

Sui Generis  
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Abstract  
Sui Generis  
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This is a work of literary fiction. It addresses family dynamics, immigration, and infidelity. It plays with form and language by introducing a two column structure whenever a character speaks Spanish. The story is narrated and lived by Vero, a young woman from Chile, in the first person and past tense. Vero is visiting her estranged cousin in Boston. She is escaping her father's scandalous affair with his male secretary, on his pregnant second wife. Vero's behaviour is compulsive and obsessive, particularly once she begins her own affair with her cousin's ex-boyfriend.

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The little screen embedded on the plane seat in front of me had three episodes of *Parts Unknown*, which before the flight, I could not have told you anything about. I chose *Parts Unknown* because I was going to a part unknown, Boston, and because I've never had the gift of a two hour attention span. Over the fourteen hour flight I watched each episode twice.

*Parts Unknown*, I now knew, was a television show that followed renowned chef Anthony Bourdain to countries, cities, or sometimes, neighbourhoods, and featured him eating. The voiceover provided his commentary. His narration straddled a fine line between sarcasm and straightforwardness, like he was making light of something very dark, but always making you always that he was doing it. The visuals, a face that didn't smile much, but that everyone seemed to like. With a feast of Biscoffs and tomato juice, knees up to my face, I watched him from the air above the American continent go to Québec to have beaver, talk politics in the freshly democratic Lebanon, hike for white cacao in Perú. I wanted desperately for him to have done an episode on my home, Chile. I was deprived of Wifi. I'd have to ask my cousin when she picked me up.

Joan didn't say much at the baggage claim. She nodded her head to me in acknowledgement, then crossed her arms and waited for my suitcase. Her foot was tapping. It wasn't so much that I felt underdressed around Joan, but that I felt underpersoned. This feeling started when I was 10 and she was 13, and she had her birthday at the rollercoaster park people died at in Chile. At 23, her eyes had just as much black makeup on them. She was shorter than me still and stood taller. Funny how some things never change. We hadn't

seen each other in five years. Three of those were easy to write off due to a worldwide pandemic; the other two, she gave no reason for not coming home for Christmas.

Some things do change. The piercings were new. So was her name. Juana went by Joan. That felt wrong to me. I don't know if I agreed with the way all my aunts had recoiled from the news when we found out, and spit venom over the smell of cooking meat and cherimoya pastries about how Fernanda's kid was too good for us now. I did know it felt off in my tongue. My mouth wanted to take the letter "j" in a different direction. However, I was going to be living with her for a summer, so Juana was Joan, and I made a quiet resolution not to say her name much.

In the car (beat-up, not doing a very good job of keeping out of cold), I was too aware of my body, of hers, of the English signs around me. Her and her tattoos. Joan. There wasn't a second in the drive back to her place she wasn't throwing ash out of the window, one elbow out, one hand loose on the steering wheel or the radio's knob. Whenever she changed the station, which was often (every time a commercial came on), the wheel was untouched, and the car drifted slightly with the wind. I clutched into the spongy foam of my seat with my tattoo-less hands.

"I watched *Parts Unknown* on the plane," I told her, for the sake of talking.

Then: "What do you know about Anthony Bourdain?"

"Killed himself," she said, and nothing else.

We drove in chaotic silence.

There was a time I couldn't conceive of myself without her.

\*

Joan lived in the fourth floor of an old looking building, graffitied artfully on its side across the fire escape, like an exposed skeleton. She lived by frozen water, a Korean convenience store, and a basketball court I knew had to be cracked under the snow. I'd live there for what was left of January and all of February. As long as what was left of my summer holidays. As long as my stepmother could justify.

We dragged my suitcase up the stairs. No elevator. Joan swore in English, like that was what came naturally. When I said "hola" at the airport and she replied "hey", I knew that was to be the extent of Spanish conversation for the duration of my stay. At least this way I'd get a language polishing out of the trip.

The door creaked, a universal tongue. Joan wasn't living with her parents anymore. They were in Florida, where she grew up. Fernanda was the sort of woman who would force Joan to take me in when I had nowhere else to go, because of family duty, and also the sort of woman who would like someone else to carry those duties, due to her own disapproval of my family branch. Boston was where Joan had gone to school before dropping out. She now worked at a café with cats. She hadn't told me any of this. It all came down from the grapevine of aunts, each with their own disapprovals and duties of blood. My stepmother had only left a plane ticket, printed out, on my grey duvet, along with Joan's address, scribbled.

Joan's walls were scribbled.

"Aren't you renting?" I asked.

"Temporary wallpaper. It's a guest book." She waved her hand around the small space, to all the lines of different colours and shaped markings in them. It was like she lived in a dive bar's bathroom.

"Could I?"

Joan stalked over to a chest that was serving as a lamp holder. Most of the furniture seemed to be something else. Her couch was a futon with a lot of pillows, propped over the wall. Her living room table was a pingpong table. She grabbed a Sharpie from a sewing kit, and tossed it my way.

I caught it. Blinked for empty space. I found a spot by the sole window. I drew Anthony Bourdain.

He didn't come out very well.

I needed a shower, and a nap, and a glass of water. I was a Sim on red.

"You best get ready," Joan said from the futon, her eyes on her phone.

"What for?"

"A concert."

I frowned.

"It's Wednesday night."

"They make music on Wednesdays, Vero."

Vero. Why did it hurt that she used my nickname, when everyone else did?

"We leave in twenty. Chug coffee if you need to."

So I explored her kitchen (no normal glasses, all wine goblets), and her bathroom (her shower curtain was purple), and my suitcase. I didn't try to look cool because that was the assured way to not look cool with Joan. I stole some of her Fenty lipgloss.

She didn't say anything about the lipgloss as we left, and I didn't say anything about the noose she had drawn around Anthony Bourdain's neck.

\*

On the subway I thought about how strange cousinhood is. Joan didn't like me and didn't want to house me this summer, but here we were, disassociating politely on the seats, going to a concert. I also thought how strange it was to be able to ride public transportation at night and not end up as one of those sad statistics you hear about in the news. I also thought what she would be like if her family had stayed home.

Fernanda was one of those who left Chile in the early 70s, a mass migration born out of peril, fuelled by the thoughts of safety and property in another land. The fucked up thing is that they didn't do well economically, and then her husband was shot in the United States. It's one of those things everyone in the family knows but nobody talks about, so I'm not sure how or why he was shot. I know it happened when I was eight. The other fucked up thing is that when Fernanda begged my mother to come with her she said she would rather die in her own country, and she did. I was very small. Although Joan and I have dead parents in common, whenever she and Fernanda came to my house in Chile for the summers, there was a tension of difference. My father had done well for himself, and I could tell with how she marvelled at the tall ceilings and the ham we had with olives before moving to the dining table, at my dolls, the dresses I lent her. I didn't really know what to do about it, as a child. It turns out I had to do nothing. Fernanda stopped coming for the summer. Then Juana only came for two weeks. Then she stopped coming at all. The timing lined up suspiciously with the arrival of my stepmother. And now I was spending the summer at Joan's.

"My friends are meeting us there," she said.

"Alright."

We got off at some station. I followed Joan's marching, trembling. The cold was waking me up. This will be good, I thought. I liked music.

It was exactly what I expected. Neon blue sign. Brick walls. Lots of leather over bellies. Smoke. People clapped Joan in the back, like a regular. I saw her easy smile between flashes of light. Sometimes I forgot that everybody liked her. She knew how to move, how to make people listen. The only thing was that she was fatter than she would have gotten away with at home, but what was normal here. I wondered if Fernanda made pointed comments about it, or if there were links to diets in their WhatsApp chat, or if actually, she had acclimated to the permissible in the United States and appreciated that her kid could be fat.

Joan led us through throngs of people to a door in the back. Metal. She pushed it open, into the cold. Why, I thought. I braced myself and walked through snow to a small circle of people.

It was a group of five. They reacted effusively to her arrival. I could tell they loved her, right away. After the fanfare, from the middle of the circle, Joan turned. Her face emptied and she gestured to me.

“This is Vero.”

“Ah, the cousin,” said a man.

I wondered what she had said about me.

“Yes, the cousin. I am Verónica.”

“Veronica?” the same one spoke.

“Verónica. Please call me Vero.”

He nodded, looking amused. I couldn’t figure out why. I smiled, just in case. He smiled back. He extended a hand.

“A pleasure. I am Paul. Please call me anything you like.”

The group chortled.

“And I’m his girlfriend, who won’t stand for this.”

That’s how I lost Paul, who was now giving his attention to the girl at his side. Joan was getting her cigarette lit by someone, it was too dark to see. I had been formally introduced to the group and officially left to my own devices.

Except.

The man to my left was staring at me. I hadn’t noticed him much, he had moved little since I had arrived. Lethargic, almost. I thought maybe he was high. As soon as I looked him in the eye I knew he wasn’t. You didn’t see alertness like that every day.

“Verónica,” he said, like he was trying out the taste of my name. I didn’t mind that he used my full name as much because he said it right.

“And you are?”

“Ezequiel.”

Which I thought was dumb. Maybe because that was the name of a boy who would not stop kicking me under the desk in the third grade. Maybe because the man in front of me looked like he had done his fair share of kicking in life as well, and Ezequiel was supposed to be a biblical name.

He didn’t dress well and he didn’t have a particularly nice face, either. Acne on his cheeks, live and scarred. Messy hair. His hands were in his pockets. He kept assessing me. Something about the interaction felt charged, and I couldn’t figure out why.

Paul came back. Ezequiel stopped looking at me, and I felt it.

“Do you smoke, Vero?”

“Not if I can help it.”

“How about a drink?”

"I can't in this country. I am twenty."

Paul removed a bottle of something from his coat.

"We won't tell the President."

It was a kind offer. Yet I did not feel like drinking. For one, I'd fall asleep immediately. For another thing, I'd made a sort of vow not long ago, only last week, days away from my flight, after I threw up for the third consecutive night. I had counted on the legal excuse. How to politely refuse, but still have Joan's friend think I was alright?

"I can't. I just took some Ibuprofen."

Paul's eyebrows rose.

"What is that, and is it fun, and do you have a philosophy of sharing?"

Oh, God.

"It's menstruation medication."

For the first time since I met him, Paul didn't seem to know what to say.

But it got him to look at me. Ezequiel, I mean. Spare a glance, more like. Live wire eyes. Somewhat humorous, or curious. He was smirking at Paul now.

"Yeah, you can get fucked up on that South American Midol, Paul. Are you snorting it, or straight to the vein?"

Paul turned his body like he was getting ready to battle.

"I'm thinking on my gums."

They both laughed and I realized they were close and that meanness was an important part of this friend group. Or maybe, the ability to handle it. Make it funny.

Joan grabbed my elbow.

"Show's starting soon."

\*

When I woke up last night's music was still resonating in my skull. Not the sort of music I like. The drummer had blue liquid frothing at his mouth for most of the set. The lead singer smashed his guitar. I had tried to hide my yawning from Joan. When we were kids our differences fascinated me; now they were a stone in my shoe.

I sat up from the makeshift couch, which was also my makeshift bed, when Joan came out of her bedroom. I hadn't seen it yet. She closed the door behind her. Rubbed her eyes and then her hair and went straight for the coffee pot.

"Can we go see Harvard today?"

"Don't be sordid, Vero."

Her voice rasped through the sentence. She drank the rest of her coffee in silence, alternating between her staring out the snowy window and her phone. My working hypothesis was that she'd be frowning regardless of my presence. Joan seemed to operate by either being in a bad mood, or laughing easily with people. No neutrality. My father used to say that Fernanda was like the waves, nagging and nagging at the beach, and Juana was like the tide, rising and falling in ways one could come to predict. I didn't ask my place because I didn't want to know. He didn't volunteer that information, either. On my own I extended this analogy: my mother was a buoy, and my stepmother the moon.

"God, I can't handle this right now," went Joan. "I'm sorry I've been bitchy, and that's the only time I'll say it, but I'm going through a breakup right and gaining weight and now you're here and we don't know each other anymore and I'm not good at living with people."

The way she said it was almost like she did not consider herself people. I was most hurt by the idea we didn't know each other anymore. I could deal with cruelty if it was a part of

familiarity. I still know you, I wanted to say. Everything with you is like pulling teeth, and you have to be the one who feels like she's doing the pulling.

Joan wasn't blinking. It was the most words and attention I had gotten so far.

"Alright."

"Alright?"

I shrugged.

"You don't need this, but I do, and I'm grateful for the space. I'll stay out of your way."

If Joan had eyebrows they would have been up. She shaved and drew them on daily.

"For real?" she asked, still skeptical. Clearly expecting the emotional breakdown I would have produced when she last saw me, at fifteen. A lot had happened to me since then. I don't think Joan knew the luxuries she had being away from the family, or the surrounding families, or even the simple one of belonging to Fernanda's branch rather than mine. She was fine to get her first tattoo at fourteen. I was stuck trying to make amends for all of my father's very public mistakes. I studied and I wore my clothes right and all people and my aunts ever did was look at me with pity, and whisper.

"Nice," Joan said, and went back to staring at the frosted light. A rectangle of it, between us.

\*

It worked like a charm. I entertained myself during the day, finding a tea shop where I drank chai after chai as I fell deep into an Anthony Bourdain spiral. I alternated between watching episodes of *Parts Unknown* and *No Reservations*. When the patron was looking at me with worry, I made my way to the public library and used Joan's address to check out the book that made him famous, *Kitchen Confidential*, and a posthumous biography written by his

secretary. I learned that when he was a child he'd look at maps and dream of going to the Congo. I learned that he got his charisma from his father and his sneer from his mother. I learned that he had a daughter. I learned that did not stop him from getting up in a hotel room and hanging himself, with no perceived premeditation or substances in his system. It was the first time I heard of someone dying in a hotel room sober. It was the first time I suspected Joan of lying and had been proved wrong.

At night, when I got back to the apartment, puffing after the stairs, she was waiting for me.

"Finally," was said in Joan's version of a murmur, which is loud. "Get dressed. We're going to Paul's."

"Oh?" I took off my coat.

She shook her head. "My friends were desperate to see about you so I'd hoped to get it out of the way last night and let the whole thing die, but no, Paul said to invite my weird cousin."

