

DINNER TALK

Liliana Hernández

At my house growing up, dinner wasn't a fancy social gathering to discuss politics or religion. Food provided the occasion to gossip about the neighbors, the women at my mom's factory, and Latina celebrities. Living in northern New Jersey with immigrant parents, I learned the hard way to be thankful for having a stocked refrigerator. Whenever I told Mami that I did not want any more of my dinner, she would say, "And with so many poor kids going hungry in Colombia! How can Americans waste so much food? Shameful!"

Food was part of our American dream: Levi's jeans, trips to New York, a thirty-year mortgage for a small old house with a yard, and red meat every day.

The afternoons of my childhood had a rhythm centered on food. I would come home from school, eat a snack, do my math homework, and then eat dinner. My snacks were processed: Cheetos, Doritos, or salty popcorn. Anything that crackled in my mouth and came in a twenty-five-cent bag. I also drank plenty of soda and fruit punch. Orange soda was my favorite, because it tasted like carbonated orange juice. I couldn't stand the homemade natural fruit juices my mother made, filled with pulp and strawberry seeds. They just wouldn't go down nice and smooth the way a Sunny Delight would. My diet was high in sugar, high in fat—but low on Mami's wallet.

My mom would get home around five. She would heat up food for my dad, who worked the night shift at the factory. He ate white rice with black beans and pork chops for dinner. Then my mother would quickly sit down to eat herself. She had double meals. First she would have chicken noodle soup straight out of the box, with some extra vegetables. Then she ate rice, beans, and pork, and whatever other leftovers my father did not eat. I was last on the food chain, whenever Mami was done.

My mother was never fond of cooking, although she liked the idea of having food around. We had no cookbooks in my house, only the Food Network. (Mami ordered basic cable to watch other people making gourmet meals.) My mother would watch the cooking shows and express amazement at their skill in slicing onions so fast, but she never tried new techniques. Cooking was more about opening a can or letting meat defrost than it was about preparing elaborate dishes like beef Wellington or rack of lamb with mint jelly and creamed onions. Mami's food was warm and generous, seasoned with her special sauce and love. The six most common meals at my house were *arroz con frijoles negros y chuleta* (rice with black beans and pork), *arroz con frijoles rojos y picadillo y maizitos* (rice with red beans, meat, and fried plantains), *arroz con carne y papa* (rice with beef and potatoes), *tortillas*, *Ellitos pizza*, and chicken tenders.

It is hard to look back and describe the taste of that food. We never talked about how soft and moist the rice was, what herbs seasoned the beef, or even what type of meat we were eating. Rice and beans with meat was the basic meal. The rice was soft and just moist enough. There were fat red pinto beans or pork-flavored black beans. There was always rice, and we made sure of it by purchasing twenty-pound bags of Carolina. We ate a lot of ground beef, seasoned with Mami's special sauce made of tomato paste, pepper, garlic, and onions. Having meat every day was a testament to living in the United States and not being poor. My father criticized people with big houses and leather couches who kept no meat in the fridge. They were not truly enjoying life. For him, to eat meat every day was to enjoy the finer things in life.

Vegetables were not part of the program, and my mom never mastered the art of making mashed potatoes. There were no side dishes

except for an occasional corn on the cob or baked potato. Mami would eat a salad of tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, and avocado, which she also urged me to eat, but no one ever really forced it upon me. I took Flintstone vitamins instead.

We rarely all sat down for dinner at the same time, in the same room, with the same meal, to converse. Since my dad and my sister worked nights, it was just Mami and me. Mami would tell me about the mean forewoman at work, who had no clue about sewing but bossed everyone around. She would tell me about how Fulana's daughter got pregnant and dropped out of high school. But most often, dinner was me eating in the living room, watching one of my favorite prime-time shows. It was by watching these shows that I learned how others (read: white middle-class people) ate dinner. They ate three-course meals with vegetables, meat, and dessert. Children passed their parents the mashed potatoes and said things like "thank you." The parents asked the children about what they had learned in school, and if they had a big test coming up. Then the mother would bring out dessert.

My mother never asked me about my day at school. I did not take this to mean that she did not care about me, but rather to mean that life was monotonous and rather uneventful. I never asked them about their factory work, if they had sewn sweaters or pants that day. Instead we talked about the real *telenovelas*—dramas in the lives of people around us. There was no passing of potatoes or being polite, and there were never people over for dinner.

Then came college.

I attended an all-women's college, where dinners involved complicated conversations about sex, politics, family, and past experiences. We talked about welfare reform, and whether we were for or against the World Trade Organization. But not only did the talk change from what I knew at home, the food was like nothing I had ever known: fettuccine with Alfredo sauce, shepherd's pie, lemon chicken, bowtie pasta with marinara sauce, turkey wild-rice casserole—wild! I soon realized that the change really mostly came down to the adjectives, while the food itself was, on

the whole, the same. I had eaten chicken before but not lemon chicken, sauce but not Alfredo, and the rice back home was never wild. These meals were more like the ones I saw on TV, with foods that were topped with spices and herbs. They had creamy sauces that would sither on my tongue. I could taste the combination of lemon and parsley on the chicken. I enjoyed the filo dough crust of the shepherd's pie, stuffed with ground beef and vegetables.

Dessert was my favorite. At Smith College, I would do anything for a piece of dessert. I loved strawberry New York-style cheesecake, brownies showered with pecans and walnuts. We also could make our own ice cream sundaes by mixing sweet hot fudge and sticky caramel sauce on vanilla ice cream, with cherries on top. At the Friday teas there was escargot, but I would skip that and eat instead the homemade, soft, warm-from-the-oven M&M chocolate-chip cookies and brownies.

In college, there were so many options. Dessert at every meal was no longer a luxury, but the normal closing to our conversations. From talk about movies and MTV to in-depth discussions of social reform, my dinners in college gave me insight into other people's perspectives about the world and their homes. My college friends were white, middle-class, and from all fifty states. Some were raised in cities and others on farms with their own horses. It was nothing like my home. I figured Latinos just never ate like white college kids. That is, until I spent a semester in Chile.

I was the host student of a married couple. She worked for the university's online library; he was a retired engineer. Having been raised in an immigrant working-class small town, I had never met Latinos like this before. Dinners were even more different than at Smith. Suddenly I was living on the seventh floor of an apartment building with twenty-four-hour doorman security, my own bathroom, a patio, a twice-a-week maid, a living room with no television, and cultured host parents. Being a minority in the United States meant that I identified with the maids, mechanics, and servicemen. My parents constantly told me that nothing good ever came from Latin America. They did not understand my desire to go there, since I would surely see only poverty. Boy, were they wrong!

What I found with my host family were Latinos who had graduated from college and knew about Western culture—arts, literature, jazz, and social movements. My parents had not finished high school. They knew social movements to be protests, riots, or wars in Latin America—followed by higher prices for milk and eggs at *la bodega*.

Having dinner with my host family in Chile was very different. The menu might consist of turkey with wine sauce and a side of beets and cucumbers, filet of salmon with rice and string beans, grilled chicken with bell peppers and asparagus, fried calamari with sweet marinara sauce. My favorite was the turkey smothered with a sweet wine sauce and cucumbers sliced into thick pieces, always cold and refreshing. The salmon with a squeeze of lemon tasted juicy and tender. I enjoyed steamed asparagus dipped into mayonnaise. The steamed vegetables were always fresh. The calamari was fried and crunchy and left me craving more. The meals were healthy and delicious, a full gourmet experience.

It took me awhile to become accustomed to these new dinners. My host mom would talk about having to review her employees, while my host father served me spinach soup as if that was normal. Over the course of five months, I learned to eat vegetables and not snack between meals. I also learned to discuss the world with my host family over the meal. Back home, my parents would talk about the same problems—the misery of poverty and the insults of bosses. But their voices held no sense of entitlement or of political consciousness. Their faces showed an understanding of the harshness of daily life—and their dream that my sister and I would not suffer as they had.

For me, healthy food, smaller quantities, and higher prices are symbols of a middle-class lifestyle. Eating healthy is easier for those with money—and natural to them. Eating smaller portions but more variety is a luxury bestowed upon those who are certain of another meal. Faty foods—homemade or processed—and lower prices are the trademarks of the working class. Minimum-wage jobs and lack of child care make it harder for parents to find the time and energy to think about and prepare healthy food alternatives.

As a descendant of farmers and blue-collar workers who still live from paycheck to paycheck, I now have a college degree, good meals behind me, and a precarious new sense of entitlement I didn't grow up like my white college friends or the Chilean couple talking about sixteenth-century Roman invasions over turkey. My family and I saw twentieth-century American invasions into Latin America on the Spanish news while we ate plate after plate of *arroz con frijoles*. We wondered if it was "*el fin del mundo*"—the end of the world. We ate real food—cheap, easy to make, fast—always with the awareness that the world could make meals harder for us to have.

