroad.

The first subway station on Bond would have taken him to the airport and I like to think that he grabbed that first train, instead of what was more likely true, that he had gone out to Chuito's first, before flying south to get us.