She dragged the "o" in "no". The interesting thing about Joan is that I knew I was in better standing with her now than yesterday. If she said mean things, she wasn't thinking them. Or at least, I've always wanted to think that if she said them, she meant them less.

"Paul said that?"

"No. I'm paraphrasing."

\*

Paul lived a short walk away, which ended up being inconvenient, because at least in the subway there was no snow. I was eager to remediate my image in front of her friends. I'd

get drunk that night, I had decided. Not embarrassing drunk but enough that I could carry a conversation splendidly.

The smoking group from the concert was in the apartment, among a much bigger crowd than I expected. I recognized the bearded man and the girl with the piercings on the bridge of her nose. Our host Paul, and I shook hands with his girlfriend Lila Fong. Lila scared me but I thought her outfit was cool. Paul was again the most friendly and verbose of the group. Joan had dissipated quickly, but he talked to me in the kitchen while we sipped Modelos. He had the weight of a rugby athlete who had recently stopped working out (which he confessed to). He was from the area. He met Lila a year ago in church. He cut a sad figure on the benches, at the absolute worst point of his life. Lila had gone because she thought it would be funny. That had been that.

“She hadn’t struck me as someone who finds things funny,” I told him. Over at the living room, I hadn’t seen her laugh once.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’ll be pressed to make Lila laugh at a joke. But things? She gets a riot out of things.”

He spoke reverently. As if she knew, Lila’s braided ponytails turned in our direction. She marched to us. Her boots were intimidating. I told her so. She nodded in approval, and settled her small frame into Paul’s. We talked about nicknames for a while. More people came in, none I recognized. The music got louder.

“Paul The Second is respectable,” I agreed.

“You see, babe? She gets it,” Paul said.

“Nobody is going to call you Paul The Second,” said Lila. “Just go by your last name if you hate Paul that much.”

“I know three black Williamses on the block alone. I need something to stand out.”

“What about The Second, dry?” I suggested.

Paul made a show of chewing it over. Lila rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I like that. The Second. The Second is here. Watch out, The Second is coming.”

“The Second will be single.”

“The Second is not sorry,” he said, pointing down at her. I followed the motion sluggishly. I was swaying a bit.

“Excuse me,” I said. And left to go throw up.

I elbowed my way to the hallway I thought the bathroom would be in. I wasn't sure what Paul did but it certainly paid more than Joan's cat cafe. There was not enough light to be able to judge if it was nice, but it sure was large.

I leaned my skull against the wall, across the door. I closed my eyes.

“That was quite the balancing act you did to get here.”

Of course it was him.

I cracked open my eyes. I took him in, since he was there. He looked good in beanies and dark blue. It matched his eyes. It was a striking combination, against his skin, dark olive.

“I have nine years of ballet.”

He huffed.

“Really. I don't get ballet from you.”

He barely knew me. Why was he acting like he did? If he was hoping to flirt, he was succeeding at offending me.

“I don't look anorexic enough or what?”

He somewhat smiled. I was right about meanness.

“Girls who do ballet, they have a tightness to them. Like control. I don’t get that from you.”

“What do you get from me?”

Oh God, maybe I was flirting.

He grinned.

“A roulette.”

The word swam in my head for a beat. What an impression to make.

“Like a casino?”

“Like the Russians.”

I laughed, because it was unexpected, and because I wasn’t used to men attributing danger to me. I found I liked it. Maybe I could do with a summer romance, to cleanse everything else away. To discover what it felt like. I had been single the two decades of my life.

“You know, Anthony Bourdain went to Russia. Thrice.”

“No mames.”

Mexican, then.

“Most recently in the 2014 Sochi Olympics.”

He looked entertained. I couldn’t place if it was at our conversation, or at my expense.

“Did he have fun?”

I considered this.

“I couldn’t say.” Then I told him all about the episode in *Parts Unknown* and then the episode in *No Reservations*.

He listened. Nodded solemnly. Said “that sounds bomb” when I talked about the pierogies. Asked me if I cooked.

“Only to survive.”

“And what do you do to survive?”

“I’m either a translator or a psychologist. For now I am a student. What about you?”

He ignored that.

“Very different careers.”

“I disagree. In both you search for meaning.”

I wasn’t looking at him so I didn’t know how he took that because my throat started to hurt then and I realized that I needed water, and that I had never gone to the bathroom. I tilted my head to the door in front of us, which had remained closed all along. I wasn’t sure when we had sat down.

“That’s a closet, by the way,” he said. Elbows on his knees. The picture of ease.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He laughed in a way that made me think the other laughs had been rehearsed. He stood up and offered a hand. I sort of took it. He let go once I was stabilized, but he navigated us through people and another hallway until we reached the ever-present line of women by the bathroom door, the same in every country. I watched the back of his neck as we walked and I tried to figure out why he was so appealing, when not that attractive. He conducted himself as the most important person in the room; it was hard not to believe him. It’s impressive, to see how far charisma can take one. Objectively, what did Ezequiel have going for him? I had noticed some holes on his checkered shirt earlier.

“Señora,” he said, gesturing at the line with his hand and bowing a bit. He was smiling. My father did a similar thing with chairs at restaurants when I was younger, and then again with my stepmother. I assumed it worked on my actual mother, too.

I went to the bathroom and didn't throw up and then went right back to drinking Modelos and went to share a cigarette on the balcony with Lila who turns out was also really into *My Littlest Pet Shop* when she was a kid. I had a convenient view of the whole gathering through the sliding glass door, like an ant terrarium, and I didn't see Ezequiel again that night.

\*

Joan breathed for tarot and astrology and all the things our aunts called heretic. I thought that was probably why. While she was at work that Friday I explored all the decks and books she had. I explored her room too. She had a tapestry of the Zodiac above her bed. A little stove by a window. Many random papers and receipts strewn through the floor, like she had given up on a puzzle. Actual puzzles, which I had not seen coming. An extensive wardrobe of black and mesh. Most of her purses had Splenda packets in them.

Then I went back to stroking my Anthony Bourdain obsession. At one point the secretary collecting the commentary of 99 people who knew him wrote that “he was playing someone else” and I realized who he reminded me of, and I knew the fascination would die soon, so I should milk it for all I could before it fizzled out. A man so fascinating shouldn't be ignored because of my daddy issues. I was having too nice a day.

Joan walked in when they were having Korean tacos at a food truck in LA.

“Are we seeing your friends again tonight?”

She threw her purse (with sucralose, to be sure), on to the counter. Started tearing into some sliced cheese, munching as she spoke, the square of dairy waving like a proud flag in the air.

“No. They’re getting together’s at Ezequiel’s tonight, and it’s all fine and good with being friendly with your ex, but he lives in a dump of a studio and I cannot look at the mattress he fucked me in and then at him in the eye. I’m really not there yet, you know?”

\*

Saturday Joan had the day off, which didn’t mean shit, because she was still sleeping when I gave up and left at 1PM. I headed to Harvard, because even though we were getting along better (she had said goodnight to me), her thoughts on tourist activities were bound to be the same.

Harvard did not look like it did in *Legally Blonde*. To be fair, I wasn’t paying much attention. The architecture took a seat behind my bad luck. Ezequiel was the ex. I would cut this off, I swore. Decapitate it.

Joan didn’t have to know because there was and would be nothing to know, I told myself. He’s ugly, I said. Out loud, which got some students to look at me. I said, internally now, as I walked, hands in my pockets, across the Harvard paths: do not be stupid. You are here for a summer. You’re already on thin ice with Joan. And possibly, you’re exaggerating. Who’s to say he’s into you? Why would he be, if he dated Joan? And would you want somebody who didn’t care about the fact that he did?

Most of all, what I told myself but would not say, even in the flurry of sentences inside my head, the monologue, coating them all like powdered sugar or grime, was, at the end of the day, I am not like my father.

In the dream Ezequiel was dealing cards. Except when I looked at my hand they weren't playing cards, but one of Joan's tarot decks. In fact, one of them had her, drawn in lithium purple and bold lines, sticking her tongue out. I looked up. Ezequiel had one of those red vests and a bowtie. The closed-off and venomous friendliness of a dealer. It was like being in the mouth of a casino, which I didn't know how I dreamt about, because I had never been in one. The whole thing was sinister.

"Now is when you bet," he said.

Joan in the tarot card winked at me.

Dialogue options, which I saw materialize in the air between us, like an otome game:

- A) I can't.
- B) How?
- C) Help me.

Instead I watched my index and thumb pluck out a card. I put it down gently against the bright green cloth of the table. Like sealing a deal, wax on an envelope, firm handshake.

Ezequiel clapped.

"Congratulations," he said. He kept clapping, the rhythm slow and obscene.

This part bothered me because I didn't remember what card it was, and even if I did, I didn't know the criteria for this kind of shit, but I knew that even as he clapped and clapped and clapped, I sat there, in my casino dress, with the look of a woman on the stand, receiving a life sentence.

For a second, I mistook my alarm for clapping.

“Why did you set an alarm when you're on holiday, and why so early, and why that fucking ringtone?” was how Joan greeted me Tuesday morning.

“Hmpf?”

She got to making coffee. She could be nice, after all.

Said something about me being helpless. I snuggled back into my pillow, and pretended to be asleep again through the noises of her putting on those clunky boots, cracking her knuckles, turning the key. I was too wired to sleep. I almost wanted to chase her down in the snowy streets and confess that he had made his way into my unconscious, twice. We'd both know it carried weight. Our aunt Belinda always said dreaming of someone meant they were thinking of you. Our aunt Laura said it meant you weren't letting yourself think of them during the day. Either way, I was fucked.

I let Joan go to work, obviously, and decided to bathe. It was the holidays for me, after all. And if I was being decadent I might as well smell like roses.

Steeped in the tub, legs up, water already spilled to the side, I pondered how most of my father's beliefs could be boiled down to Murphy's Law. If you looked it up, there were several of them, all revolving around the idea that everything that could go wrong would do so. He would quote this not by direct quotation, instead cursing his name like a swear word when his toast fell with the dulce de leche down. If he invoked the whole phrase “la ley del puto Murphy,” he was probably also shaking his fist at God. What was funny to me was that this happened exclusively in situations that were entirely his making.

I thought about Murphy when the knocking on the door grew louder. Wrapped myself up in two towels and threw on Joan's fluffy bathrobe, hissed at the cold floor against my feet, opened the door.

His jacket was puffy and looked comfortable.

Gripping the door: "I was bathing."

"I can see that."

I really did not know what to do with myself. I wanted that interaction six feet under ground. A lightbulb.

"Joan's not here."

"I know."

The lightbulb exploded.

"I remember her schedule," he said, like everything he was saying was nothing.

I tried to study him, then. That was the first acknowledgement he had given him and Joan had been together. His face seemed devoid of anything meaningful.

"You free for coffee?"

Right, well.

"I'm in towels."

He grinned. "Obviously, but I'm not opposed to your avant garde style. I'll get you some hot chocolate to warm up."

He was back to being charming. He had come all this way, presumably to see me. Was he going to apologize for ignoring me on Saturday? Would he pour out his heart about Joan? About me?

I must have still looked skeptical. And stupid.

"I don't have your number, sorry for showing up like this."

The word “sorry” seemed foreign in his mouth. Made me realize I had definitely not expected Ezequiel to apologize, for the ignoring, or for seeking his ex’s cousin out, either. I had nothing to do.

We went for coffee.

\*

The walk there Ezequiel talked about a movie he had seen, and I shivered. My hair, hidden by a pompom hat, was still wet. Expected him to order a black coffee but he got a matcha lavender thing. In my bewilderment I repeated his order to the barista, and as the number \$6.76 popped up, I realized he expected me to pay for myself. I did.

We waited at the long end of the bar.

“Why does everyone think Joan and I aren’t cousins?” I asked him.

It had been bothering me. The past two days I had looked at her face and I was certain we had the same nose. My forehead was wider but the cheekbones were the same. Despite the different hair textures, our eye colour was identical, a mix of brown and green. Like a swamp, my Dad used to tease. His were pure green.

“You look uncomfortable around each other.”

Although I had been hoping Ezequiel could clear it up for me, I didn’t like that he did.

“Oh, I hit a nerve,” he said. He sounded delighted. There was the tiniest gap between his front teeth. I found myself caught between hitting him and smiling back.

“It’s been a while.”

“It’s not that,” he said, emphasizing the dismissal with his head. He grabbed our two matcha atrocities and started walking. He talked still, and I had to push past people to catch his words. “You’re not very compatible as people.”

What the fuck did he know?

I told him so. He raised his hands up in innocence, settling down in an iron chair.

“We’re cousins.”

“And that’s a cure-all.”

“It means something.”

He sipped.

“Means you have a genetic affinity. I’m talking about your ways of being a person, Vero.”

Your ways of being a person. I liked the sound of that enough that I forgot to articulate that I disagreed with his view of family, that Joan and I had been molded together, that he slurped when he drank. A way of being a person. I kept mulling it over, like it was my own beverage.

“Joan and I are more similar than you may think.”

“How?”

He let go of the straw and leaned forward, elbows on the table. Face serious. Immediately I knew no answer I gave would satisfy him. Something about my understanding of him shifted. I had cataloged him as careless, the kind American TV shows called a “slacker,” and yet here was this intensity of his. In its presence, I couldn’t believe I had ever forgotten.

He persisted.

“I remember everything you’ve laughed at, and what people think is funny is the best way to know who they are. The two of you are very different.”

This provoked a tiny heart attack. *I remember everything you've laughed at* sounded like a romantic confession, but if and only if it was extracted from the matter-of-fact presentation it came wrapped in, and also if it weren't coated with the dust of a prior comment about remembering schedules.

"What do you laugh at?" I threw back, hoping to deflect the spotlight I felt on me, warming my neck in the snow.

He leaned back.

"The usual."

We drank in quietness for a bit. No one else was insane enough to sit on the outside patio. There was a very brave or very stupid bird about to peck at my winter boots. This prompted Ezequiel to tell me about his shift in a couple of hours, in that charismatic manner some people have, where they pull out a topic of conversation out of thin air and make it sound like they'd been dying to talk about it with you all day.

"What do you do?"

"I sell goldfish. Someday I'll be a beekeeper."

"Say you're lying."

"That'd be lying."

"You like bees? You like getting stung by bees?"

"No, I like honey. And I like how hard they work."

"You like their work ethic."