I am left wondering what types of dinners and talks I will have with my own future family. It is hard to be at home everywhere. I was never fully comfortable in Chile or at college, though I've come to enjoy eating to jazz music and sipping wine with dinner. I try to understand my parents' reality, but every day it just seems farther away. I'll never feel their hardships, and my children will not understand where the wrinkles under their grandparents' eyes came from. I hope my children will feel at home at any dinner table, but I know they will grow accustomed to eating like my Chilean host family. I probably will not make fried squid, but I will make a pretty tasty rice with black beans dish. Our conversations about Third World politics will carry the privilege of taking future meals for granted. My kids will probably live in a suburban house with nice furniture, and I do not know if there will be meat at every meal, but I hope to give them dinners with friends and family—more instead of less, and plenty of laughter. They will learn that dinner is not always a dining "experience," but that there is always a lot to be thankful for.

IT'S JUST BLOOD

Hadassah M. Hill

I sell my drugged-up blood for rent money, been doing it for about a year now. It's not so bad, either. Just a few days of lockdown, and then you walk away with a small stack of bills. Pay the rent, kids: That's the first priority. Then you can drink for a few days. Take out your best girl, go to the by-the-pound thrift store, buy eggs and bread, give the phone company the crumbs.

Listen. At twenty-two, I found myself in Canada, with a newly minted degree in the liberal arts and a newly emptied bank account. Genius is what they called me in school, and that's exactly the opposite of what it was to decide to stay in the amazing foreign country without money, access to money, or papers that would allow me to get a job and make some money. I was living in Toronto—New York City minus the crime and sex harassment, plus Commonwealth quirkiness, fabulous queer artists everywhere, and an economy that allowed me to have an apartment for the price of a leaky closet anywhere else.

On top of it all, there was a girl. No, there was The Girl. Stay here, I thought to myself. Pull something off. Having started out as a bookworm charity-case kid, I was about to try to scam survival. Having had to scrounge before, I figured I could do it again.

So I signed a lease and proceeded to look for work. That didn't go so good, and even the sweet deals soured when I was told, "And we would need

GHETTO FABULOUS

Tina Fakhrid-Deen

Buying a house in the 'hood was a sociopolitical decision for me and my husband. I didn't want us to be the type of Black folks who get a little money and flee to the suburbs, away from our people. I live in Chicago. I was born on the west side of one of the most segregated cities in the nation, in the Jane Addams projects, a place commonly referred to as "the ghetto." It was a few miles west of downtown and close to everything imaginable—a prime location.

My family was poor, but resilient. We were no strangers to food stamps, roaches, and hallways that smelled of urine. We often had to eat those black-and-white-labeled generic brands and drink powdered milk, which I despised. I learned early on that sugar on a slice of bread or mixed with a glass of water made a tasty afternoon snack when peanut butter and jelly or Kool-Aid were unavailable.

I am proud of my roots and my complex identity, so it makes me sick when I hear people speak negatively about the ghetto, the place that I called home for many years. It is common to hear white and Black middle-class teens, in a skewed attempt to embrace hip-hop culture, say offensive things like, "Oh, my God, he is acting so ghetto," or, "Look at my big ghetto booty." Although the word "ghetto" refers to a section of the city densely populated by a certain minority group and was formerly where all Jewish

people were dumped in some Eastern European countries (and later in Chicago and other big American cities as well), the term is used quite differently now.

To those on the outside looking in, the term "ghetto" is now synonymous with being Black, dirty, attitudinal, ignorant, lazy, uneducated, and dangerous; it has taken on the same connotations that the term "nigger" historically has had. However different, they are both politically loaded terms used to denigrate poor Blacks, but to acknowledge that would be politically incorrect. "Ghetto" is the new code word for "low-income Black person." Whites won't acknowledge it because it feels too close to being racist, and middle-class Blacks won't acknowledge it because in their hearts, they know that using the word is a sad attempt to distance themselves from the lower class, to assimilate and be accepted by mainstream culture. It would be a public admission that poor Blacks are reduced to frightening caricatures, misunderstood by the majority of American society, still overtly oppressed.

I am ghetto. I love hip-hop, Ice Cube, and the Geto Boys. I have a big butt and snap my neck back and forth when I'm cussing someone out. I look good in cornrows and wild afros. I can do the "booty" dances with the best of them and I still say "ain't" to get my point across. I also have good parents, who always encouraged me to be the best and to speak my mind. As a result, I have a master's degree in education. No, my mama is not on welfare and yes, my father was present while I was growing up. I've never committed a crime, unless you count the time I stole a piece of bubble gum from 7-Eleven and returned it two minutes later out of guilt. I have a beautiful husband, not a "baby daddy." I've traveled to at least six different countries, studied abroad, and wear "ethnic" thrift-store dresses to work. I plan to teach our child Spanish and sign language. My ghetto identity is more than the latest booty-shake video, it is my foundation, and it reverberates through every facet of me—textured and rich. And no, I am not the exception.

My old neighborhood was ghetto. The scent of month-old chicken grease filled most homes, and stained blinds hung in the place of flowery curtains. There were scattered winos on the sidewalks, glass shards on the

playground instead of wood chips, rampant petty crime, graffiti on the walls, and boarded-up windows on some apartments. There were also community centers where we could go and play board games and get juice and a "choke" sandwich (so damn dry you could choke eating them) until our parents got home. Hard-working parents worked several jobs to make ends meet and to provide a good, loving home for their families.

In school, we had spelling bees and learned Spanish in kindergarten. Caring adults with knowing eyes watched over us if our parents weren't around. We all knew each other's names and who to call when a child got out of line in the street. We were a community. My friends were ghetto. We did ghetto things, like drinking buttermilk with cookies and mixing Kool-Aid with sugar, giggling at the sour-sweet taste in our red-stained mouths. We played double dutch with a long extension cord while singing "take a peach, take a plum." Each time the jump rope hit one of us in the face, we had bitter fistfights, wind-milling with our eyes closed, hoping to make contact. At Halloween, we got yelled at or whipped for throwing eggs, not because it was childish and rude, but because we were screwing with the food supply. Some of us grew up to be construction workers, accountants, and teachers, while others became gang affiliates, hood rats, and drug dealers. Some moved out of the projects; some remain to this day. Some went off to college; others went off to prison. Regardless, we all shared the same history, cried the same tears, and mirrored the same struggle—withstanding poverty.

My family moved away from the projects when I was about six. We lived in the suburbs and then down South for a brief stint, but moved back to an urban area on the North Side of Chicago marked by many of the same characteristics as my former ghetto. Basically, we were still poor and struggling to survive. Upon returning to Chicago from college, I searched the city for housing. I drove back to my old neighborhood and, to my chagrin, found most of it had been torn down—shiny new town homes with skater boys stood in its place. It was now called "University Village," because a local university had bought up most of the property. Even the hospital where many of my friends and I were born had disappeared without a trace. It was almost as if we had never existed. It made my blood



boil that all of those poor people had been displaced, and I wondered where they had gone. I blamed middle-class America and greedy developers. I accused the mayor and his cronies of turning a blind eye to what was happening in poor communities like mine.

I wanted to live in a place where all socioeconomic backgrounds were represented, no one above the other. I finally decided to move back to the North Side, for the diversity in ethnicities, cultures, and economic status. The local fruit market sold everything from *kimchi* and plantains to yucca and collard greens. *Elite* carts rolled down the street with hot ears of corn as often as ice cream trucks. Blue-collar and white-collar workers rode the el train together each morning. There were little coffee shops on several corners, adorned near the entrances by the occasional evening prostitute or homeless man. In my building lived a Jamaican drug dealer who often threw wild parties with the scent of cheeba oozing under the door; an alcoholic white man and his six-foot grocery cart-toting girlfriend, who fought like Ali and Frazier in a title bout; a spiritual Black vegetarian who swore that a cat's purr meant that it was going to attack her; a wiry ballerina who rented out her place every other month; some Eastern Europeans who spoke little English and managed the building; me and my mathematician husband; and an interracial couple who just seemed shady.

Slowly, many of the buildings in our area were converted to condos, the asking prices beyond ridiculous. The poor were being forced to move out, just like in my old neighborhood. They left a few Section Eight homes intact, for nostalgia's sake. Although gentrification came rapidly to our neighborhood, we weren't directly impacted until my mother (who lived down the street from us) was forced to move out of her tiny one-bedroom apartment when her rent jumped from \$475 to \$1,250 a month. Then our building changed hands, and the new owner threatened to almost double the rent for our modest one-bedroom. We all needed to move, and fast. My mother purchased her first home on the far South Side. Loving the diversity of the North Side, my husband and I tried to find another local property to purchase, but the price hikes were happening everywhere. We considered the suburbs, but quickly came back to reality. Why buy into the

reverse white flight and allow upper-class whites to move back into the comforts and convenience of the city while we got stuck out in the boom-docks, disconnected from everything we knew? So we did the most intelligent thing we could think of, we invested in Bronzeville, a historic South Side community.