He shrugged. "I never said it was mine."

"It's diligent work, beekeeping. It's an everyday thing."

“Did you know,” he mused, dipping his finger into the cream at the rim of his cup, “that there’s such a thing as a Queen breeder? It’s a special kind of apiarist that specializes in raising Queen bees for other breeders. They select the best of the best, using Jenter kits to maximize the amount of Queens. You realize how important Queen bees are, no? Well. That’s who I’m going to be.”

That shut me up.

“What are you studying?”

He didn’t remember.

“Psychology.”

“Do you like it?”

“Not particularly. But it makes sense for me.”

He quirked his head. “For you, not to you.”

“Yes.”

“Explain.”

“I spent a long time obsessing over understanding myself. Now I try to understand others.”

“Did you get it? Understanding?”

I recognized the moment as a familiar crossroads. I could dismiss the question with some vague nonsense, or I could answer honestly. I had to weigh how much of myself was appropriate to give away, a calculation I kept tripping over. Not too long ago, in a stall of my faculty’s bathroom, fourth floor, I had heard the girls I’d been trying to befriend for three months call me cold. I wanted to burst out and explain it was only because I was too well acquainted with the look on people’s faces when I said too much. That talking to others was

like one of those playground seesaws. That my stepmother called my chosen discipline “ironic” and my father “desperate.”

“All I had,” I said slowly, like I was chewing fatty meat, “was the feeling that there was a list, somewhere, of all the things that were wrong with me. The deeper inside me I looked, the more I realized it was written in other people.”

I avoided eye contact.

Ezequiel cleared his throat.

Panicking: “For example, seashells.”

“Seashells.”

“I’ve never heard the sea in them. I was convinced everyone was lying.”

He bound his fingers together.

“We are. We all agreed.”

\*

We stood at Joan’s door, the air tightening around us. I rummaged for the key she had given me, loose somewhere in my purse.

“Here you go.”

I looked up. His extended hand held a ten dollar bill.

“What?”

“For the matcha.”

My hands halted their motions. So he did intend to pay for my drink. Earlier, I had found it both disappointing and re-assuring that he hadn’t. It made the whole outing less threatening. But to give me physical money now? Was it consideration, attention to the fact I

was living off cash? Had it been a test? Did he know how dirty it would make me feel to say yes now? Why was everything with him like whiplash?

“No.”

No thank you, no nothing. I looked up. Ezequiel looked taken aback for the first time that afternoon. His expression didn't change much, but he looked blanker, overall. It was a good look on him. It was a good feeling for me. Like the satisfying noise of an unreturnable tennis serve.

I smiled.

He eased into the doorframe.

“How about I get the drinks next time, then?”

Next time. “Next time” whirred loud enough in my brain that all I could do was nod, and dismiss myself quickly.

I hated him for it, but I couldn't stop him from whistling as he walked down the hall. I heard it through the closed front door. Some classical piece.

\*

I wonder if Joan noticed I was having trouble looking her in the eye. She microwaved us both some macaroni and cheese that night. Didn't even ask me if I wanted some, just put out two bowls and two spoons. Fuck.

We ate quietly on the not-couch. The TV was off. The wind was howling more than usual against the one window; I hadn't understood why people used “howl” for wind before Boston. Anyone else would have remarked on it, but Joan's disdain for small talk was coming in handy. Or I hoped it was disdain for small talk, rather than me. I thought, by now, we would have thawed some more. That she would have gotten used to me again. But Joan was still

keeping me at arm's length, like I was a pet she'd gotten for her kids with the hopes it'd die soon anyway. But why? She wasn't the sort to punish me for something that wasn't my fault. Fernanda taught her that well. The summer my grandmother died and everyone was fighting a quiet war about who got what, Fernanda found out our Aunt Belinda was 'too sick' to come to Joan's eleventh birthday party. She got off from the chair where was hanging balloons. The soft light of the afternoon shone on her hard face, bounced on her glasses. A very geometric woman. Juana and I followed her to the kitchen, watched her grab the phone and dial a number she had memorized. My father stayed in the living room, out of the business of the recently motherless sisters. Fernanda told Belinda that her only daughter was in our country only for a couple of weeks, and if Belinda did not show her face on her eleventh birthday party, she would not see it again. What's going on between us has nothing to do with these creatures, she said. Juana and I stared at each other, eye-lines off by several centimeters, incredulous. We only knew implied verbal violence. Subtextual remarks, the unsaid. But that was Fernanda for you. She went right back to inflating balloons.

"Do you remember your eleventh birthday party?" I asked Joan.

She had to think for a moment.

"The laser-tag one?"

"No. That was when I was nine. There was a bouncy-castle in this one."

Joan scoffed. "When wasn't there a bouncy-castle in that house of yours?"

A fair point. My father wasn't able to recognize when it was no longer the height of all fun. We had one at my confirmation party. I was sixteen. Joan wasn't there.

"You should reheat that," she said, with a nod to my mainly virgin plate.

I watched the bowl spin on the little disk. I looked back at her. It wasn't the conversation Joan and I needed to be having, but it was a start.

\*

Was I a bad person? Coffee with Ezequiel had been the highlight of my time in Boston. The facts remained. He was Joan's ex. I was staying at her house. I knew this mistake and its consequences like the back of my hand. Maybe I could keep spending time with him, but only as friends. Which was all that had happened, really. I just had to keep my brain there.

At a newspaper stand, I tried to make it look like I wasn't searching for divine guidance in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw it. A little green book. 101 Sudoku puzzles. Beginner, intermediate, hard, master. I paid \$4.99.

\*

When I got back I found her crying in the apartment.

"Ezequiel's stupid *Game of Thrones* chessboard got delivered here," she got out between sobs. She threw a napkin passionately against the floor.

My father told me what his lawyer told him. That the key to being a good at his job was the same key to lying: distracting with technicalities. Took off my coat, like if it had been two days ago, and nothing had changed.

"Why didn't he send it to his place?"

She shook her head. Mascara was running, bad.

"I got it for him. We were about to reach two years, soon."

Two years. The enormity of that clouded my vision. That was a tenth of my life.

"He plays chess?" I asked, as a deflection. I kneeled next to her.

"Against the world," Joan said. "Always five fucking moves ahead."

I was out of technicalities.

“Funny for an aspiring beekeeper.”

Joan’s head snapped up. A mistake.

“He told you about that? When?”

I had to be very careful.

“On Thursday, I think. Does he not usually say this?”

Another one of my father’s mandates: throw back questions, or wonder together.

She blinked a ton. The lines on her face spoke of concern.

“Never mind, Vero,” she said, after a while. She left for the bathroom.

I minded. With Joan, you worried when it was quiet.

\*

After thirty minutes the shower was still running— I could hear it. I stared out into the cold Boston cobbled street I was randomly living in this summer, or perhaps really not at all, and I made a decision.

\*

My father told me the story of how he met my mother on a plane. A short one; he was going to Buenos Aires for business. My mother was visiting my aunt Belinda who was trying to make it as an actress in Argentina. He was hyperventilating and seriously considered using that brown bag they give you to throw up in. Decided not to, on account of the beautiful woman calmly working away at what he thought was a crossword puzzle. Until suddenly it was in his swimming field of vision.

“Go on,” she said. “It’ll distract you.”

When they got off the plane he said the only numbers he was interested in were hers.

And so I came to be.

\*

“God, you’re boring,” Joan said when she saw me labouring at the kitchen counter.

The Sudoku looked like this:

			4			2		
		2					1	8
5		6	9				3	
	6	9				3		
	5						2	1
8			1	5	7	6		9
				3		9	6	
9			6		2		5	
						7		2

By the time she left for work, it looked like this:

			4			2	9	6
	9	2				5	1	8
5	<sup>1</sup> <sub>8</sub>	6	9	2	<sup>1</sup> <sub>8</sub>	4	3	7
1	6	9	2	<sup>4</sup> <sub>8</sub>	<sup>4</sup> <sub>8</sub>	3	7	5
	5			<sup>6</sup> <sub>9</sub>	<sup>6</sup> <sub>9</sub>	8	2	1
8	2	3	1	5	7	6	4	9
2		<sup>5</sup>		3		9	6	4
9			6		2	1	5	3
6		<sup>5</sup>				7	8	2

By the time Ezequiel knocked, this is what I had:

3	8	7	4	<sup>1</sup>	5	2	9	6
4	9	2		<sup>6</sup>	<sup>6</sup>	5	1	8
5	1	6	9	2	8	4	3	7
1	6	9	2	8	4	3	7	5

“No,” I greeted him with.

He found this amusing. Visibly so.

“No, what?”

“No, to whatever you are going to suggest. No to spending time outside group activities. No to sneaking behind Joan’s back.”

He frowned. He looked genuinely confused. That day, he was wearing a black hoodie that looked very soft, and a flannel over it. His curls seemed bouncier than I remembered.

“Who said anything about sneaking?”

He then proceeded to duck under the line of my arm holding open Joan’s door. He made his way to the not-couch, my bed, and plopped down. He took his time extending each leg and crossed his arms behind his head. He looked very pleased with himself.

“Seriously?”

“As far as I’m concerned, and believe me, a lot concerns me, I’m doing Joan a favour. I’m taking her bored cousin out and about. Playing tour-guide.”

That was blatantly false. I couldn’t help crossing my arms, unsure if it was because I wanted him to read anger in my body language, or because I read, once, that we respond positively to people mirroring our movements.

“I never said I was bored.”

He nodded towards the kitchen counter between us.

“Ain’t that Sudoku? You don’t do a Sudoku unless you have no other option.”

A flurry of indignation in me. I never did like it when someone insulted the thing I was living for. Since exhausting Anthony Bourdain, and deciding Not To Think About Ezequiel, that little book had been my lifeline. I was Sudoking in the nearest park (not for long, too cold), on

the subway (I realized I could just keep taking it), on Harvard Yard (I kept hoping someone would imagine I was a Sudoku grandmaster, like in chess). The last forty-eight hours, those numbers and cells had made my brain as quiet as it could go. I was halfway through the intermediate section of the book.

I had said nothing, and yet:

“Whoa, did not mean to upset you.”

He raised his hands, the way people who have guns pointed at them do. His sleeves had rolled down somewhat and I caught a tattoo in his forearm, a phrase. He sat a bit straighter. He looked me in the eye.

I did not know what to do with this. An Ezequiel who named an intention. It was new information, which interfered with the Not Thinking About Ezequiel law I'd been instantiating. The dogma I was curating. God, I hadn't even meant to let him inside the apartment. How was I failing so spectacularly? I'd been doing good, until he was flesh and bone in front of me.

“I like numbers,” he went on. “I'm taking a part-time course on coding, did you know? Of course not, only Lila does. Not that coding is numbers. But I like order, and when things make sense, is my point.”

I gave up. Closed the door and leant against it.

“Lila?” I asked, too drained to come up with more.

“She's my roommate.”

“I thought you lived in a one-bedroom apartment.”

To his credit, he didn't ask how I knew that.

“I do. It's Lila's. I'm in the living room. It's fine, she's always at Paul's anyway. It's also bullshit, because she's always at Paul's.”

I ran back every interaction I'd seen them have. I never caught a whiff of closeness between them, not like the obvious bond between him and Paul. So Ezequiel liked numbers, and knew how to hide intimacy. This was getting ridiculous.

I swung the front door back open.

"Well, this was nice."

He didn't move.

"I was hoping we could go catch a movie."

"Hope is free."

"There's nothing wrong with us hanging out. You can tell Joan. In fact, I can't believe you haven't. Please do."

I laughed one of those gurgling laughs, ugly, uncomfortable to hear.

"You know I can't," I said, heavy with what I took as an understanding between us.

He stood up. Walked until he was in front of me.

"I don't see why not."

This part fucked me up. He was either:

A) being coy about liking me, which meant he was circumventing my refusal, while also refusing to acknowledge that he liked me.

B) being serious, which meant that I had built a fantasy in my head, again. Had I presumed too much?

In any case, it was confusing. So I widened the gap with the door. My decision had been to wash my hands off this business, and I would cling to it like a dying man's religion.

"Goodbye."

“It’s been real, Vero,” he said, crossing the threshold, and from the easy smile on his face, I knew he’d be back.

I licked my wounds, and chased it with some Sudoku.

\*

“Get up,” Joan said. “I’m dying for a bagel.”

It was 3:13 PM. Hardly bagel time. I had eaten one of the pre-made salads I had taken to just two hours ago. Joan had taken food to her room, too. But I would have been a fool to deny the first non-group outside-world invitation. Joan and I put on our boots, wrapped our scarves, nodded to each other, and stepped out.

“The best bagel place in the goddamn galaxy is eight blocks away from us, aren’t we lucky?”

The truth was I would not be able to distinguish the best goddamn bagel in the galaxy from the worst. I’d had very few, all from Starbucks. I recalled a stand-up I saw once, where the comedian said that you’d hear people raving about Jewish bagel places often, but never a restaurant.

“Are there meals you’d consider Catholic?”

What was nice about Joan was that I didn’t have to try to find a way to connect my thoughts to the current conversation. Even when we were children, she’d been too impatient to watch me flail attempting normalcy.

“Catholic guilt is caloric enough for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

Through the wind and snow, I saw her head turn to me. We had just passed by the park with the frozen pond I sat in sometimes.

“Oh, come on, you haven’t heard of Catholic guilt?”

“About what? The Crusades?”

Joan laughed. I had made her laugh.

“The fucking Crusades. No, like, the way we grew up. Everyone in this city. Everything is sin. Wanting things is bad.”

I liked it so much when she said “we”. But I had to confess:

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Funny,” said she. “You’re crawling with it.”

We reached the bagel place, and Joan informed me we were lucky. There was usually a line. Inside, about six people. On the menu, too many options.

Joan went straight to the counter.

“I’ll take a rosemary bagel with cream cheese and lox, please. Vero?”

My eyes hadn’t even scanned half of the bread options.

I looked at the guy behind the register (high-school age, a ponytail he’d be beat up in the playground for back home) and implored: “What do you recommend?”

“Coming right up.”

Joan paid for us both, then leaned her elbow against the counter. She stared out the shop’s window dreamily.

“This bagel is going to fix me. Nothing like a bagel to get rid of a hangover.”

That startled me.

“You’re hungover?”

“Like a bitch.”

I thought about Joan coming home, opening the fridge for a glass of milk, taking a shower.

“I thought you just went to work last night.”

“What sort of cafe would have me coming home at eleven? No, I usually hang out with a co-worker after our shift. Drink a beer or two, shoot the shit. You know how it is.”

I did not know how it was. I had never had a job. I didn't bring it up.

Was it weird that I felt oddly hurt she hadn't invited me to these sessions? Was it weird that I wanted to ask why she had brought me along for the bagels? Was it weird that I kept measuring our distance everyday in a futile attempt to know where we stood?

Our bagels were handed to us. Joan was... Both of us were sibling-less. She used to be the person who felt closest to my experience in the world, even though she spoke a lot of English and lived in another part of the world. I almost thought she understood me more for it, more than the kids in my own country and neighbourhood. Then she was a ghost when I needed her most. Then we were this.

She bit into the bagel. Moaned.

I tried mine. Too much garlic.

\*

I noticed, after a while, how I kept waiting for knocks that did not come. How I deflated when Joan turned the key. How I cursed the neighbour's constant influx of Amazon packages. I yearned to untangle how I felt about it but I was on a strict Not Thinking About Ezequiel diet, so all I know, is that I felt.

\*

“Why did you break up?” I blurted out of nowhere.

Joan paused *Los Simuladores*. I had put it on in the back as I did my Sudoku, and she had silently sat beside me. Then I spoke, before realizing what I was doing.

Her eyes slid to mine. She was in her version of pyjamas, which involved a gigantic band t-shirt under an even bigger band hoodie. I couldn't believe she wasn't going out on a Thursday.

"I was miserable."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it? That's why we all break up, isn't it? It's an old story."

I wasn't sure. I had never had anything to break myself.

Joan chewed at her lip. I stayed silent, knowing she had more to say. Her face was the one of someone trying to uncork a wine bottle with a spoon. I wasn't sure when I had reached the conclusion Ezequiel had left her. She certainly gave me the impression of a scorned woman, and he looked just fine. My grasp on their past shifted.

"Him and his causes, you know? It was so embarrassing to be with someone who cared so much about the big things, and not be one of them. He forgot our one year anniversary and I let it slide. I want to time-travel and slap myself for that."

"His causes?" I asked, because I did not know.

Joan had rearranged her body, her knees towards me, elbow against the wall, head nestled in her fist. She spoke, and it was like a flood.

"Latin America, America, religion, the working class, etcetera. He was always so angry about who we were and when and where. It was impossible to live with! We'd stopped going on dates. He stopped trying. He'd just talk all day about everything that was wrong with us and the world and God, and then get to fuck me at the end of it. It was disrespectful. Worse was how quiet I was about it. You know at first I thought we could debate. Like for example I'd say, I don't need to learn to speak Spanish, I'm American. But he kept insisting I was like,

dishonouring Chile and my mother. Mind you, his Spanish is fucking rudimentary. Have you heard it?”

I shook my head.

“That doesn’t surprise me. He hates things he’s not good at. Anyway, whatever I said, he wouldn’t take it from me. So I stopped arguing back. In October I realized he was monologuing. The whole relationship was a fucking soliloquy. He didn’t even realize I had stopped responding, really, but I knew I was losing myself. I got out.”

Joan’s hands, which had been flying around the space between us, stilled when her voice did. Her gaze was fixated somewhere else. Overall, it was somber. I let the silence stretch.

“I’d never left someone without wanting to leave, until him.”

But had she left? I couldn’t imagine having to face an ex-lover as often as she did, so casually. It dawned on me then, that maybe she was in as much pain as she claimed to be, or unspeakably worse. That she kept seeing him because she loved him still, despite barely looking his way.

It was the most honest conversation we’d had since I’d arrived. Way back then, whenever Joan first arrived for the summer, we’d hole up in a room and fill each other in about the year we had spent apart. The friends we’d dropped (I liked the names of hers, like movie characters) or the concerts we’d been to (in 2008 we both saw the Jonas Brothers, at different ends of the continent). The best part was how much we didn’t have to explain. Cousin intelligence. I knew Fernanda and her twitching fingers. The bluntness with which she spoke. Juana knew how easy it was to like my father the first two weeks, until he got tired of

smiling. The strangeness of having my stepmother in the house, of the whispers, the forked tongues.

It was almost like she heard me thinking about her.

“Speaking of break-ups, how’s Gloria?”

It was strange to think about having to explain now.

It was strange to have to speak about why I was there, in Joan’s apartment.

It was strange to not know if I appreciated that she asked, or if maybe, her not asking all this time had been a kindness.

“In shambles, last I heard.”

Saw, actually. Gloria drove me to the Santiago airport and dispatched me off to Boston. She had been wearing sunglasses, which she never did. I spent the quiet car ride trying to figure out if she was trying to hide her red eyes or her identity. We gave each other a clinical hug at the gate. I’d avoided the local news since then.

“And how are you?”

Not a question I liked to be asked. Not one I ever seemed to answer correctly. I found my own invisible dot in the carpet, and shrugged. Joan nodded, and shrugged too.

“For how smart your father is, he sure doesn’t learn his lessons. How is he dealing?”

This part of the round-up I honestly could not answer.

“I couldn’t say.”

“Well, how did he sound last time you called?”

I looked at Joan.

Her eyes seemed to grow in size.

“He hasn’t called you? Not once, in three weeks?”

It had been two weeks since I had arrived, but whatever.

“Not sure. I blocked him.”

“Ay, Vero. Vero, Vero, Vero.”

It had been a while since I'd heard her do that. My name as a lamentation.

I reached for the remote control, and pressed play. *Los Simuladores* were re-animated on the screen, like Lazarus.

\*

Lying in bed, unable to sleep, I thought about all the life she'd lived without me knowing about. She'd loved someone to the point of losing herself. What had I done in the past five years of my life? It just felt like things had happened around me. A bunch of neck-craning, is what I had done.

A car back-fired outside. A neighbour downstairs was throwing a party, and the faint sounds of music drifted up like a wafting pie. I munched on my nails.

Joan knew. Joan cared. This shuffled things in my brain. Our state was fragile. Like a plant I wanted to water and not kill. A bridge on the brink of collapse. It mattered more to me than anything else. I thought that maybe something was still on the table for us. Maybe this was adult cousinhood. Maybe I could become someone who chose, like her and my father.

\*

It was my father who taught me how to play Sudoku. The time tables had been a nightmare and a half for us both, so we were pleased when the next math unit came around and we discovered my knack for it. Those times mattered to me. I had seen how it pained him to raise me. He wasn't unwilling to do it, which I'm grateful for, but there were shadows of

grimaces around my existence. My theory is that he thought he got saddled with my mom's job when she died.

But this was connection. This was us on the same team. I understood, for the first time in my eight years, watching him fill out the little blanks on the granite kitchen table, how my father saw the world. How his engineering mind fit things together. Holes to be occupied. Order always to be found if one looked closely enough.

I closed the book. The cafe Joan worked at was lively, the cats less so. I tried to pet one during my first coffee, and got hissed at. By the second coffee I was just hoping not to get clawed at. Joan hustled behind the bar. Instruction after instruction. I don't know how she did it, but she did have a certain air of entrancement. Even when she took my order, she no longer seemed like the woman who I had commuted with to work. Least of all my cousin.

A circular table in the corner had my name on it. Everything was orange or cat-themed. I kept my attention away from the awful décor, solely on the numbers, or her.

It was kind of her to invite me to see her workplace. Maybe she had seen something in me the night before. Maybe she read I hadn't slept much in the bags under my eyes the following morning. Maybe she regretted her words, like I regretted hers.

Your father doesn't learn his lessons, Joan had said. This was true but I didn't want to hear it. It was the sort of observation Belinda and Laura had kept making all summer about their brother-in-law, every time we caught a headline in a magazine. Or when they were cooking. Or I was around.

You had to admit that my father was at least never cliché. Maybe at first, right after my mother's death. I heard he buried his sorrows in pussy for a while. But the first time news got out about a proper affair, albeit to a much smaller scale, he was the up-and-coming engineer,

and Gloria was his supervisor. A woman older than him. I'm not sure about statistics on Chilean female engineers in 2006, but there can't have been many. He can't have liked working under her. So it was well-received, I imagine, when people found out. Like emasculation reversed. A business move, maybe. I'm sure he got clapped in the back about it.

Then he fucking married her. Legitimized, a small scandal now a funny story about how he met his second wife. Gloria stopped working at the firm shortly after that. I got used to the strange lady at my house.

And then! This summer, just when anyone least expected it! Picture it. Juan Pablo, now head of the Chilean branch of Latos INC. Well-respected and liked, rich, a married man with a family (me). Hair going from black to salt and pepper. Getting fat in a way that adds volume to his personality. Is caught in his office (cliché), bending over his secretary (Miguel).

\*

"I pray for the day we unionize," Joan said. Threw her bag onto the table and my Sudoku book, wiped her hands on her apron (a huge paw drawn on it). "Let's go."

\*

The subway swayed and twisted. Joan had her eyes closed and head tilted back against the window. I couldn't help but keep my eyes on her bag. Back home she would have been robbed three stations ago.

I caught our reflection on the window. Joan, catatonic. The unusual stillness made her features look even more esoteric, as if the realm of sleep was where she really belonged. Her lips were like cracked paint. Her hair a silky black I'd always coveted. My face was the same as ever.

In English the expression is “saving face”, which I thought captured the feeling more than in Spanish, where we talked about the inability to “give your face.” A face was something to salvage, not gift. One finds that out when one’s father’s actions are finally deemed inexcusable. I tried defending him against the slurs, and I tried staying quiet so as to not call attention to it. I tried. Sometimes I just wanted to grab Twitter by the shoulders and tell that it was just very likely that my father was into doing it on desks.

\*

“You already have a five in that line. Below.”

Paul sighed.

“I have to think about the other squares too?”

“You’ll never get anywhere if you don’t. The other squares are your keys to filling each one. So that five over there-”

I pointed.

9					5		7	
			9		8	5		
1			7				2	
	9			5	7			
2							4	5
	5	3	2					
8						6		3
	4			3			5	
			7		9			

“-means that vertical line all through out, and that horizontal line, don’t need one. You have to get one through nine in all of the lines. It’s easier to think about it that way than to focus on the nine squares as separate.”

Paul nodded, twirled his pencil. It was one of those black and yellow ones I hadn’t been sure actually existed. I really loved him then, for humouring me. I also felt bad he was saddled with one of the last remaining puzzles on the master section. Joan had rolled her eyes when I got the Sudoku booklet out of my pursue.

“You can’t just bring your math to someone’s kickback. It’s Friday night, Vero. Live a little.”

A kickback was different than a party, apparently. A kickback consisted of the usual suspects: Paul, Lila, Joan, Ezequiel, the moustache person whose name I forgot, and now, me. It consisted of finding out what soju was. It consisted of me panicking when Ezequiel walked in, an hour late, and resorting to my current coping mechanism. He wasn’t wearing a jacket or a hoodie for the first time, which was distracting. More muscle than expected.

“This is what I call a conundrum,” Paul said. He bit the pencil.

“Come on, someone with a name like The Second has to be good at this.”

“What? Oh, that.”

Embarrassment. Over-familiarity. My creepy memory. But Paul was nice.

“We say a lot of shit, Vero, it’s hard to keep track of each week’s manure.”

Lila, sitting beside him on the couch, flicked his forehead.

“It’s pronounced *manure*.”

They started part-bickering and part-flirting. I stared down at the Sudoku. The clear answer was to place the five to the right of the cell Paul was hovering in. My hands itched.

“This is so lame,” said Joan. “I haven’t gone out all week and this is what I get when I do. You know what’s happening at Chewy’s right now? They’re playing all thirty-one versions of ‘Bela Lugosi’s Dead.’”

Joan and I could be similar. Who’d want to hear the same song thirty-one times? I had to stop myself from looking over at Ezequiel and mouthing “See?” But he gave me an excuse to look at him. I got a good look at the words inked in black over brown: *memento mori*. I swallowed laughter. My one and only consolation was that he had a stupid fucking tattoo.

“It’s not our fault you’re not allowed back in,” he said to her.

Joan’s spine went rod-straight.

“Don’t get me started on that.”

He got her started. Smiled while she ranted.

“Improv show’s tomorrow,” Lila interrupted. “Quit complaining. Come, we’ll do karaoke after.”

This appeased Joan and confused me.

“Improv?”

“My girlfriend,” said Paul, “is the most comedic person in Massachusetts, so it follows she is part of an improvisational comedy troupe. And Ezequiel too, I guess.”

“Thanks, man.”

“You got it.”

My brain reeled. Lila had not once smiled in front of me. I supposed her blank face could be funny among a group like that. Plus, she always looked ready for a stage. White eyeliner on her lower waterline. A slick ponytail. There was highlighter on her collarbones. Ezequiel, though. I had thought Ezequiel would be the type to make fun of things like that.

“Gay,” said Joan.

My hand stopped mid-drawing of a seven.

Paul noticed my body stiffening. He placed a hand on me.

“Don’t worry, your cousin isn’t being homophobic. She just thinks she’s funny, and bitter she’s not in a comedy group.”

“No, I’m being homophobic,” Joan said casually, reaching for popcorn. I wanted to grab the bowl from her hands and turn it upside down. “It’s not my fault you don’t recognize the comedic fucking potential of queer people being homophobic.”

What was happening?

“You’re gay?” I asked her.

The room didn’t feel quite as casual anymore. Some people exchanged glances.

“Bi,” said Joan.

“Does Fernanda know?”

Joan snorted. “Christ, no. And she doesn’t have to. Can you imagine?”

I could. My clearest memories of Fernanda visiting over the summer usually involved running around the house, trying to escape doing the whole rosary with her. My most recent one had been an international phone call, when she told me, with all the love in the world, that it wasn’t my fault that my father was a depraved sinner. That Gloria and her talked and it’d do me good to stay with Joan for a while. That she’d pray for me, and that I shouldn’t pray for him, because some people don’t want to be saved.