During the great migration of the early 1900s, many Blacks emigrated from the South in hopes of landing industrial jobs in Chicago. Bronzeville was one of the only areas of the city that southern Blacks were allowed to live in. It is legendary for its sizzling-hot blues scene and notorious 47th St., a strip of juke joints, jazz cafes, restaurants, and hotels. This is where famous Black artists such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald came to perform and stay when they had a gig in town. For years after its heyday, Bronzeville had been a poverty-stricken area filled with crime, despair, and little development. This was now one of the hot spots in the city to move to, because of its accessibility to downtown and the lakefront, and its affordable housing.

In a matter of days, we found a beautiful three-bedroom condo with a monthly mortgage in the same price bracket as our old apartment's rent increase. Set right on the main boulevard—named after a well-known Black civil rights leader—we could see all types of Black people walking up and down the street. This was the first time that I had been back in an all-Black area since my days in the ghetto and the South. It was exciting and wonderful, although I did miss the ethnic diversity of the North Side. There was a new Black-owned poetry cafe and a bank, and the alderwoman's office was less than a block away. It was rumored that a comedy club, performing arts theater, art gallery, and bookstore were in development on the next corner. Across the street, a sign boasted a new town-home development starting at \$350,000. My husband and I thought that our neighbors were fabulous and incredibly nice. We had two lesbian pastors across the hall, three outgoing drug dealers, otherwise known as "pharmaceutical representatives," two PhD's, an ex-cop, a lawyer, and several high-powered businesswomen. We were all so close that it was like living in the dorms again.

I soon realized that I had somehow crossed over and was officially middle class. It was confusing, because I wasn't like the bourgeois Blacks who knew nothing about hard times and mocked the accursed lot of poor folks. I was different. I cared about civil rights for everyone. I didn't turn my nose up at the thought of eating pig feet or chitlins. I didn't fear that my property value would go down because poor folks lived next door. And I didn't refer to all less fortunate people, especially the expressive or thug-ish-looking ones, as "ghetto." Then my whole reality changed. Within a week of our moving in to our new building there were two attempted robberies. I was four months pregnant and actually heard them kicking in my neighbor's door. A few weeks later, someone's car was broken into; then more robbery attempts in the coming months. I began to fear coming home late in the evening. As a pregnant woman in her third trimester, I was truly defenseless. My mind began betraying me. I questioned whether this neighborhood was good enough—safe enough—for me and my family. I feared the possibility of my child picking up broken crack vials in the neighborhood park during our afternoon strolls. I thought about sending our daughter to the substandard neighborhood schools. I thought about someone actually getting into our home, violating us and everything we've worked so hard for. I thought about moving—moving far away from crime, far away from my present reality, and even farther away from the ghetto we now lived in. It no longer felt like home—it felt like prison. It felt dangerous. It felt unforgiving. I felt like I was being punished for leaving the hood and coming back with a pot to piss in. I saw jealous eyes oggle me as I entered our six-foot gate, making sure it slammed behind me. I became resentful, fighting rage. I felt like a traitor.

I had become that middle-class asshole who moves in and pushes aside the poor residents, who are rightfully angry. They wanted the good life too. They wanted big-screen TVs and Jacuzzis like us. They wanted to feel important and respected, as we did. They also craved quality community resources for their families. No matter how I tried to frame it, I had become one of the powerful pawns in this gentrification game—with the poorest of Bronzeville being knocked clear off the board. Like magic, with our middle-class presence, the schools would begin to get better, more

commercial development would find its way to the area, and politicians and policemen would make special visits to our condo association meetings to hear our concerns. We would complain about the crime and beg for the removal of it, of "them." My sensitivity for the wretched poor would wear thin. Ill feelings would grow between us and "them" until someone gave in and moved on. There could be no coexistence between the classes. We misunderstood and distrusted each other too much. There could be no community here.

Not until we stop to realize that we're all in this together. Not until I use my newfound middle-class power to advocate for the right to decent and affordable living for my new neighbors, here in Bronzeville. Not until I help them to advocate for themselves. Not until I realize that some of these residents don't want or need our middle-class handouts because they were doing just fine before we got here. Not until I understand that many of these families are just like mine was back in the day, working hard and trying to keep food on the table. Not until I treat them as equals. Not until I stop being scared and open my mouth to say "hello" to the skeptical faces that eye me daily. Not until I recognize that the ones trying to rob us are just lost souls with no hope or heart left (that doesn't mean I won't keep calling the cops). Not until I get the resentment out of my heart.

The ghetto is a community filled with ups and downs, struggles and survivors and people sticking around hoping that things will get better. Being ghetto is so much more than a new catchphrase or a hip-hop song; it's an identity, a reflection of our economy, and a way of life. Just as hip-hop will be in my blood and spirit forever, so will the ghetto. I will transcend the box that us ghetto folks have been put into and create a new space. I will make people think before using the term "ghetto" to refer to any person, place, or thing. I will fight for the right to be ghetto, even when my back's against the wall, being violated by those I'm trying to stand up for. That's keeping it real—real ghetto. As a people, when one of us suffers, we all suffer. In my heart, I know that we ain't a true community until we take an honest look at each other and begin to embrace every part of our intricately woven culture. Black folks must get a handle on the crabs-in-a-barrel syndrome, and learn to stand strong, together.

FOR THOSE WHO LIKE TO DIG

Ricky Lee

At 4:15 A.M. the alarm goes off. I hit snooze . . . precious snooze. The girl had come in tossed at 3 A.M., wanting to get it on. I'd given her the keys to my place, which was maybe a mistake, but what can I say. Loneliness often leads to mistakes.

4:30—*son of a*—press snooze.

At 5 A.M., I shut off the alarm, sit up in bed, and listen closely by the window. Sounds like rain, a slow, persistent, San Francisco drizzle. Rain. I start making plans involving pay-per-view pornos, pizza, hot wings with a side of Ranch dressing—don't forget the Ranch—all stuff I can't afford, particularly because my check is gonna be short, but it's fucking Christmas, goddamn it, it's a *rain* day. I pull the curtain back slowly, very slowly, and stare out into the street below, where a small white Toyota pickup truck is doing laps around the block, no doubt lookin' for a hooker and a blowjob before work. The tires on the asphalt sound deceptively like a San Francisco rain shower.

I'm a laborer for a landscape construction company. My particular crew is working a large job up north, handling large tree plantings, sod, irrigation, and drainage. Some mornings I get a ride from my apartment. On these occasions I stand in front of my gate and watch the business of Capp

Street. Most of the girls working my street aren't so dressed up, and they're pretty strung out. Some of them are straight-up bulldaggers like me, workin' the streets in shorts and Converse sneakers. Sometimes the guys think I'm a hooker—the guy in the white truck propositioned me once. I told him I wasn't working, though in fact I was waiting for a ride to my shitty manual-labor job, same sort of work he was heading to, after he got off. Most days I gotta catch a train to get to a bus that gets me to a ride that will drive me an hour up north. All by 5 a.m.

I have already wasted so much time this morning, with my rain-day fantasy plans, that I can't shower. I step right into the jeans I stepped out of just a few hours earlier, and dirt pours out of the cuffs, making tiny pyramids on the floor. T-shirt, pleated flannel, ball cap, keys, cigarettes, wallet. The wallet is merely habit, as there is not much in it. I throw some French rolls and lunch meat in a plastic bag, plus two cups of ramen—one to eat, the other to barter with.

5:15. I hit Mission Street, beginning the sleepy, gender-dysphoric walk through my day. Rounding the corner, a tweaked-out hooker smiles flirtatiously in my direction, her smile drooping into annoyance as she realizes I'm a chick and she has just wasted her precious milliseconds. She flips her hair and quickly strides across the street. Crack dealers say, "What ya need girl?"

"Nothin', but thanks for askin'. Have a good day."

Every interaction is laced with ambiguity, laden with suspense: Do they know I am really a girl? If they don't, when will they figure it out, and what will their reaction be? I have passed through airport security with an ID that clearly states my girl name and female gender, and been waved on with a "have a nice trip, sir." The guy at the McDonald's will call me "sir" and then go through an embarrassing, apologetic spiel when he figures out my real gender. Even when I enter a women's bathroom downtown, I am looked at with skepticism and fear.

But there are a couple of things I can count on, and one is that the crack dealers in the neighborhood know I'm a girl. Perhaps they're used to more toughie-lookin' girls, and their street survival depends on keen observation. Also, a john can spot a girl-booby from a mile away.

The subway is nearly empty, the day's heavy commute yet to begin. The few of us riding are on our way to manual-labor jobs—lunch pails and hard hats, nannies and sweatshop workers. Many of us are lulled into a snooze by the rhythms of the train. We open sleepy eyes at each stop. We are the working class, the sleeping class. I put my headphones on. Mobb Deep's album *The Infamous*, all jazzy New York beats and angry, disenfranchised rhymes. In the sleepy loneliness of the morning, it makes sense.

Off the train and on the bus. Gerome is already sprawled out on one of the back seats; he gives me one of those smiles, like, we're such suckers for bein' on the bus so goddamn early. I sit across from him. "How much did ya pay?" he asks.

"What?"

"For your fare?"

"Oh, thirty-five cents—kid's fare."

"Ten cents," he says.

"How'd ya do that?"

He shrugs real nonchalant. "I think she likes me," he says, nodding toward our bus driver. She's an older black lady who seems mostly concerned with getting to the next stop, by the Quickmart, so she can get her coffee.

"I think you're high," I tell Gerome. The bus stops and our lady gets off.

Gerome scoots closer to me. "Can you tell?" he asks.

"What?"

"I've been up all night." He has been working for the company for a year longer than me and half as long as he's been in the States, having come from central Mexico. He picked up driving the backhoe like a pro. It's a skill that could make him money someday, though because we are all officially "unskilled," the company pays us very little for our labor. It's the beginning of the San Francisco dot-com boom, and slowly all my friends are getting evicted. It happened to Gerome, too, and now he stays with his uncle, a coke dealer. "There were girls there, I couldn't get to sleep," he says. In a year Gerome will get busted for car theft and be sent back to the old country.

* * *

We arrive at the strip mall, where there are various laborers standing around, coffee in hand. Our supervisor pulls up furiously in his truck, a.k.a. the weed truck. When we are working with a big crew there are often a few choices for getting back home and every ride is different. Boss is a stoner, hence the name. My preferred ride home is the tequila truck.

John is there. He smells like vodka, which both comforts and repulses me. John is in his late forties, though we can't know for sure because he lies all the time. I like him because he has loads of incredible stories about his life—they're interesting, even if they're not true. We pile into the boss's truck and I sit in the back, between John and Gerome, so that they don't ruin their masculinity by sitting beside each other. Jeffrey is like a nineteen-year-old overgrown puppy; he fixes things well and falls a lot. He sits in the front, lookin' out for cops 'cause boss speeds like a mother. Jeffrey adjusts the piece of wood that holds the stick shift in fifth gear. They talk about *Monday Night Football* plays. A new guy gets crammed in the back of our truck, next to Gerome. He is white, kinda thuggy, probably thinks I'm a guy, probably thinks Gerome is white, 'cause he is so light-skinned, and by the end of the day he might even believe that John scored with a couple of Japanese twins when he lived in Hawaii. Gerome lays his head on my shoulder and I put my head on his head, coffee in hand. I can sleep holding on to stuff and not spill it—a coffee, a beer; it is one of the traits God blessed me with.

By 7:30 I am standing in a gravel parking lot with a sixty-pound jackhammer in my hand. Gerome drives off on the tractor with John, breeze in his hair. "See ya later, *compadres!*" he yells, and I flip him off, a very feeble comeback. I do feel sorry for him, 'cause he didn't sleep and I did, and I can still feel the sunburn from our ride home in the tequila truck yesterday.

This crazy rich lady wants a few eighty-foot palm trees in her parking lot, where nothing would ever wish to grow. It's a delicate area. Because it's by the winery, there's lots of underground piping, so we have to do a lot of it by hand. Oscar is like an ox—he works and drinks harder than anybody. He doesn't speak much English and I don't know so much Spanish, but we have a relationship based on our rides home in the tequila truck and our mutual respect for each other's hard work. He seems impressed that a girl

can use a shovel. Today we are digging a gravel parking lot, with base rock, hard clay, maybe even cement if we're lucky. It's all about the compression hammer. Shovel and pickaxes for now, and we take turns with jackhammer duty. Fluorescent orange lines mark the trenches, sweeping around one of the ranch buildings. I wonder if the owner wants these trees in her parking lot so she has a shady place to park her Mercedes.

I survey the surrounding landscape. The hot sun is already starting to burn off the morning fog, revealing clear, bright blue skies and pristine, green rolling hills. I would probably think it was pretty if I wasn't hung over, or if it wasn't my job.

Boss rolls up in the truck, wearing his mirrored, I-was-a-cool-guy-in-the-eighties Oakley surfer shades. He sticks his head out the window and speaks English with a thick Spanish accent. He doesn't know Spanish, but he thinks if he speaks in broken English it will help Oscar understand him better.

"O.K. we are starting off with drainage here. The trenches are two and a half feet wide and four feet deep, everything is clearly marked, but look out for the pipes, hear me Rick? Don't break any pipes. I'll be in the shed if you have questions. *Comprende?*"

"Got a lot of paperwork today, boss?" "Paperwork" is my joke for reading the newspaper.

Boss looks unamused. "I want to see less talk and more digging," he says, kicking up gravel as he peels out of the lot.

"Sí, Señor Pendelojo," I say.

I adjust my safety goggles. Oscar is grinning at me as if he's watching a situational comedy.

"Um, 'scuse me," I say to the new guy, "do you not remember how to warm up the compressor?" He's realized that I am a chick and is standing, shovel in hand, jaw flapped open. "Uh, I guess you should take that shovel and start clearing out some of that gravel," I say.

He is still gawking at me, like he's deciding if he should do what the woman says, or just make a run for it, into the rolling Northern California hillside, perhaps to become a mountain man of sorts, never to be heard from again.

"C'mon man, just move the gravel," I say.

He looks toward Oscar for sympathy, but Oscar—who no doubt knows what's going on—has distracted himself with the knobs and dials of the compressor. The new guy reluctantly starts shoveling the gravel into tiny piles.

What's the problem? You guys have never seen a hung-over lesbian with a jackhammer before?

As the only female laborer in the company, I'd like to represent—you know, to prove something, like "girls rule!"—but my slacker mentality and general laziness keep me from being any kind of star employee. I'm just a regular working-class schmuck. I pull my weight, but sneak off to smoke weed in the port-o-potty when I get the chance. "I have to do my girl's business," I say, and then hang out in the stench, pulling off my stem and staring at the brown plastic walls with dirty Spanish words scratched into them: "*Chulo*," "*puto*," alongside crude pictures of pussy and cock.

I think about screwing a lot when I'm digging. There is something about the physicality of the work—the flexing, sweat, and hard bodies, and my own shirt, which I'm not allowed to take off 'cause it'll be too distracting. Lined up on the hillside, trenching old-school chain-gang style pickaxes flying, swinging in the rain, and the rhythm of the breath and grunts, the thud of mud moving, splashing around us, dig the holes, fill the holes, dirt, dirty jokes, base rock, gravel, sand, mud, cement.

There are times when I wish I could fit into the butch-femme paradigm; then my sexuality would make more sense to the guys. I'd have a pretty girl on my arm to kiss me and say, She's my man. But no, I'm just out here shoveling sand, dating girls that look like guys, which would make me kind of a fag. Which isn't so accepted in my line of work. Identifying as an anticapitalist art nerd doesn't really help build my machismo, either. I don't talk so much. Trying to relate stories of gender dysphoria becomes confusing, like—usually I pass as a man, except in the morning, when guys think I'm a hooker. Relating work stories to my artistic lesbian friends is usually not very effective, either—who wants to hear about the hundred yards of piping you just laid, or the keen efficiency with which you can pick up piles

of sand with the backhoe? The what? What's a backhoe? Eyes glazed over, never mind. But when you are used to being the freak it almost doesn't seem so unnatural that no one gets you.

During high school I was a dishwasher at an Italian restaurant. It was all grease and steam and rancid tomato sauce. The smell coated my clothes and my very weird eighties skater haircut that was long on one side and shaved on the other. The chefs were guys and the waitresses were girls, except for one extremely charismatic gentleman waiter. The dishwashers were Mexican immigrants, and me. I watched the ladies coming through the double swinging doors with their trays, skirts swirling around, and it was like they were in some show, an opera. They came backstage to the kitchen to let us in on some dumb customer requests, then swooshed back out to the stage. There was something about them. They did the girl thing really well, and I was thinking about the tips they made. Was I always gonna be makin' \$4.75? Was I gonna have to learn to wear pumps? It seemed that if I did, it would be the part of the opera where the man comes out in drag—fuckin' hilarious.

My mother was a working-class intellectual. That's what I called it. She read a lot, and worked low-paying jobs until she decided to go to library school. Now she is a library clerk. She still rents the poorly heated, ramshackle house I grew up in. I always wore combat boots, which back then was a big deal for girls in the Midwest. In the winter, after work, I would stick my half-frozen, soaking-wet, booted feet in the tiny gas oven, puff on Ma's smokes, have a shot of whiskey, wait 'till I smelled burning rubber, and take the boots out. Our house would have been condemned if the city cared, but compared to the very small Section Eight apartments next door, it seemed luxurious. The neighborhood consisted of folks raising rabbits and chickens, dope dealers who got busted monthly, and little kids sittin' on the stoop, waitin' for their folks to quit arguing. Or just waitin'. A new set of tenants would move in, a new set of guys would step to me as I walked home from school. Instinctively I puffed myself up. If you can pass as a guy you can walk independently through the world, especially at night. This I knew before I knew anything about being butch.