I hadn’t said anything for a while. Processing. Joan’s friends probably thought her South American cousin was homophobic. I didn’t think I was, but I certainly wasn’t happy at that moment. Joan was bisexual, and I didn’t know. This meant there was precedent for this in

my family, but the scandal was with my father. We didn't even know if he thought of himself as gay. He hadn't confirmed or denied anything. No "it was just once" press release, no "this is who I am" heart-to-heart. He had looked me in the eyes, shrugged, and said *puto Murphy*. It hadn't mattered much, what with Gloria smashing the plates, and every Spanish slur under the sun directed at him. Joan thought it was funny. For once, for him, I needed her to be considerate.

"Plenty of material for tomorrow's show," said Ezequiel, and he didn't even know.

\*

Joan and I were walking back. The thick tension a third person between us.

"I texted him, so you know."

My feet stopped in the snow.

"What did you say?"

"That he's not alone. And that it's okay."

Now Joan had swallowed a clown too.

"He is. And it's not."

"Oh, I see. Is that why you blocked him?"

We were both offended. I sighed a cloud into the cold, exasperated. We kept walking, so we wouldn't have to stare each other in the eye. It got weird at the traffic light.

"It isn't like here, Juana. He's a man, and he's from another generation. He is alone."

The weekend the news broke out I cleaned blood from his eyes.

"Don't explain what you don't know to me."

"You don't know. It's comfortable here."

"I'm going to snap your neck."

The little man turned white. We moved.

“I’m happy you have that. But he doesn’t. And he was married. Is married! That’s why I’m angry. It didn’t have to be like this.”

I nodded into the night.

“How moral, Vero. Personally, I think you just can’t deal with your father liking dick.”

I reared towards my right, toward her. Saw her face for the first time this conversation. The furrowed, drawn brows.

“Don’t speak like that.”

Joan’s whole body turned around. As in, she started walking backwards. This meant she was looking back. She raised her shoulders and hands, the way people do when their pockets are empty.

“How about this? Don’t speak to me.”

\*

We didn’t.

\*

In the shower. It was awkward because I had to cross Joan’s room to get to the bathroom. My teeth had gone to bed dirty the night before. I knew I wouldn’t be putting on makeup before the improvisational show that night. You know who never wore makeup?

My morning shower ruminations boiled down to the fact that part of me thought Gloria should have known better. It’s not like they met like that— my mother was already in the ground. But it was known my father was a ladies’ man (nobody could have seen the gay part coming).

When I was told about the marriage, I asked him about it. We were in the car. No clue where from or to. The car was my father's favourite place for any hard conversation. No escape. The car to me was a mental state, its own liminal space that had no relationship to the outside world, or the radio that played, or the sun setting and rising through the tinted windows.

After a while, he said that I needed a mother. Hands on the steering wheel.

I was in third grade and was conscious enough to know about wanting and needing and deserving. My father is doing something for me, I thought.

Gloria, of course, had no intention of mothering me. She looked bored with life, most of the time. At first, newly wifed and unemployed, she jumped from hobby to hobby. Crochet. Tennis with Laura. A book club. I watched her stop. Become unfulfilled. Speak less and less. She spent a lot of time in the garden, without anything but nature to distract her. One time I saw her do nothing about a bee sting. We got along. Shared the living room and meals. A cordial affair. Until my father and I had another car conversation about why she'd been smiling more.

Maybe Joan was right.

I had used up all her hot water. I let the cold river run through my hair, my exposed nape, my shoulders.

\*

Sudoku is a Japanese word, by the way.

\*

Sudoku is not a Japanese game. That I hadn't known before, but a simple trip to the Boston Public Library (all I needed to sign up was an email and Joan's address, unbelievable.

She wasn't a member. Joan didn't read. Joan had a Criterion Channel subscription and listened to podcasts about the stars while she bathed. Joan didn't know her address by heart. When I asked for it she said "hold up" and looked up her postal code on her phone. That had been last week.) revealed much more.

So in 1973 a Swiss scientist (known) makes something he calls "Latin Squares", which somebody (unknown) at Dell Puzzle Magazine in 1970's New York makes into "Number Place", which gains popularity (worldwide) once published by the Japanese company Nikoli in 1986. Wayne Gould devised some code (Don't Think About Him) that would produce unique squares, and so in 2004 Sudoku grows like weeds. What this means is that before the program, there were people making the eighty-one cells, and subtracting, subtracting, until they reached a point they thought made just enough sense for foreign reconstruction. It may have been someone's job. Imagine a CV that reads: Sudoku reverser. Google Translate says it would look like this: 数独リバース.

\*

The mood at the improv show was odd.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was that I had never been to one. Maybe it was that when Joan was buzzing about making rice I wondered if I should ask if I was still invited. Maybe it was how she said: "We'll be late. Fuck it, we're Ubering."

A few steps in, I got our tickets. From Lila. Looking ridiculous in a yellow t-shirt.

"You're almost late," said Lila, eyes on the cash.

"Don't crucify us for an almost," Joan said, a half plea, half indignation. She shrugged off her coat, the one that looked like it was from the Matrix. I started to unravel my scarf. My eyes searched.

Lila stamped a little thing on my wrist.

“Enjoy the show.”

An Irish pub. A lot of TV screens, all off. Not that many people. It was early.

Joan recognized the back of Paul’s head, pointed. He greeted us warmly. We sat on stools.

“What did y’all do today?”

“I went to the library.”

“Anything new?”

“To me. Did you know there was a French predecessor to Sudoku, that involved diagonal lines too, but disregarded the subsquares that make up the modern game?”

Anyone else might have met this information with an embarrassed smile, or a confused reply. That was most of what I got. This was Paul.

“I did not. How French. And you, Joan, dear?”

“I was out all morning getting lectured on queerness by straight people.”

After that we were quiet.

A spotlight. About five people wearing yellow t-shirts on the wings of a stage. Lila, Ezequiel, a girl who looked like me, a boy who didn’t, a woman who had one of those remarkably forgettable faces. Ezequiel stepped forward.

“We are the Not Constantinople Comedy Group, and we thank you for coming to tonight’s show. A portion of the proceeds go to a good cause. Most of it goes to a better cause, which is our rent. Who hasn’t been to a comedy show before?”

I felt shy raising my hand. I couldn’t tell if Joan was the sort of person to participate fearlessly in this sort of thing, or judge those who did.

“Lame,” Ezequiel continued, “but remedied tonight. The way it works is we will ask for suggestions from you. For example, a relationship between two people.”

The speed at which the bar-goers responded surprised me. I heard “co-workers”, “married”, “teacher and student”, “divorced”, but most clearly, from Paul:

“Co-pilots!”

Ezequiel snapped his fingers. “Co-pilots.”

He nodded solemnly to the people behind him. Sat in an imaginary chair in an imaginary cockpit. Lila joined him. Cracked her neck. Reached for an invisible communicator. Made her voice nasal.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for flying with us on this beautiful, cloudless, sunny Tuesday, September 11<sup>th</sup>.”

The girl to the side of the stage spun on herself. Someone in the audience got up and left. Joan chortled.

Paul shook his head and leaned in closer to me. “That was the day of the Twin Towers.”

“I know.”

He looked surprised. I found myself in a strange bind. I never liked it when people assumed I didn’t know something. It insulted me, actually. But I liked even less the way Americans expected everyone in the world to know everything about their country, every movie, law, scandal, street, coffee size, politician, advertisement. It didn’t matter that I knew most of it. I appreciated that Paul didn’t expect me to. I had a sense he knew people from other places.

Of course, September 11<sup>th</sup> meant something quite different for me. The 1973 morning of, my people overthrew a dictator. I saw flashes of widows dancing with handkerchiefs and the missing shapes of their husbands. I wondered if anyone here knew something about Pinochet. If Joan was also thinking about the dancing women in the stadium, or if she even knew about them.

The humour was just as inflammatory the rest of the show. Lila kept a straight face the entire time. Ezequiel was prone to letting a bit of a smile slip through. The boy was terrible and often had to cover his face. The girl was funny but insisted on being switched on to the scene too often. The woman was well-dressed.

Ezequiel on a stage. Ezequiel on a stage moved as naturally as he had through my living room. Joan's. Smiled at the audience. Picked the best ideas from our crop ("baseball player" and "poisonous frog"). He was more charismatic than funny. Clearly the leader. It was easy to want his attention. I did not raise my hand or open my mouth. If my eyes left him, it was to look at Joan. Her face so fond. I didn't think she would let it get like that if there was a chance he could look back through the spotlight. She clapped the loudest.

"Terrible show," she said to them during the intermission. "Just dogshit."

"Stop suggesting cannibalism," Ezequiel answered. He was sweating a bit.

Lila chugged water. Paul ruffled her hair and she swatted at his insistent hands. Settled them on her waist.

For the first time I felt like the fifth wheel I was. How nice these people had been, to not show it so far. Or how bad things between Joan and Ezequiel must have been, to be keeping their interactions to comments like pointed ice. I hadn't really laughed that evening, but

suddenly I felt like crying. Not good. I made a motion with my thumbs towards the street, and left without knowing if anyone registered it.

Sunk to street-level against red brick. Trembled in the cold. Found my bible.

“Oh.”

Paul found me chewing at my pencil. I hastily put in behind my ear, dog-eared the Sudoku page. He pretended none of that happened, sat next to me. Unleashed two cigarettes.

“I assumed this is what you were here for.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“My mistake.”

It gnawed at me, as he put one back. A small fire. His lighter had personality. I couldn’t pretend to know the references itched in blue, but I liked that he cared for something so small and easily disposable.

“You look like you need help?”

Quasi statement, quasi offer, quasi question, quasi judgment. Was there such a thing like backhanded concern?

“Indisputably.”

He huffed.

“How is your English better than mine?”

On to lighter things, then. I caressed the feeble spine of the Sudoku book.

“I had to learn it. So I am not good at sounding casual. Natural.”

Slyly: “Would you want to?”

I thought of the aerobics I made in Spanish sentences. I thought about him already catching glimpses of my personality more firmly.

“No. Probably not.”

“How did it get so good?”

“I got an outstanding education. Not an international school but the closest you could get to it. My father wanted me to be armed with English.”

“What does he do?”

“Engineering. Quite a lot of it is business in English. He knew how important it was and wanted me to as well.”

“Is that why you’re here for the summer instead of Joan going there? To practice your English?”

I caught the scent he thought Joan should be going back instead, and I also got the scent he thought that wasn’t enough of a reason. He hadn’t made a comment about my father being wealthy, but it was there. I could sense it.

“No,” I told him.

How nice it was to have no one know.

“My father had an affair with his secretary.”

“Yikes.”

“A man twenty years younger than him.”

“Fuck.”

“Caused quite a media scandal. His wife is pregnant.”

“Your mom?”

“Stepmother. Second wife. Mother dead.”

Paul rubbed at his average-sized temple.

“Gloria kicked us both out. Him officially, me she put on a plane here. I don’t blame her. She has a lot to figure out.”

Without even realizing, I had been ripping up the Sudoku book’s cover. I had a handful of flimsy corpses in my hands.

“You know the worst part? She told me she had been thinking of naming the baby Ignacio. Like the child is unnamed right now.”

“Do you think she’ll keep it?”

He looked distressed. I really did not want to hear his take on abortion. He probably took it being legal for granted. I hadn’t even considered this new possibility.

“I have no idea. Unlikely. I’m doing everything I can not to think about all this.”

A pause.

“I’m sorry about your father.”

I didn’t know if he meant the affair or the way people were about it. But.

“It’s alright. That’s just how it is there.”

“Well.”

He said it melodically. The cold stung my eyeballs.

“Well, what?”

“You shouldn’t let personal drama reduce your country to a stereotype.”

“Sorry?”

“That everything in latinoamerica is sex.”

I blinked at him, incredulous. I hadn't said that. I had expressed an acceptance of the way of things. Yet I couldn't possibly explain the context and codes of Chile just like that, and something about him told me he wouldn't understand or appreciate if I tried. I appealed.

"But everything in the world is sex."

This was true, in my experience. Sex killed my mother. Sex unmade my father. Sex made people look at me on the street. Sex made me look at them. My triangle was sex. And that was here in Boston.

My response was not swallowed well. The air around us was that of disagreement. I was somewhat taken aback by his intensity. Confused with this turn of conversation. Why did Joan and him have to make things societal when I was just minding about my family? Was Ezequiel like that too?

"Don't you have a show?" I asked, slightly desperate.

"Yes. That's true."

But he didn't move. Something in him loosened, though. He placed his head against the concrete and looked up into the black canvas people there called a night sky. Not a single star had been saved.

"I didn't mean to upset you."

I cracked my knuckles inside my mittens. His were taking the cold raw.

"It's alright. I upset myself." Said with the sourness I felt crawling in me. Got the balance wrong again, gave too much of me away. In a futile attempt to backpedal in time, I also told him: "I don't know why I told you about any of that," even though I did.

"I have one of those faces," he said back to me.

His head had lolled to his left, my right, and his smile wasn't boyish like his best friend's. Paul felt like a person; Ezequiel felt like a man. I wanted the formula to printed and studied. At the same time, I didn't want to be victim to it. Of it. The whole thing.

I meant to reply, but something stopped me. I tripped over the word in my head again. Paul finished his cigarette, said something, and stepped inside. I barely noticed it, dazed.

Victim. Sex. Second wife. Legitimacy, promotion. My father never loved Gloria, so that wasn't it. You need a mother. Victimhood. Sinner. Abortion. No, not abortion. Divorce. What else would make a pregnant Gloria leave him? What would make a pregnant second wife accept the shame of being a divorcee?

Suddenly, alone in the Boston concrete, I knew the root of it all. My father was a smart man. My father did not make mistakes. My father was an engineer but not a lawyer. My father wanted to be caught with another man. My father did not want another child. This, was a business move.

I needed a pointy thing and I didn't know where Joan kept them. The peeling kitchen drawers had a number of corkscrews and bottle openers, shaped like little ninjas or giraffes. Gifts, I assumed. But too wide for my purposes. I had caved in and bought a SIM card for the remaining three weeks, and to have the side door of my phone open, a slim pointy thing was required. I rummaged further, into more and more absurd places. The balcony had nicotine, cannabis, and sage ashes in peanut butter jar lids turned upside down. No lighter with one of those extended antennas. However: a bowl of water. Moon water, she had told me, when I first moved in. Underneath the bathroom sink there was hair dye, and underneath the kitchen sink there were ants. The trash bins were a monument alike the Tower of Pisa, composed of plant-based yoghurts and Sapporos. A wok was soaking and the smell of last night's garlic lingered. I couldn't help but think that Joan had perfected the cool twenty-year-old apartment. I also couldn't help but think about what her mother would have done at the sight of it. Fernanda once had me scrub my bellybutton out with a Q-tip. I could have texted Joan but then again I couldn't have.