The liberal arts training that I received landed me into a great deal of debt instead of a secure place in the job market. In the city of San Francisco I wore button-down shirts a few times and rode the elevators of office buildings, trying to score one of those high-paying temp jobs. The woman would look at me: nervous, with a fresh buzz cut and no office experience. "I can get you a job passing out flyers," one woman said. Another woman just laughed at me. "I can probably get you a job as a day laborer," she said, looking over my résumé. I changed out of the button-down shirt on the elevator down from her office. I put on a T-shirt, feeling like a reverse Superman changing real fast into my original identity before I hit the ground floor. I imagined that I was a simple bulldagger in street clothes, but in the button-down shirt, I was "Officeman," with keen schmoozing abilities and the superhuman power to make money reproduce on its own. No one knew my real identity; I invested wisely, and I saved lots of people. I bought Ma a house. And then, *dinng*, the elevator doors opened. I was back in the lobby, back on the street. I lost a day's pay for that one, having called in sick to go to the interview and listen to this chick tell me I could be a day laborer, doin' the job I already had, but for less pay.

I check out the new guy. He is shoveling gravel furiously, trying to prove himself by workin' extra hard. He might stick around, though, and if he does he might get friendly and start telling me his story, and I won't tell him my story, and he won't ask why.

Oscar works for us, week in and week out, as a day laborer. It's because he is illegal. We sneak him in. We take turns signing his week-laborer time slips under different names, and he gets paid cash. He came to this country seeking economic refuge but he cannot work under his own name. There are so many ambiguities, and yet they are always the same—like the newest guy will always buy John a beer the first Friday we get paid, because John always tells every new guy that it's his birthday. It seems like every morning my girl stumbles in thinkin' she's gonna get laid, I wake up thinkin' it's rainin', and the damn Toyota is doin' laps. A hooker looks hopefully in my direction, hopin' I'm a john.

Oscar—who thinks it's hilarious I got the new guy to work—gives me a wink and then a thumbs-up before powering up the compressor. I squeeze the handle and a surge of power releases into the hammer; I grind my teeth and think, Damn, that feels good, and sparks and tiny cement chips fly around me. I watch the flesh on my forearms jigging, then I get the fear for a second—am I really gonna be able to do the work, to make it through the day? I think about digging, and not breaking pipes, and then I think about fucking, and the girl I left sleeping in my bed, and it's all going to be O.K.

FIGHTING

Bee Lavender

The first fight I remember, I was five years old. My uncle Anton had just married a dimpled, dark-haired girl; the church was filled with golden light streaming into my eyes, and I blinked jealously from the front row. The girl had not asked me to be in the wedding.

After the ceremony there was a cake reception in the basement of the church and my family stayed on one side of the big drafty room, sitting on folding chairs behind round folding tables. The bride's family stayed on the other side—except for the maid of honor, the bride's little sister, Susie, who had been sneaking drinks from some old man. She went from table to table in her cotton eyelet dress with yellow bows, giggling and talking to people. Susie had dark hair cut short like Dorothy Hamill's, a bowl shape on top of her head. I watched her moving around the room and wished I could have that hair, but my straggly reddish blonde hair was past my shoulders and my mother set it each night on squishy pink curlers. In the morning she combed out the curls and sprayed on hairspray. My hair fuzzed in soft curls for a few hours and then fell straight again before the middle of the day.

The flower girls were all from the bride's family, little girls in eyelet and ribbons, and I didn't want to talk to them. My Aunt Louisa held my hand and walked me over to the strange girls and introduced us. "These are

your new cousins," she said. I didn't get it; why did I need new cousins? I had so many already, we were related to most of the town. The little girls stared back at me. They were wearing cute white bonnets with yellow ribbons under the chin; real brown curls trickled from under the bonnets and all the way to their waists. They didn't say hello; they just stared. Apparently they didn't need a new cousin either. Aunt Louisa let go of my hand, patted me on the back, and walked away to talk to Susie. I turned and walked away from the girls. They looked mean.

The church party broke up quickly, all the presents were loaded into a truck, and the bride and groom made out in front of the car my dad and some of the other grown-ups had decorated with shaving cream and tin cans tied on with string.

Back at my grandparents' farm, the real party started, with just our family and the neighbors and a few of the teenage friends of the teenage married couple. The uncles had stacked cases of Budweiser on the back porch, and Grandma Vi had cooked a big dinner of macaroni noodles and tomato sauce with crumbled hamburger, store-bought greasy whole chickens, and packages of flaky pull-apart rolls.

My mother brought in plates of deviled eggs, which had been stored in our trunk during the wedding, and she stood in the kitchen laughing and talking to her sisters as she mixed up tuna to spread on tiny pieces of sliced rye bread. My mother was beautiful, young; she would have been twenty-three when that party happened. She was wearing a green velvet dress with puffy sleeves. All seven kids in her family started blonde and ended up dark, like the relatives from Finland—dark-haired blue-eyed people with high cheekbones, everyone with broad shoulders, the women with soft breasts and curving hips, a good place to sit if you were small enough to demand the privilege. I wasn't that small anymore, but I was small enough, and my mother loved me and held me tight. I could still sit in Grandma Vi's lap, and I could still ask my mother to carry me when I was tired.

I played with my cousins in the sewing room, a white room with a huge closet we used as a fort, a magical portal, and a hiding place, standing between or behind the rows of Grandma Vi's silky polyester dresses, which

smelled of acidic perfume, Lysol, dog. The whole house smelled of dogs; there was Tuta, which they said meant "girl" in Finnish, a mixed German shepherd with a happy face and waggly body. There was Boyka, which I suppose meant "boy," or was a bad translation or joke or something; he was a big red Irish setter, tall and strong enough that I could ride him like a horse. He was Anton's dog and would go to the new house with the new couple. There was Conrad, a white wolfish dog, rescued by my Uncle Frederick from an abusive home. He was friendly and sweet and known to attack anyone wearing a uniform. There was a tiny, ancient black mop of a dog named Midgie who had always been around and probably dated back to my mother's childhood. Midgie was territorial about Grandma Vi's recliner, wouldn't let us sit in it. She went everywhere we went, and Grandma would buy her ice-cream cones and hamburgers.

We played in the back room and the grown-ups sat around the house, smoking and drinking and cracking jokes at the new couple's expense. We ate off paper plates, the plain red tomato sauce seeping through, bits of food dropping off to be eaten by the dogs. People started going home, the great-aunts first, with their assorted kids and grandkids, then the teenage friends; they had other parties to go to that night. Soon it was mainly family in the house and it was late, and my mother told me to lie down on the couch, then tucked a crocheted brown and red afghan around me. My own little dog snuggled with me on the flat, dirty silk pillow stitched to commemorate a stranger's trip to a foreign port, Manila or Okinawa, the memory fades. I fell asleep listening to my mother and her brothers and sisters, all together, all laughing, Grandma Vi and Grandpa Tom and assorted husbands and wives in the dining room and kitchen.

I woke up to the sound of glass breaking, voices raised in anger. I sat up and hugged my little white dog to me, confused. My mother ran past, coming from the bathroom with towels, and said sharply, "Put on your shoes." Had I done something wrong? What was happening? I reached down for my shiny, black buckle shoes. I slipped one small foot into a shoe and was pushing the strap through the buckle when a roar and a chorus of screams made me look up, just as my uncle, the groom, came running straight at me, face red and mouth cracked open in a hideous scream, his

eyes the eyes of a horror-movie maniac. His brother, the one who rescued dogs, was behind him, tattooed arm reaching forward to grab his shirt, ponytail disheveled; Grandpa Tom was there too, his hand on Anton's belt. Anton screamed a conquered-warrior scream, a victim scream, the sound of a sick and dying animal cornered and fighting back. My uncle and grandfather leapt forward at the same time, tackling Anton, and the three bodies hurtled through the air, sliding across the coffee table in front of me, pieces of their errant bodies connecting with my knees, arm, head. They slid across the coffee table and landed in a heap next to the front door, knocking over lamps, and my little dog jumped into the fray, biting at any piece of flesh he could reach.

Someone grabbed me and yanked me off the couch, and it seemed like I was flying through the rooms, carried aloft like lumber, one shoe dangling, the other lost in the fray of fighting men, grunting and pummeling each other. I screamed, "No, no, my puppy!" But whoever was carrying me ignored my screams and ran away from the fight, past the remains of supper on the big oak table, through a kitchen spattered with blood and sparkly broken glass, through the dark porch and outside. I could smell whiskey and beer and then I was standing with no coat in the yard, next to the picnic table and the sandbox, the silver dollar plants and willow tree, the bride.

She was crying, and in the dim light from the nearby chicken coop, I could see mascara streaming down her face and neck, making smudges on her white shirt. We were alone. The rest of the family was inside, and we could hear them yelling, dogs barking; but we had been set aside, sent away into the exile of the yard. My foot with no shoe on was wet from the dew on the grass, the night was cold, and I could see stars and a sliver of moon above the orchard. The bride cried and cried and I patted her arm. "It's O.K.," I said. "This doesn't happen very often."