My quest for a pointy thing had relegated my hands to my hips and given the air a certain stale quality. Gnawing at the inside of my bottom lip. Bad habit. I'd carved whole tunnels with my canines before.

Whenever an interest dried out, like a well, I spent too much time on the physical plane. Somehow it removed me from others even more. I started to feel like my actions in public had no consequences. Earlier that morning at the street kiosk, on the mission to buy another Sudoku booklet, I suddenly realized I didn't want to. My hand ached in my pocket. For

ten seconds I meditated reaching out and stealing a Twix bar. Didn't. Walked back to Joan's like a puppet recently cut loose, or a puppeteer undergoing a career crisis. Looked at scarfed pedestrians in the eye. Thought about opening my mouth. Screaming.

"View hallo!"

The door. Paul. His neck had beads spelling out "just lobotomized."

"Lila," he said, noticing my eyes on his chest. "Joan not in?"

"Extra shift."

"Those cats are running her to the ground, huh."

"It's a cat eat cat world."

"I'm always saying this."

We headed to the couch/bed. Paul immediately started playing music from his phone. There were no lyrics in it. I wasn't sure where I stood with him that morning. He was acting nicely/normally enough, and it led to all sorts of interpretations. Either he was trying to sweep bad blood under the rug, or he was satisfied with the sense he had taught me something, or he simply didn't think it was that deep. The last was the least likely. I was forming the idea that Paul smiled a lot but did not always mean it. There were possible noble reasons for that, of course, and they lived somewhere in his head.

He looked up. I recalled myself. The odds of Paul having a pointy thing were low. However, there was another issue we could solve for me.

"I have a problem."

He barely reacted.

"False."

He took his beanie off and started twirling it in his finger, like it was pizza dough or a basketball.

“What do you mean?”

“I’d be jealous of anyone who only has one problem.”

“I can’t figure out the laundry machine in the basement,” I told him. It was a pressing crisis. There was a growing pile of laundry zipped up in my suitcase. I had managed so far washing my underwear in the shower and drying it out under a tough towel. There wasn’t someone being paid to take care of it for me.

“I’ll ask Joan.”

I was grateful I didn’t have to add that part. Yet:

“But without her knowing that it was me asking, please.”

He nodded, looking down at his phone. The most cracked thing I’d ever seen.

“Would you mind also asking her about the cinnamon and coins outside the front door?”

He hummed.

“I did notice that.”

Ten seconds.

“Abundance spell, she said. Apparently there’s a laundry card. Should be in her bedside drawer by the strap. They charge \$2.75 for a load. Y’all are getting ripped off, why not do laundry at my place?”

I declined, and thanked him.

He rolled his shoulders.

“You know,” he started, with the tone usually used when one did not want to know, “I could talk to Joan. Give you one less problem.”

My eyes focused on a fly above the struggling basil plant I bought at the Safeway. Not enough sunlight.

“You don’t have to do that.”

He shrugged.

“It’s the best thing about me,” he said. Confirmed he didn’t understand my meaning, or was pretending not to. “I need to talk to her anyway. I came here to party plan.”

Gripped by an idea, he turned to me.

“Vero, how does your family feel about Japanese whiskey?”

“In general?”

“Tomorrow night. It’s Joan’s half-birthday.”

\*

Joan was getting skinnier.

\*

Things my father was right about:

Being suspicious about meat sometimes.

“You have to exercise shame,” he said, once. 2012. I was wearing neon clothes designed to make a knot in the front, and a ponytail to the side, probably. We were in the Parque Arauco shopping mall escalator.

- “Exorcise?”
  - “No. Like a muscle.”

He turned around, palms up and out, and pretended to be a priest addressing guests at wedding ceremony.

Unspoken, but I didn't have the makings of a good sister.

\*

I barely caught a sight of Joan. She came in and out of the apartment as if it were a pit stop. Showered, shaved, brushed teeth, rubbed vanilla extract over the faded stamps on her wrists, and out she went. Some days she just used dry shampoo, which made her greasy hair silky in a matter of seconds. Somedays she spent time braiding it in complicated patterns, and then messing up the braid so it looked unpracticed. I watched from the couch/bed.

She texted me that Saturday. I was on the couch/bed. It was all I seemed to do those days. Could I make a verb out of lethargic?

Joan said to meet her at 8 PM, which meant after nine. That left me two hours to get ready. There were three candidates for shirts that I hadn't shrank in the washing.

Another ping on my phone. An address. Ezequiel and Lila's.

\*

In Boston they dropped "r"s instead of rolling them, the way Chilean tongues do. Or throats? I wasn't sure. In Boston people stayed to the right of the subway escalator if they were standing still, and sped down the left if they were in hurry. In Boston people were often in a hurry.

It took me two line transfers to get to my stop. I composed a mental list of Joan's tattoos:

There was a seagull.

The veins in her hands.

She mentioned “the ketchup tattoo” but I had yet to see it.

The small dot in her neck, that passed for a freckle.

A skeleton bending down backwards to limbo. This was on her ribs.

“What’s a half birthday, anyway?” I asked Paul as he took my coat.

“It’s when you need an excuse to drink.”

“Not need,” came Ezequiel’s voice. There he sat. There sat everyone, again on the ground, carpet this time, cross-legged around a low table. Clearly Lila and Ezequiel were managing a different budget than Paul’s. I could see water stains on the walls, I could see Doritos in plastic bowls, I could see Ezequiel’s unmade mattress in the corner. He slept under the window. “Want. Need would make us alcoholics.”

“We’ve got at least six years before they start calling us that.” Joan.

“Who’s they?”

“Me. Before I start calling us that,” she said, taking a shot. “Hey, Vero.”

Stunned, I nodded. Sat down.

“Give the woman a shot.”

Japanese whiskey burned.

Lila emerged from one of the closed doors, balancing a laptop in her hands. There was a purple tulle skirt peeking out under the checkered black and white one.

“It’s charged.”

Like vultures, they all huddled around the screen. By extension so did I. There was an email?

“What should we say to him?” someone whispered.

“Tell him to-”

“I don’t want to hear it, Joan.”

“I’m never letting you plan a party again.” She crossed her arms and everything.

Lila didn’t move her head but when she spoke I knew it was for me.

“We’re emailing Noam Chomsky.”

I didn’t know what to say.

“The linguist?”

“Apparently he always responds.”

“Not that that’s enough of a reason to email someone.”

“We have to. Before he dies.”

“That’ll be my Avicii.”

Joan stood up. Wobbled a bit. The Japanese whiskey bottle did have quite a dent in it.

“I can’t take this. Come on, Vero. Let’s smoke.”

\*

On the rare occasion I had seen Joan crave nicotine she’d just motion to Lila until a vape, grape-flavoured, would be tossed her way. It seemed at odds with her person. The rest of her group smoked cigarettes like God intended. The point is I knew I was getting high.

Joan’s thumb had to roll the little wheel about three times. The wind. I didn’t understand people who said there were whispers or any sort of knowledge in the wind. Boston wind was the most unintelligible thing I have ever heard. There were snowflakes dying on her eyelashes.

“Listen,” she said, once the joint was lit. And she’d let the smoke marinate in her lungs. And exhaled. “I wanted to say that...”

But she just shook her head and passed it to me. I wasn't about to bite the hand that passes the joint.

I hadn't smoked in about two months. Even before the access problem in Boston, I was too conscious I might just freak out. Too on edge those days. Looking for a shadow of an excuse to crash. Shame. I used to love lighting up by myself in the swings of my backyard, by Gloria's agapanthus, and then cracking open Wikipedia.

I exhaled too, a mixture of smoke and breath freezing. Joan deemed it an apt time to resume.

"Sometimes--" she started. Stopped. Her eyes were fixed on the building in front of us. I wondered what. The plants spilling of a balcony? The pulsing violet light? The way down?

"You're like one of those pencils that you sharpen and sharpen too much and the lead breaks."

What a thing to say.

"Graphite."

"Eh?"

"Even lead pencils are not made of lead. Common misconception."

"See?" She laughed, not the cynical huff of air I'd become used to. More like a hyena. A hint of relief in it. She snagged back the joint. "That's exactly what I fucking mean."

I didn't understand the comment but I understood the root of it. I understood the things Joan couldn't, or wouldn't, articulate. That she was going through things but so was I. That we were different but life had cast us together. That we could smoke a joint at a party.

"Does the moon look, like, really wrong right now to you?"

I said it looked just fine.

“No, I swear she’s lower than usual. Dude, does the moon set?”

\*

Intoxicated off the bliss of reconciliation, because cousins know forgiveness to be a fiction, and with no blood in my face, because cold does not know mercy, we slid the door to the right and entered the room. The carpet felt very vibrant against my socks. I yearned to be an ant so I could crawl between those blades. Or water, boiling.

Ezequiel to my left. Pouring liquids into glasses. Asking me a question. Was I good.

I was high enough that English escaped me. I gave him a thumbs up. Two, actually.

Was I sure?

“Cabron, no me insistas.”

He laughed. A melodic, guttural thing.

“Bueno.”

Was he? Yes, he was caramelizing onions. Well, the onions were caramelizing themselves. With the Japanese whisky and some brown sugar, it looked like. Ezequiel was crushing garlic with the side of a knife, pressing his palm down on it.

“You know, I’m not even sure why we’re supposed to do this,” he said, nodding to the unclothed garlic.

“Habit?” I ventured. I kept looking at his hands. Rings and scars. God help me.

“Give back the whiskey!” someone shouted from behind me.

Joan appeared, out of nowhere. She grabbed the bottle. Her hand lead my elbow and my subsequent person to the circle. I sat down next to Paul, seeking out his friendliness. His eyes told me he knew something had happened in the balcony and he was glad. I clinked glasses with him and her, and Lila, because what the hell, and Ezequiel, who was looking at

me. Someone's phone flashlight was shining against the material of the table, a soft, obstructed halo.

The onions kept caramelizing.

"I thought only Mexicans said cabrón," Lila said.

I could not have this be my first one-on-one conversation with her. Everyone else was too caught up in their own thing. I saw Paul cross his arms over his chest and fall backward into Ezequiel's chest. He caught him at the last second. Once he was upright, he didn't react to his teasing, as I suspected most people would. He clapped him on the back and said something that made him nod, grimly. I hadn't ever done a trust exercise with someone I trusted. I had just been forced into someone's arms in theatre class.

"When's the last time you screamed?" I asked, searching for something sharper than her.

"About twenty minutes ago."

Two options: she was either being very honest, or pulling my hair. I chose.

"What a coincidence."

She took a long sip, focus on Paul. We were the only people still on the ground. I needed the ground.

"You were screaming?"

"Like Kitty Genovese."

"Does she work with Joan?"

"Shots!" Joan announced, and that's about all I was conscious for.

\*

The sound of Joan lighting matches was my alarm. I had what could only be described as a Japanese whiskey headache.

Joan was frying bacon and even that wasn't enough of a solace. The smell of it and the gas from her stove was an attack on my nostrils. I groaned.

"Take a shower," she said as a greeting.

I dragged my miserable body upright. Her hair was wet. Eyebrows undrawn. Table (counter, no seats) set for two.

Could I tell her that in my dream I was kissing someone, with all I had, but then my teeth were pouring out, like a leaking faucet, and I tried to cover my mouth but blood seeped through, and around me a variety of people I knew were having sex with each other, so graphically, and it wasn't erotic, it was a teacher from my third grade and my aunt and an acquaintance from Behavioural Neuroscience and the maid and they were all fucking and the sound of slapping skin really reverberated and in that rhythm I found the truth that this was a dream, it was a dream, and I didn't have to live through this, so I slapped myself, a wet, thick slap, that left me coated in warm buccal blood, and I kept going at it. I was staring at a mirror then, because I needed a mirror, all the writhing bodies (my father, Paul, Lila) behind me, and that's how I saw Gloria come up behind me, naked, saggy, lay a hand on my shoulder. Isn't there another way, she said, with a voice sweeter than velvet, a voice she did not have. I love you and I don't want to see you hurt.

I neared Joan and the bacon in the kitchen. Needed water.

Joan, one hand on the frying pan and one on a plastic spatula, shot me a faintly amused look.

"Are we getting an encore?"

My face pleaded stupidity for me. She released the pan to point.

“You threw up in the sink last night.”

My head whipped back. It certainly didn't look like it.

“At the party, Vero.”

\*

Wanted to die most of the day. Winter arched its back outside.

\*

What about déjà vu? I had them the most when hungover. Must be something there.

\*

The simple act of opening my computer lowered the battery by 2%. Not good. At the cat café, power outlets were coveted things. Students typed away, and my cord remained coiled in my backpack.

I had roughly twelve tabs open on déjà vu, mostly the remains of forcing the issue last night. My heart wasn't really in it. Often my eyes would land on Joan, making chai, or the people she made them for. I spent a solid twenty minutes observing a kid too young to know what was going on or to ever remember that afternoon. He was in one of those chairs with wheels. Blond. Looked like a Cheeky model in the making. Played with his straw. Batted the one cat that approached him away. I tried to catch his mother saying his name, but she never did. She had one of the power outlet spots by the window.

When the little bell ringed and Ezequiel walked in, my battery was at 15%.

He headed towards Joan. I expected an uproar. Dread. A drink poured on him.

They fist-bumped?

They chatted a bit and Joan leaned over the counter to point to me. He turned his head. Sauntered over. Jesus Christ.

“Feeling better, champ?”

“Don’t make me want to insult you when I should thank you. Or apologize. Which one do you want?”

“I want nothing.”

The temptation to copy Paul was right there: I know that to be false. Patently.

Ezequiel was well-dressed that day. The centerpiece was a fashionable furry jacket.

“What’s with all this?” I gestured.

“Church. Are you coming?”

A beat.

“You’re serious.”

He was. His fingers were laced and his face was stone.

“Joan,” I said when she arrived, carrying what was surely a matcha monstrosity. “Joan. This American psychopath wants to take me to church. I’ve just escaped Chile, I’m on holiday, make him see reason.”