The next fight I remember was my own. I was six years old, and I was playing in the woods across from my house, a tangled mass of blackberry bushes and salal and wild rhododendrons, evergreens shading our special places. The children of the neighborhood—not so much a neighborhood,

really, just four short streets of low-income housing set down next to an abandoned city dump, on the far southern outskirts of the county—had made paths in and out of the remnants of the forest closest to our homes. We had clearings and we had hollowed logs; there were tiny winding trails and some bigger trails our dads made for dirt bikes. I was in the woods, in a clearing, on a sunny weekend day in the fall, after kindergarten started, before the rainy season.

The two red-headed girls from the yellow house, the only one with an eight-foot fence around the whole yard, were with me, along with my best friend Shanna's younger brother, Todd. Shanna was locked in her house doing chores; she was three years older than me and faced a vastly more complicated system of rules—commensurate with her status as an older kid, a fourth-grader. Todd was two years younger than me, not in school yet, a baby; but a mean-tempered baby with the whitest of white hair, dark suntanned skin, ripped denim jeans, and the top to a set of Underoos worn as a shirt.

We were playing a game where the girls were the pioneers, in wagons, trudging across the deserts and barren plains we had seen on television Westerns. It didn't occur to me then to wonder how the pioneers who went all the way west, to the Northwest, the Olympic Peninsula, the very farthest tip of the United States before it drops into the ocean, covered in a dense, mottled, cold, impenetrable rain forest, had managed their journey. Now it seems to me that the barren plains, though barren, would at least have been easier to walk across. No hacking away at scrub.

Todd was the ox, tied up with a jump rope, pulling our weary pioneer wagon as we sang songs and worried about ambush. "Faster, oxen," I called to him, tapping his bottom with the wooden handle of the jump rope. Laura and Jeanne giggled and Todd said it would take more than that to make him go faster. I tapped his bottom harder, and he stared at me with his cold baby eyes. "Is that all you can do?" he challenged me. I tapped again, harder. He laughed at me and the girls giggled. "How about this?" I asked, and hit harder. He kept laughing. I raised my arm above the soft bottom he was wiggling at me, daring me, and brought the wooden handle down with a *thwack!*

Suddenly the "ox" reared up, ropes swinging in an arc, and he wasn't a pretend animal anymore but a real one. He shoved me to the ground and pinned me, hitting and scratching as I pushed and writhed and tried to get away. The red-headed girls had stopped giggling and were standing there with their mouths open, and then they ran away, not to get help, but to hide behind their high fence. I shoved at Todd but I was shocked and scared, and he was a solid boy.

We rolled in the dirt and then he had his hands on my ears, on my pretty new earrings, and he clutched and yanked as hard as he could, and then his face was close to mine and I could feel my ear lobe tear and I started to cry and then his mouth was on my cheek, his teeth digging in, ripping the skin, the skin of my face and my ear, and I screamed and pushed and knocked him away, running for home without looking back.

I had blood on my face, blood on my neck; the earring had been ripped forward all the way through the lobe, leaving me not with a tiny piercing but with a large jagged hole. My mother tried to ask me what happened, tried to wipe off the blood, but I was sobbing and my nose and mouth filled with mucous and I started to hiccup and I couldn't say much except "Todd hurt me."

There was a knock at the door. My mother went to answer it, and I could hear the voice of Todd's mother; she was yelling, and she had Todd with her. I ran to the pantry and hid in the very lowest cupboard and pulled the sliding hollow door shut behind me, cowering in the dark. I could hear Cindy telling my mother the story of what happened; she made Todd pull down his pants to show a red mark from the jump rope. My mother listened and then said, "Well, my kid has her ear ripped half off, and bite marks on her face." My mother didn't sound angry, just stiff and formal, as if this comment was the end of the discussion, the bill is in the mail, good-bye. She was good friends with this woman, whose daughter was my best friend. We went places together, to the zoo, inner tubing, camping on the coast.

After Cindy left, my mother slid the pantry door open. "Come out," she said, and she didn't sound happy.

"Nexttime," she said, "you have to hit back."

* * *

The women in my family hit back. Sometimes they hit first. Not usually in a provocative way, not to start a fight—but in the middle of a fight, when the rage over some enormous transgression boiled over. It's easy enough to break the rules when you live not only in poverty, but in the lowest dregs of working poverty, too poor to feed your family but not poor enough to receive government benefits, when you're a family living on a boy-man's salary for delivering newspapers or pumping gas or part-time work in the forest. Often, there would be an argument over something the boy-man bought. A model car, a magazine, tickets to a movie, a special treat—and that money should have gone toward a loaf of bread. They would argue, then scream, and the boy-man would have a shaking tantrum. These men, even the violent ones, were just boys who broke the rules. If a fight started in the car, it usually ended with the man dropped off on the side of the road, kicked out to walk home or bum a ride off a stranger.

But sometimes, someone would raise a hand and hit. Then they would fall on each other, stand back up, fall back down, go waltzing around the room in a macabre dance of violence (but they did not know how to waltz, so perhaps it was a square dance, a do-si-do), while I sat in the crackly green reclining chair and watched Westerns on television.

Nobody hit *me*, not even as a measure of discipline. My cousins were cuffed routinely, someone was always threatening to cut a switch; smacks fell down like rain. But I was absolutely protected within this family, because my mother would not let anyone touch me, and because I was a bleeder. My nosebleeds were frequent and copious—I could soak a towel or fill the sink basin just from riding in a car or reading too long or falling asleep in an awkward position. If I felt sad, I coughed up blood. Growing up, I was usually sick, curled up with a blanket and an infected organ, ear, throat—recuperating perpetually, watching television and reading books. People had fights, they hit each other, and I was never touched.

I saw fights between my Aunt Louisa, the baby of the family, a teenager still with short hair and David Bowie T-shirts, and her husband, my favorite, who drove a VW van and wore purple high-top sneakers with plaid bell-bottoms. His parents had a lake cabin, an impossible luxury, and we used to float around the lake on inner tubes, lazily stroking the murky

water, and then climb up the steep stairs to the A-frame cabin where three boys spent summers in a perfect—sitcom-perfect, like *Hazel* or *Father Knows Best*—childhood. Aunt Louisa used the baby's diaper bag to hide their stash of drugs, and I know that when they broke up, someone hit someone else, and my aunt's eardrum was punctured, but it was never clear to me why my now ex-uncle was the bad guy. He always seemed so nice, and my aunt, well, there was the story about the time she wouldn't stop kicking one of her sisters in the car and the car went in a ditch and they ended up pummeling each other in the middle of a busy road.

It was understood, though never discussed, that the habitual, reflexive violence in our family was an expression of strength, that we were not abused but merely querulous. We were the strong ones, the victorious, and the women in the family were to be honored for their ability to fight. The women whispered about the new bride's younger sister, Susie, who had married a man with a moustache and mean eyes. He hit Susie and she just put her hands across her eyes, crying. Susie showed up with bruises on her arms, black eyes, and a big pregnant belly. My mother and her sisters said that if she couldn't protect herself she should leave, or, failing that, kill him; they nodded and agreed that they would never let a man get away with that shit.

When her baby was still in diapers she was pregnant again and she tried to leave, but the man broke down the door and beat Susie up, left her bleeding on the floor, took his son, and disappeared forever.

Some fights were so legendary, discussed so often, it was easy to imagine you had been a witness even if you weren't born yet when the event occurred. My Aunt Signe, my mother's oldest sister, had a wretched husband, the worst kind of bad imaginable. She had a good job as a secretary in the shipyard, and one day in the middle of an argument he swept up all of her work clothes and took them outside. He threw the clothes in their muddy driveway and then drove back and forth over them with his car. When he came back inside he was laughing and he picked up a bottle of wine and raised it to his lips for a drink. She smacked that bottle into his mouth, shattering teeth and glass—bone and blood and glass and wine spilling forward across the kitchen table as he screamed.

One day they had a fight about dog food and he hit her and she grabbed a knife and chased him out of the house. He ran down the driveway and she got in her station wagon and knocked him down and drove over him, grinding him into the mud and gravel, just like he had driven over her beige pantsuits, permanent-press skirts, blouses with ruffled collars.

It didn't kill him; we believed he was too wicked to die. We whispered, "Too bad she didn't use the truck" as he passed through the dining room on his way to torment someone in the living room, hobbling on crutches, stinking of motor oil and whiskey. Of course, my aunt would have gone to prison, which would have been bad, because she was the respectable one, with a nice hairdo and a job in the shipyard, and she was smart and funny.

One bright, sunny day I was driving across the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, Mt. Rainier on the horizon and sailboats far below. I was wearing an electric-blue mini-dress. My hair was long and blond, held back with a chiffon scarf, and my legs were covered with laddered tights, black boots to my knees. I had a boyfriend of rare beauty sitting next to me, and we were driving to Seattle to see a band called Pure Joy.

I reached out to change the radio station and he smacked my hand away. Without pause for thought, my hand curled into a fist and my arm jerked back, up, and with vicious force connected with the face of this pretty boy. Without forethought or planning, without losing control of the car hurtling at fifty miles per hour over a high bridge, I hit him as hard as I could. He held both hands to his face. His voice was muffled and he started to cry. "You broke my nose," he said.

This was neither the first nor the worst of our many fights. After the episode on the bridge, I would like to say, that was the end, the moment, the signifier. But my courage, the purest and most valiant part of me, did not match my wisdom. I tried to break up with him after awhile, and I told him we had broken up, but he didn't believe me. More important, I had broken one of the most important rules of those who practice domestic violence: I hit above the neck. The arm that struck the blow would have to pay. After that day on the bridge, every time we fought, he grabbed my

wrist, twisted, shoved—shoved my elbow into a wall with a dull thud, or punched the lee of the joint with a sharp pop. On cold mornings or when the season changes, my arm gets numb, and sometimes there is a flash along the nerve that runs between the smallest finger and the elbow, reminding me of those teenage games.

We were in love, and it was a passionate and enormous love, and the dialectic of our family lives (for his mirrored my own) never taught us how to act any differently, to restrain ourselves, to enjoy the quiet things in life. He touched my scars and said that I was beautiful. We were young and reckless and the sex was good and the laughs were fine and it was delightful, addictive, to be alive.

We broke up eventually out of boredom, because we wanted to kiss other people. My teenage love saga ended with a different boy, years later, an honorable boy inevitably corrupted by the reality of life in a hard poor town and the dangers that befall children when their mothers are not vigilant in protecting them, body and soul. This story ends with a 9-mm handgun held at my right temple, as I looked into the eyes of a boy who would never have hit me. This was our contract, we had figured out that much: He would never hit me, nor would I touch him in anger.

But we were both damaged by our short, fast lives and the inescapable events that brought us to this particular clean moment, standing in a shabby white kitchen of a dank basement apartment, dirty dishes on the counter, school papers scattered everywhere.

In a different kind of story he would be portrayed as shaking with rage, flushed with power, blustering and rolling with emotion. But in real life he was steady and determined, the barrel of the gun pressing against my skin an admonition, a benediction; and I neither doubted his intent nor his ability and willingness to act.

He would argue, "But you had a knife," and this is true: I had a good knife, a sharp and lethal knife, pressed to his belly, and knew how to use it. Even if I couldn't survive this fight, I could inflict damage.

I looked at his round young face, pale and freckled, at his brown eyes as he decided exactly when to pull the trigger, and remembered all the other moments of rage, the other fights I had won or lost, and felt a

despair deep as any mountain lake. I thought, "This can be the end of all the fighting, it would be so easy." Simply being alive had been such a terrible war of attrition, I had survived by a narrow margin, and I could have chosen to do so many other things with my hard-won victory. I could have traveled, or learned to sing, could have done anything in the world, and I had chosen this boy and this moment. I had used up all of myself and ended up no more than a mile from my childhood home. I was just on the far side of the same forest. The rage emptied out of me and I was calm. "Put it down," I said quietly, and I continued looking into the madness of his eyes until his eyelids fluttered and closed, and he stepped away.

All of the people in these stories managed to grow up and settle down and stay together, and eventually, to stop fighting, and still love each other. Or they chose death. But even with the example of many long marriages, frictions but no longer violent, or the wretched uncle eventually tamed and consigned to a wheelchair, or the honest and simple suicides and murders, I could not or would not move beyond the moment with the gun at my temple. That was the end of a specific relationship, but also the end of my rage. It was the last fight.

I walked away from my lover, my family. I stepped out of the diorama, tore up the placard, walked away from the box that contained the scenes of battle. I moved away and started over with a new identity; with a new family; with scores of friends, chosen carefully.

One of my young friends was confiding in me recently about her problems with her lover, and wanted advice, or at least a little perspective. I shrugged and said, "Maybe you should date someone who had a happy childhood." This is advice I inflicted on myself after the fighting stopped, and ten years of decency has proved worth the effort (and just as exciting). It is not easy, it is in fact harder, to be vulnerable, to be kind.

I'm still attracted to damaged people, the grown-up children of violence, the people who keep secrets and show off lies. But I keep them at a certain safe distance, and politely decline to play. I have a strict and representative code of conduct for myself, and I will not fight, nor debate, nor will I

even speak to people who might cause me to fall again, to take that reckless, thoughtless slide down into rage.

Those of us who grew up fighting know each other without telling these stories; we can smell it, maybe, or perhaps see it in the way a hand rests on a table. Maybe we hold our bodies differently; maybe the secret crosses our faces before we even know that we have given it away. I do not consciously try to convey information with my body, but I've never been panhandled or harassed on the street. Nobody has ever asked me out on a date or flirted with me in a social setting. I can walk through a large crowd and people move swiftly out of my way.

In this adult life I have had only two opportunities to fight. The first happened several years ago, on a dark night with no moon or stars, a cold night. I had put my baby into the back of the car, buckled the car seat, and was about to get in when I sensed danger. I turned around and a man had materialized, not near the car, but actually standing within the curve of the door. He reached out with both arms and I pulled back my fist and he saw, through the scrim of light from the car, the expression on my face. He pulled his hands back, held them in front of his face, jumped back a foot, stumbled, and apologized before running away into the darkness.

Another day, a dry autumn day, I arrived home with my children and unlocked the door. The living room looked strange; something was missing, and I could see through a doorway that my study had been searched; clothes I had left stacked on the desk were strewn across the floor, wires pulled out of the wall. Standing in the living room I could see that the back door was still locked. I sent the children back outside. I grabbed the nearest possible weapon, a large metal flashlight, and ran up the stairs. My only thought was to find and hurt the person who had invaded my home, who might have hurt us. It wasn't until I had checked all the closets and stood next to the broken window, the route of entry and escape, that I realized what a foolish choice I had made. My instinct was not to get help, but rather to attack.

This is my meditative discipline: a constant wakeful awareness of danger. My blood contains the secrets, the knowledge of hospital corridors

and the threat of injury. I can only offer the most obvious lesson I have learned: that anger feeds rage and rage breeds violence and that people who allow anger to dwell in their bodies and minds perpetuate the cycle. But I'm not didactic about it; I'm not testifying. I don't really care enough to convince anyone to change: ~~life~~ life is complicated, and if I hadn't known how to defend myself, I would not have survived. I just want to keep my small family safe and to stay here, laughing, until it is time to go.

to get out of the working class, we will continue to be afraid. Assimilation does not free us; it whitewashes the most obvious lie ever told. The Game is a con. The Wheel is fixed. It's time to invent a new one.

What are our choices?

MY MOTHER WAS A WHORE

Nikki Levine

It's something I've known for much of my life, though I couldn't even begin to say it out loud until I sucked my first dick for money. It's never been a big conversation piece, not something I bring up to people, because it always seemed like any other job to me. Not a lot of people actually had jobs in Jersey City when I was growing up, at least not legal ones, and definitely none of the people around me. I didn't have a home for years, unless you count other people's cars, motel-room floors, and pitched tents in Lincoln Park behind the projects we were kicked out of after a drug bust occurred in our tiny apartment.

"We were dealt a shitty hand," my grandma once told me after I interrupted her watching *Wheel of Fortune*, her weekday 7:30 scream-along session, to complain about what the kids around town had been making fun of me for that day (I'd worn the same shirt two days in a row). "SOLVE THE PUZZLE, YOU FUCKIN' SCHMUCK!" she'd be yelling at the polished people on the black-and-white screen who'd stare blankly at obvious phrases, or at least phrases that were obvious to Grandma. As the oldest and the first-generation American, as well as the loudest in the family, Grandma was regarded by everyone as the genius, the one who knew everything. It still blows my mind that she never figured out my mother was a whore—or maybe she was so smart that

she knew the whole time but kept her knowledge a secret from my mother and me.

Grandma kicked us out of the family's average-sized Ocean County house in 1986. We had lived there for almost a year, along with my aunt, her husband, Grandma, Grandpa, and Grandma's parents. I was in first grade, and all I knew is we were "moving to the city." Mom had met a guy named Tony, who I hated from the start because of his creepy voice and the fact that he wore ribbed tank tops over thermal underwear shirts in the summertime. He wore a gold chain with someone's head hanging from it like a museum exhibit. I later learned this was Jesus, someone that the Catholics worshipped. I knew nothing about that in my sheltered Reform-Jew world. Reform, mostly because we couldn't afford to join a temple. Grandma said we had to leave because she didn't want my mother to be with Tony—who I later found out wore those thermal shirts to hide the track marks that stained his arm like paint on a canvas. "MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY!" Grandma screamed at my mother one day as she opened the broken front door, pointing to the proverbial "highway." My mother chose the highway, a.k.a. drugs and the chance to be a Mafia wife, and we moved to Jersey City.

My mother walked the streets for years in her late twenties and early thirties. She was a genius and could have been the doctor that her grandma always told her she'd better be. But by the time she was twenty-eight, it wasn't an option for her. My mother was a heroin addict. Her addiction was like having another child to keep alive with the easy money she made with her body, with her hands, her mouth, her pussy.