“You need a project,” was her answer.

I appreciated she didn’t say hobby.

“The church could use your Spanish,” she said, too.

I was pretty sure she meant Ezequiel, and also that the waitresses didn’t have to take to-go orders to the tables.

“Everybody wins,” she concluded.

Battery at 10%.

“Say hi to God,” were her parting words.

I stared at Ezequiel. Up until that moment, I would have bet good money he was an atheist.

“Well, you heard the boss.”

“Church?”

He gave what was nearly a sigh.

“It’s not a religion thing, it’s a community organizing project. I’ll explain on the way.”

He nudged my laptop screen shut. I glimpsed a 7%.

His hands were in his pockets while I zipped up my backpack, but then left to wave goodbye to Joan and hold open the door. Outside, he smiled, a nice one, and when I smiled back I felt the cold against my the nerves of my teeth.

Teeth, maybe?

\*

Ezequiel at church was a sight. You could tell what a man thought about God from the distance between his knees when he sat. Plus, he looked at me, pointedly, when we walked in and I knelt.

The church didn’t feel like a church as much as a sad basement. Where were the vines crawling over stone, clouding the dancing lights of the vitros? Where were the oil paintings of the stations of the cross? The arching ceilings, the booming voice of a priest in the concave, the cold floor. Where was reverence, where was awe?

We sat in a rotting pew, under white lighting, surrounded by fading yellow. We were alone.

“So obviously, the parish could use some money.”

“You don’t say.”

“That’s why we’re here. The idea-”

The idea walked in. A man with a salt and pepper beard and glasses approached us, extending his arms out the whole time. Smiling the whole time. Ezequiel sat up straighter when he saw him, as a prelude to standing up. They embraced. I caught the older man calling him “m’ijo.”

“Y esta quién es?” he asked Ezequiel. He didn’t wait for an answer. He moved forward to kiss my cheek and I realized how much I had missed the casual touch of a stranger’s skin.

“My name is Segundo.”

“Me llamo Vero.”

He was a short man, stout, so when he jumped a bit on to the tips of his toes, you noticed.

“Ah! Con que esta es la Vero!”

“I may have already told him you would help us out.”

“Estoy a la orden,” I assured Segundo.

We sat down and I was told about what ailed the parish. Almost everything. Santa María de Nuestra Piedad offered service in Spanish. What they had going for them was that they were Catholic, like most of Boston. But funds were low, and so was attendance, and Segundo wasn’t even the priest. Just a concerned church-goer, who Ezequiel met at the pet shop. Segundo had a lizard. Which he showed me many pictures of. It seemed a faith equal to that of Christ.

There was talk of the Spanish service ending.

“The joke is that Segundo and I want to write a proposal, or a plea for help, to the English-speaking Latino communities. I’m convinced it’s an untapped market.”

I looked at Ezequiel in the eye. I tried to divorce the problem from the speaker. To leave aside everything I really wanted to ask him. If the onions had burnt last night. If he had to wipe away my vomit with his hands. It somewhat worked. He could be right. Either that population managed both languages, or they might care out of guilt, if they didn’t. In a way, that was exactly what he was doing right now. Although I was sure he would’ve had other words for it.

“Would you mind helping us translate?”

“Do you want a translation, or a poster with both languages?”

Ezequiel and Segundo looked at each other. Segundo lifted up two fingers.

“Si no es mucho trabajo, m’hija.”

“Es justo y necesario,” I joked. My all-time favorite line from mass.

Ezequiel scoffed.

“When has anything necessary ever been just?”

\*

I listened to them both. To Segundo’s heartfelt appeal, and to Ezequiel’s marketing campaign. Spanish and English. I deliberated and came up with two texts. Was informed Lila would handle the graphic design. Segundo hugged me goodbye. It was 4:28 PM when we stepped out. I once again knelt before we left, head bowed. Ezequiel did not look at me that time.

I felt I had silence to fill.

“You know what plagues me?”

“What plagues you, Vero?”

This fucking guy. His hands were in his pockets again.

“I really don’t know if the amount of times I’ve done the sign of the cross is even or odd.”

We reached a bus stop but neither of us sat.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I could have opened a prayer, when I wanted to close it. I could be actively inside a prayer right now. There is no way to know if I’m right or off.”

“Why does it matter?”

I zipped up my coat all the way up, trying to find an argument-killing answer. What happened was that I thought about his question, instead. Not does it matter, but why.

“I’d ask God if I could. You know that thing where you ask him something when you die?”

Ezequiel was fully facing me.

“It’s come up.”

“What would your question be?”

“I’d ask for your cross number,” he said, nonchalantly. Looking at the street.

Something churned in me. Half hope, half acid.

“Be serious with me.”

“If it helps you relax, sure. I’ll tell you right now. It’s an odd number.”

I wanted the bus to be there very badly.

“That is of no use to me.”

\*

The door closed.

“How was it?”

Joan. In some sort of triangle posture. She paused a YouTube video with her toe.

“I can see what you meant,” I said, and left it at that.

The yoga resumed. I showered, scrubbed too much. Left the bathroom and was met with the sound of chickpeas popping in the oven, and Joan pouring wine. She liked rosé the best, for some unholy reason.

“We’re doing better,” she told me, like I had asked. “He texted asking to talk, and we talked. Do you remember the Mutually Agreed Destruction thing from school? Imagine that but for getting along. We share friends, you know?”

The chickpeas were released from the oven. She scraped the pan to get the crunchy carcasses.

“I feel like I’m doing better after it. I mean, I’d still get him in the Purge. But he’s more chill these days. This church thing will be good for him,” she said, solemnly.

“I can’t believe he asked me to do that,” I said. Hoping for something.

“What? I volunteered you.”

Not that.

\*

Our aunt Belinda had given up on her acting career aspirations about two decades ago, a decade before giving up on a husband or kids, but/so she still spoke of her time in the Argentine theatre with fondness. Or with cryptic comments. One time she said, in Argentina they talk about blood, Chileans talk about the dead. In any case, she’s how I found out about the Christ cake.

The Christ cake controversy happened in 2018, in an exposition place that my research told me was also where horses raced and were bet on. At this art event thing, one artist made a gigantic cake (the texture that of arrollado) shaped like Christ on the cross. I'm talking several tables. The idea was that people would eat the body of Christ.

The country was up in arms about it. So was my family. Aunt Belinda sent it to the groupchat, which made Fernanda call her a heretic, and Gloria weighed in that something blasphemous did not make one blasphemous by osmosis, and my father sent crying laughing emojis. Joan didn't reply and neither did I. But I was thinking about the Christ cake when she made both blueberry and scallion pancakes that morning.

Music played. The most vivid song was "Freedom!". If Joan pressed shuffle randomly, I noticed that every twenty songs or so, a classic would pop up. The kind of music Belinda would play and modulate the lyrics of while in the kitchen, to improve her English. That was back in the times I knew what a hypotenuse was, and I wore skirts whose circumference ended with frills. Joan and I, on the aqua tiles of her old kitchen that always smelled of thyme, making choreographies, licking sugar and butter off wooden spoons, stealing our aunt's nail polish from the upstairs bathroom and being too scared to paint the evidence on our hands. I didn't even know.

\*

"This fortnight, cast away what doesn't serve you," Joan said.

"I don't like this," Paul said. Paul had it easy. He was just holding a glass of the moon water.

Ezequiel, holding dirt between his hands: "You think I like this? You think I'm thriving in the space right now?"

“I will eat you,” said Lila, who was the one even getting the tarot reading. Her eyes were fixed on the cards laid down before her on the couch. I don’t think she had blinked.

“Z, you’re really getting on my nerves this fortnight,” Paul added.

Joan carried on. I looked at the flickering lavender candle between my hands and thought that if I was her and people were discrediting something I took seriously, maybe I’d wait for them to shut up and then continue. I thought many people would have whined and asked for everyone’s attention. I thought Lila would snap someone in the forehead, and Paul would pass the time amicably, possibly to the point the conversation would not return to its home. Not sure what Ezequiel would have done.

“Avoid tautologies. Everything that has happened once, by law, cannot happen again. Unless it does, in which case, it will happen a third time.”

I had never heard Joan speak like this. Where was this vocabulary, this serene composure, all of my cousin’s life?

Lila nodded, sagely. Probably why she went first. But also probably something I had miscalculated about Lila. I found her cold at first, then I found out she biked everywhere and I wrote her off as aloof and calm, and then, dangerous. There was a volcanic quality to her. Since the cabrón comment, I had realized, this was a jury that would not be silent.

Joan begun shuffling her big tarot cards. Sometimes her rings would make small noises against them. Lila stood up, so did I, trading places, handing a candle.

I faced Joan.

Belinda had taught us how to play casita robada, truco, and canasta. The basic survival pack for our age; we would graduate to poker and bridge in time. Joan always shuffled back then on account of being the oldest and being gifted with better fine motricity.

Plus, the one time I had tried, I had dealt to the right, and Belinda never forgave me for it. It was odd, hoping the cards would fall. They did.

She regarded them for some seconds, digging her fingers into the holes of her fishnets. They meant nothing to me. Little cartoon people in places, with coins and jewels.

“Do you ever wonder why it always feels like you’re in a Saw trap?”

“Good grief,” I heard Paul say.

“As opposed to?”

\*

Joan didn’t offer to do a reading for Ezequiel and he didn’t ask. One of those mutually understood agreements, I supposed.

\*

The Korean convenience store by Joan’s had a small counter facing the window, and a microwave, that customers were welcome to. I had just found out what MSG was and was on the hunt. Joan was out.

I tore open a plastic wrapping. I rotated the microwave disk. I poured soy sauce.

I ate.

I went to the aisle, then to the cashier, ignored her stare, got another packet.

There was a puddle of sauce in the pseudo-plate, the discarded skin, the plastic. It occurred to me that I knew no one there and no one knew me. I licked it like a dog.

\*

To me, out on the balcony, she said:

“Mirrors are the worst thing that have happened to the human race.”

We were watching the sun set, because that is what it draws out of people.

“Think about it. People used to have to kneel to stare at their reflection at the river or whatever the fuck. That’s humbling.”

“Today you can’t escape your reflection.”

She nodded, crossing her feet up on the rail the opposite direction.

“I’ve been thinking about the difference between ego and self esteem. And also how even speaking about killing your ego points to the presence of the ego. What’s the way out?”

“Let me know when you figure any of that out.”

She nodded again, cracked her neck. Joan had a very noisy skeleton.

“What’s been up with you?”

MSG had not satisfied my most important hunger. I was walking around with a loud skeleton in my own way. I thought about something Joan had said to Lila at the séance: “sharks need to keep swimming but you don’t.”

“Nothing, really.”

“Paul likes you.”

“I like him.”

“You haven’t told me anything about your dating life, Vero. You know they’re poly, right?”

I had not known that. Either Vero was off entirely, which suggested a shadow of a cover, or I had misread Paul’s smiles. I had read of polyamorous people, from a small liberal corner of Chilean Twitter that advocated for my father. Even I thought that was too much. Alas. Bigger fish to fry.

“There has been no one.”

The constant question: would there be someone? At some point.

Joan seemed to grasp I meant longer than my Boston stay. She chewed it over.

“Why?” she asked, without any malice.

I look at her like it was self-explanatory.

“Fair enough,” she huffed.

\*

When it came down to it, I did it again.

I knew Joan knew, that Joan encouraged, even, this activity, but I don't know if she knew how. How I felt like my skin needed to touch his. How he touched mine, sometimes knocking our knees together on the bus, and always looking at me a few seconds too long.

If I wasn't in knee-deep I was in over my head.

“Segundo's been asking that you come to service,” he greeted me with. Dressed nicely again, leaning against out doorway. “Will you? I'm on my way.”

The raging on internal conflict, the shoulds and woulds and cants and the eventual yes. Like letting go of something.

“Let me get my gloves.”

I liked that he didn't look at his phone as I did, and also got my coat, shoes, scarf, nerve.

It was a short walk to the subway. In Santiago you really only had the subway in the heart of downtown. I was more towards the outskirts. I didn't have a weekend house but I lived in one. Not a private neighbourhood, because my father disliked the time-consuming transaction to even get in to the places. He also disliked the apartment downtown he used to live in with my mother before she died. One time he told me the protests the kitchen staff from the hotel to the right would wake her up from her naps. The point is I still had a subway card

in Chile, showing on the outside of my wallet, mainly so my classmates could see. In Spanish we call that careteo, as in the action of holding up a fake face, a mask. I was inclined to call it survival. In Santiago the water of my nice house didn't even ever flush all the way. In Santiago I would be back to living with my father in three weeks. Probably somewhere new. It looked like Gloria had made a home-base in the house, and although I liked her well enough, I did not know her well enough. Mejor mal conocido, which means better the evil you know, and not devil, like in English. There was also the blood allegiance thing. And, it would be too sad for me to end up living with my stepmother. I wouldn't take it as a life story.

"What are you thinking about?"

He was there. Physically, Ezequiel had become more compelling to me. I didn't even care, most days, about how he looked. He was potent enough.

"My father."

"What's he like?"

"Much," I said. "And about to do it again."

\*

I wanted to bottle up Ezequiel at church, like a desperate message in a castaway movie. Quiet, as he often was in groups, but turned down. Not brimming with electricity, his eyes following all hand gestures, leaning forward on his elbows and knees. Ezequiel at church had an arm extended over the back of the pew, a pleasant expression, and when they sang, closed eyes. I would admit that the choir was not in need of help. One voice, a short girl's, was particularly angelic. The two strumming guitars by her side anchored the sound to Earth. I was reacquainted with devotion. I hadn't gotten my weekly dose since my last mass with Gloria. I truly respected her for attending, despite the whispers and the fact that whoever

chose to give us the sign of the peace was making a political statement. It made me see a new strength in her, understanding that the last thing Gloria, who had started ordering groceries online and stopped wearing red lipstick, was church. Faith or the routine of it.

It may have had something to do with the arrangement with Fernanda that shipped me off to Boston. Fernanda didn't know that my last weekend in Santiago Gloria found me throwing up rum and coke on the gravel driveway out front. I didn't really have anyone to drink with. I had just been in the yard. El descaro, she said, de emborracharse cuando yo no puedo ni tomar un vaso de vino encima de todo lo que me está pasando. Descaro is an interesting one. It literally means without a face, it really means without shame.