My mother became a whore because she had a daughter and a dead-beat ex-husband. She was a single mother in a dead, brick city in northern New Jersey, dividing her time between finding places for me to sleep and having sex with strangers. Tony was living with his parents, who hated my mother because she wasn't Italian. Regardless, we were allowed to eat Sunday dinner at their house. Tony slept in their garage and always had needles hanging out of his arm when we'd show up. He said he loved me and wanted me to call him "Daddy."

My mother's addiction was serious, it controlled almost everything, but she never forgot that she had a daughter to take care of. She'd cry us

both to sleep at night on motel-room floors, the floors of her Johns who were kind enough to let their homeless whore and her daughter sleep in their \$20-per-night first-floor unit. They'd wake up early in the morning and shoo us out in time for me to get to school. My mother would walk me to school in her stiletto heels and black cat suit. The other kids thought she was a goddess just like I did. We didn't know she was a whore, or that a whore could be a goddess.

My mother was a whore. The black sheep of the family. Divorced from my father and now dating Italian men exclusively. She wanted to be Italian, not Jewish. My mother dated Mafia bottom-feeders and changed my last name in my school registration so I wouldn't have to be a "Levine" anymore. I was now an Italian girl, a DiFeo, just like her and her Tony. I was sworn to secrecy.

She sold cocaine on the job. She didn't have a real pimp, just Tony, who she was selling cocaine for—to make money to support his habit. I knew she was out in the streets for me, though, her daughter that she didn't mean to have but loved more than anything in the world. She was a dealer, but the money she made from whoring was different from the drug money. When I was thirteen or fourteen she told me the story of what she was really doing. How she never spent drug money on me, that's what the fuck money was for. My dad disappeared and didn't pay child support; she had to get money for me somehow.

My mother always told me that I should respect the sex industry, though not in those words. We were inner-city to the core; she didn't know that it was an "industry." I look at all of the hype about sex work now, how it's the new cool feminist occupation and how young whores are spreading the gospel of prostitution to the Third Wave, the no wave, the whatever-the-fuck wave of feminists now. Unfortunately, most of this is on the Internet or in fanzines. In most cases, inner-city whores and their children do not have access to this kind of information. I've come across a multitude of fanzines and Internet websites geared toward The Sex Worker—resources that are intended to provide safety tips to, and instill the feeling of community among, sex workers. My mother was an older woman (relatively) from the streets of Jersey City; if someone had handed

her a modern fanzine about sex work, she most likely wouldn't have understood what was presented to her. Phrases like "sex work" would have been alien to her. A loner in the industry, my mother would have shunned the idea of a "safety call"; she was too proud to have anyone else know what she was doing when she left our roach-infested apartment in her cat suit and cheap, broken stilettos. Though I think it's important that sex-worker harm-reduction information be brought into the inner cities for people like my mother, I'm unsure as to who would be capable of translating information originally intended for college-oriented young people into something that an older inner-city prostitute with not much formal education could process.

Before she was a whore, my mother was a stripper. I would try on her costumes when she wasn't looking; they always made me feel so glamorous. I'd use duct tape to keep the thongs up high on my little thighs; pasties covered my tiny five-year-old tits. I'd dance around our tiny bedroom to her collection of 45s, singing along in my shrill baby voice while slowly removing my sequined panties. "*I wanna rock with you . . .*" I'd sing along with Michael Jackson. When Mom would catch me, she'd move the needle off the record and tell me it was O.K. to wear the outfits, but not O.K. to remove them while dancing. She told me that she never got fully unclothed for any job. She said she hoped I would never have to do what she does.

After a year of fruitless efforts to find a way to escape Tony (who had been beating both of us and taking my mother's money), she finally called the police on him. I'll never forget that day—I sat on the counter of the apartment we were sharing with another family for the month and watched Tony as he carefully loaded his syringe and got down to business and suddenly the front door was broken down and in pieces on the floor. Police filled the room, my mother grabbed me, and we hid in the corner behind an undercover agent who we had been getting to know. Her name was Michelle and she helped my mother set the trap. We were free.

We entered the world of the mysterious witness-protection program. We were put up in a hotel on Staten Island and told to wait. We waited, and during this time my mother detoxed. I had no idea what was wrong

with her. While she lay in bed curled into the fetal position, screaming about the demons she saw, I would roam the streets of Staten Island looking for a cure. I described my mother's symptoms to random street runners, dealers, thugs, whores, you name it. Finally, I met a guy named Gooch who told me he had what my mother needed. He handed me a clear bag with whitish brown powder in it. A heart decorated the bag. I brought it home to my mother, excited that I had the antidote to her sickness. She looked at the bag and threw up, commanding me to flush it down the toilet quickly. She told me that bag contained the demon. I did as she told me and lay next to her in the bed she'd soaked with her sweat, and she held me tight and told me she'd never be this sick again.

About a week later, my mother was feeling a lot better. We watched *Good Day New York* every morning, and my mother told me that if I saw myself on the show I shouldn't be scared, because we were moving. She didn't know where, but she said we'd have new names, new hairstyles, and new stories to tell people. Stories we'd need to maintain in order to keep us from Tony. Right as *Good Day New York* was ending and *I Love Lucy's* beginning credits rolled, the hotel phone rang. It was Michelle. She said we were not allowed to be a part of the program because my mother's drug test came out positive. At least, that's what my mom told me. The next day, we checked out of the hotel and moved to the shore for *A Better Life*, with the fear of Tony's return constantly lingering in the backs of our minds.

My mother became an agent at a "fantasy entertainment" company run by an old family friend named Lee. She was essentially a pimp—finding dancers for private parties and making sure she got Lee's cut. She made \$5 an hour, which wasn't enough to pay for my lunch at school. It paid the rent, though, keeping us alive in our one-bedroom apartment in Brick, New Jersey. And it was off the books, so my mother was now able to collect welfare and get food stamps. The food stamps were embarrassing to me; I refused to go shopping with my mother when she used them. The town itself was mostly filled with families, "whole families," families with day views and their own attics and basements that nobody lived in. Maybe they kept their toys there, or had a "family room." I don't even think there was a welfare office in town.

One day, Tony showed up on our doorstep, crying and begging to be let in. "I'm clean, I'm clean," he said over and over again. I wondered what his hygiene had to do with letting him into our tiny roach-infested apartment. He'd just get dirty again. And she let him in. He detoxed in my bedroom, and I wondered why they were both so sick all the time. Soon they were both feeling great. They had gone back to heroin, and Tony returned to dealing out of our apartment. I was once again to call him "Daddy," and I had to start walking differently. Apparently I didn't walk "heel-toe, heel-toe." This infuriated him, and he'd spend hours watching me walk around the house. On one particularly memorable occasion, he followed me around with a .357 Magnum and told me that I'd "better get it right." My mother screamed and cried, begging him not to hurt me. He used the gun to hit my mother in the face and she fell to the ground, bleeding and sobbing. I started to run to my mother but I also caught a pistol whip to the face and was knocked out immediately. I don't really remember what happened after that.

My mama was a whore but it didn't upset me. When money got tough after she died, I never thought of whoring. I figured I was too fat, too this, too that. I didn't want to be called a Whore. It seemed so dirty. But my mother taught me that if I needed to, I could be a whore and it wouldn't be terrible. It would be a job.

What am I now? My mother taught me how to take care of myself in the presence of older men. Older men were the ones who would fuck us over all the time. We were both deathly afraid of men in their forties. Mustaches, beards, white skin, little purple dicks. She taught me not to fear; she taught me how to take charge and make them fear me, which was a totally new concept. Mama taught me that if I had to be a whore, I wouldn't be scared or ashamed.

So when my hands clutch unfamiliar balls, my mouth on unfamiliar dicks, unfamiliar hands on my tits and grabbing for my pussy, I don't get frightened. My knife gives me power. My mother carried a gun. She also walked the streets, and did it alone. I work with my girlfriend and we do it sober, watching out for each other and keeping ourselves out of danger.

When they thrust green bills into my hands I remember my mother sucking dick for food stamps. I remember going hungry because there was a blizzard in Jersey City and she couldn't walk around in stilettos in the snow. Borrowing cranberry sauce from our next-door neighbors Dennis and Cathy, coke customers of Tony and my mom. They were adamant about us buying them another can once the sidewalks were plowed.

In 1999, AIDS claimed the life of my mother, thanks to Tony. She never shot anything into her veins—she snorted her dope. Tony, on the other hand...

My mother watches over me like an angel. It wasn't her time to go, but she did leave. She must have had a plan. She always had a plan.

I never thought I'd be here, a sex worker, a pro-domme, but I am and I'm not afraid. Because where I go, there's my mother, hovering to make sure I don't get hurt. And when their prying hands find their way to my pussy she intervenes, drawing everyone's attention to something across the street or across the room.

I walk into every call knowing my mother is there and that it's going to be O.K. I walk out of every call with a smile on my face because we're that much richer. I get my money, and I learned how from my mother, who was a genius, a goddess, and a whore.