Is it strange to think all Christs on the cross look like my father? Except 50 kilos thinner. Add fat and that's him at home. In public he is the Michelin man. Handing out stars. At the parish I stared at the stigmata, like acne scars, like that blotch on my knee from the time I fell off my Ripstick and passed out for the first and last time of my life to this date and my father slapped me awake. His other hand was holing the nape of my neck. My bruised knees kissing, he looked afraid and it took me aback. It bled, like I did, into relief.

That was when he used to have a moustache.

\*

That weekend, Joan unfurled the ping pong table. Lila brought a miniscule chalkboard, and Paul was way too excited about keeping score. Ezequiel brought a lot of beer. He had to make two trips up the stairs. I assumed the American inevitability was beer pong. I stared in disbelief at a genuine ping pong tournament, one where the ball rarely hit the table.

"This is like that squirrel Willy Wonka song," Lila said.

“In what way?” Paul asked, returning Joan’s serve. She groaned as she got on all fours to fetch it. Paul persevered. “The original or new one?”

“Not sure. I felt like saying something.”

“A better question is the good or bad one, Paul.” Ezequiel. Hovering to my right. “Don’t expose your age.”

His age?

Paul looked like he wanted to strangle Ezequiel. Ezequiel popped some bubble gum.

“So I may be thirty.”

He sounded slightly apologetic for it. Thirty? Not twenty-three, like Joan? How old was Lila? How did he look so young?

Lila smiled (was it just me or were her teeth always so filed) and curled her arms around his shoulders, effectively distracting him. Joan scored. Paul didn’t look upset about it. I added a tally by Joan’s name, scrawled next to a pink bee.

“That’s a game.”

Joan put her fist up in the air. A five minute break was announced. The people gravitated to the kitchen.

“We’re up next.”

To no one’s surprise.

“We’re fried. Toast. At least in the oven. Wow, English really likes these.”

An amused huff. Those felt like olive branches from Ezequiel. I had noticed that anything Spanish or latinoamérica related got his attention, or approval, or got me respect or recognition as a person in a novel way. I liked the link, stroked it. Maybe forged it.

“It’s not even a competition,” he said.

I held up the board questioningly. If it served as a shield between our bodies as well, good. Joan could come back from the kitchen any second, and he was very close. We weren't in church and there was no God.

"You're that bad?"

"No, we're totally winning. That's why it's not a competition."

I could have sworn he was about to wink. There was a strong conspiratorial sense in the air. Suffocating.

"Your eyes are kind of cat-like."

"I have to take a call."

I handed him the board. Walked past laughter in the kitchen. Opened and closed the front door, sank down in front of the descending staircase. I took my phone, newly SIM equipped, out. My hands opened the relatively short list of contacts. I didn't know why I was following up on my lie/excuse. I did know my eyes were kind of cat-like. The colour was my father's almond brown, the shape I'd been told was all my mother, the hoods and dark circles all me. Flickering over the blue light of my laptop instead of sleeping.

My father's phone number wasn't in my contacts. Blocked. It didn't matter. He'd always had the same number. I knew it by heart.

“Si?” he said.

The equivalent of starting with “Yes?” or maybe “And?”. He picked up the phone like this, until he knew who was calling. I always imagined the process by which a chameleon shifts its rainbow scales as what happened inside him. I could glimpse it on his face before the front door opened, some mornings when the coffee was watery or if it had rained the night before.

“Soy Vero, pa.”

Wouldn’t he know that? Wouldn’t he have caller ID?

“Vero,” he breathed out into the phone. Then was quiet for some time. The silence bounced off the wood and iron details of the staircase. It was nicer than Joan’s building. I had hated the lack of elevator there at first but my quotidian hikes had grown on me. You really felt like you were working for the privilege of your home. Paul’s place felt too easy in comparison. The alcohol made everything swim a little. Or maybe it was the nerves. I wondered if most people would feel shame or guilt or something bad about talking to their parent when drunk. I knew I certainly couldn’t have done it without it. There was a communal palpable relief when I was old enough to join my father in his dinner-time glass of Cabernet, for the heart’s health.

“Como anda Gloria?” I asked him, the way she constantly dabbed her napkin on her mouth’s contours on my mind. Of course I had to ask how she was. I had toyed with texting her but we really were not that close and she had a penchant for Bitmojis.

“Gloria?” he asked. Like the affair had erased the word from his head. That name would have worked here. She wouldn’t have had to pull a Joan. Juana. Whatever.



I realized I would never understand my father or what he was going through. I realized I may not have the chance to stumble upon those revelations due to the reluctant sameness of living together. I realized what had been severed, the price he had decided was worth both of us pay. That he was just another victim of the century and I couldn't keep being his.

"No sabes el calor que hace aca," he said. I'm not sure if the sound of splashing I heard was real. I hung up.

First I tilted my head back so it was supported by the concrete step behind me. Secondly I wiped my cheeks. Thirdly I made my way back to the party, ignored the fun roaring on the wide balcony, and opened the bathroom mirror. I grabbed Tylenol from its insides. Took two. I sat on the empty bathtub and I let the painkiller do what it does best.

\*

Joan came out of the shower with a towel twisted half-around her like a snake. Those yellow big boas you saw on eighth grade birthday parties in neighbourhoods with money.

"Righty tighty, lefty loosey," said Lila, gently, into a drill.

Imagine growing up hearing that? I watched in amazement as Lila spoke of her older brother. A man with moustache but no beard. Greying already. At least I thought of him that way when she told me about him. I really tried to listen. But ever since Joan started her pole dancing lessons her body was skinner, taught, her muscles tensed at the suggestion of an action, she blinked so much. Didn't she?

I couldn't tell you.

She didn't say a word about it until she was in the intermediate class. She sat me down and made me watch her twitch in reverse, all slow and shit. Skilled. There was no music in the video. The song had been in her head. There was no music in the video at all.

It was Joan who taught me what stretch marks were and to be afraid of them. The last summer she was over in Santiago de Chile she put lotion on her legs every night. At thirteen, religiously preserving herself. The faint oil of lavender would linger on the sheets long after she was gone.

“God is real and he can be found in the shower,” she said, eyebrow-less and exfoliated.

“I’m up to here with God,” said Lila with her hand to her forehead, bent over the Sharpies now. She was simultaneously building an Ikea table and painting some poster for the church. She had said she was too broke for digital art, as nice as it sounded. “It has a sick sense of humour. I bet its throne is art deco.”

Joan unravelled her hair from a towel.

“My mom will be thrilled to hear you’re not an atheist anymore. We’ll work on the ‘it’ part.”

“God only knows what she’d do if she heard that,” I said, eyes on the ceiling, as an afterthought. “He only knows... Shouldn’t it be ‘only God knows’?”

Joan pointed at me, over the fumes of the Sharpie and the biting noise of Lila’s drill.

“You’re jerking off in my living room right now.”

\*

That night he cornered me at the basement of the random man who sometimes showed up, the one who refused to wear socks outside some days, I’ve heard it said.

“Verónica.”

And I pushed past it. The rightness of it. He did not. And what’s more, a tilted head:

“Your name should always carry a tilde. It suits it.”

“You don’t say.”

He smiled. He didn't. But he had.

"Do you know me?" I asked, the world's textures changing against me. What I really wanted to ask was: Am I violent? Is being good making enemies?

Ezequiel twisted his head to the left. The chains on his chest were glittering. I wanted to crawl inside him.

"I'd say I do. Why?"

The curation of the self was not something I felt particularly proficient in. Couldn't really say that. So much one can't say... I had as many thoughts as a horrible thing the host had made of gelatin into shots. I confessed:

"I'm myself with you except that I'm speaking English."

For a while he didn't move from his spot against the beige wall.

"I understand that."

I was almost on his chest then, for a second. My palms on top of his red t-shirt. Then I got pushed around into a crowd, and into a group picture. There were few things I hated less than group pictures, the question swimming around in the air and in everyone's head-- if I should be part of it. But groups wasn't one of the things I hated. I thought of way out. I offered to take a picture of them all, and they agreed to it. Then they insisted I get into another version of the picture, with me in it. I wondered, distinctly, if it was always like that.

\*

The Boston metro was so far underneath the ground it felt like borrowing into the earth. Mole is an emotion, I discovered. It was claustrophobic but so, so efficient. Ezequiel and Lila had already gotten off at Porter Square. The Porter Square stop had largest staircase, like climbing up to Joan's apartment but higher, like the stairway to Heaven that Zeppelin sang of.

There was a Boston uniform, I came to notice. Similar cuts, muted colours. Subtle wealth I heard it called. It was prevalent. Like tennis sweater sleeves tied elegantly over each other on a male neck. Someone in a Youtube video said that Boston's history of upper high class was linked to its hostility to fashion, as a nouveau rich faux pas. Wasn't that something?

"What are you thinking about?"

When I turned my head to the left, a man I could have sworn had been wearing glasses before had his face bare. It was startling, and yet I didn't feel it would be normal to share that with Paul. Who had for some reason ignored the silence the group unanimously agreed on whenever we were inside the metro, armpits exposed as we clung to bars, weight always shifting. Paul was clumsy, so his coat was intruding into someone else's air, his hands adorned with Hello Kitty bandaids, his presence usually accompanied or announced by soft "oh fuck"s around a table's edge.

"Someone is smiling with their eyes," he added. Not blinking.

\*

Joan, on the phone, braiding her hair: "What I can't figure out is how we figured out we can't dream up new faces. Who realized? And how? Make that make sense."

It was on speaker. Paul's voice came through the other side, grainy.

"This is why you woke me up, Joana? I needed two more hours for my beauty sleep."

It was 2:21 PM.

"Even a coma wouldn't help you. And don't call me Joana."

Paul groaned. I had made the same hungover sound a couple of hours ago, before coffee and savoury oats, before a shower, before some adult cartoon show that made Joan cackle and choke on flax seeds.

“You may be right. I’m getting old or fat, I think. Maybe both. Should I cut back on drinking?” he asked.

Joan’s eyes met mine in the wall-length mirror. Her fingers didn’t stop weaving but I knew she was curious what I thought. Not what I would judge. Those were different.

Quite frankly, yes. Joan and her friends drank a worrisome amount. This was convenient to me. Before I had been shipped off to Boston, I had wondered if I’d have to find some crafty way to drink as much as I needed, if Joan had become American enough to care I wasn’t twenty-one, if she’d try to tell me I had a problem.

My crumpled, pyjama-clad bean-bag-strewn form shrugged in the mirror. Joan nodded.

“It’s fine, we come from a long line of alcoholics.”

“That reminds me, I haven’t told you what my uncle said to my mom.”

“We’re accumulating chisme by the day, I swear, like it’s brewing,” said Lila’s voice, sounding farther away. I hadn’t known she was there. I hadn’t known she would know a word of ours like chisme. It was nice, to have meanings spread across a continent. But I also questioned it.

“We’ll be there in thirty. Forty if you want us to bring Sapporo.”

\*

They were in the apartment an hour and twenty minutes later, with an awful beer that advertised its 12% rate with the name “Lobotomy Beer.” Lila’s favourite, apparently. It amazed me how often Joan was with other people. Didn’t they ever get sick of each other? Was it the alcohol that did that? Ezequiel was bending at some awkward angle in a Twister mat with holes. It looked like moths had gotten to it. Red left knee. Blue hand. Yellow hand. One could

see him in all sorts of directions. This shit would have been easier if I didn't have to see him all the time.

"You got an alcohol bottle tattooed sober?" I asked, for clarification.

"I don't have to explain myself to you which is great," he huffed, "because I don't think I can."

Other people were playing Twister but who cared. No one twisted like that.

Joan did, for a minute, long after we were done playing Twister, too drunk to be bipeds, pole muscles but no pole, and purple lace underwear showed. She must have known it showed. She must know and not care, or care on purpose.

We ventured outside through the rain. I lost my voice at karaoke. Lady Gaga songs were the only ones I really knew the lyrics to in English. Most people sang melodramatic duets. Lila was upset she couldn't find the Glee covers. Ezequiel didn't really sing, just nodded along with a soft smile, and joined with the choruses. Joan fell to her knees in a rendition of one of Shakira's early songs, not early enough to be in Spanish, but already blonde and still with feeling in her words.

It was all mellow until the scene outside the karaoke bar, when we saw a fight. No one we knew, just people outside the tacky red velvet line. They were going at it. It looked personal, more than some stranger who tried to take a cellphone from a back pocket. What had the tall man done to deserve that sadism? I watched blood splatter into the pavement, like a painting. I saw hands turning into fists. I think I heard something crack, most likely a rib. Bruised, at least. That was the thing. The blows, they landed. As was their nature.

Joan whistled loud enough through the rain that someone in a taxi stopped for us. Everyone clapped her in the back. I sat on her lap on the overcrowded taxi back to the

apartment. I craned my neck to watch the violence disappear round the corner. That was a nice miniskirt she had on.

\*

I was lying on a very fuzzy rug. What happened was everyone was there but Ezequiel. Late as usual, Lila scoffed.

“I swear to god,” Paul said, “if he doesn’t show up any minute now...”

Joan made an “x” with her hands.

“Six bucks he’s using my old gravity bong right now.”

“That’s just losing money.”

They laughed and I stared at the scratched floor some more.

“You didn’t know?” Lila asked me in the kitchen, later, where we were alone. “Ezequiel has never not been high any time that you’ve seen him. Ask Paul why.”

Of course who I really wanted to ask was Joan. Why did she date someone who seemed to fit the drug addict definition for so long? I couldn’t. Treacherous waters. She wouldn’t have the answer I was looking for, anyway (had he been high at the church? That seemed impossible. No?). Joan called it quits after a while. She had to open the cafe on Monday mornings. Lila was snoring softly on the couch bed. I turned to the silent Paul, who was watching her.

I asked why no one was trying to stop Ezequiel from indulging into dependance.

“We tolerate it because he’s a cunt otherwise,” Paul said, solemnly, eyes far.

Which was something.

\*

Gin was a bad idea, as it almost never is. We had all played pool at a seedy bar and a card game that very night. A regular Wednesday evening. I felt like sprawling around a table. But it was Joan's old iPhone that gave the impression of being sprawled on the floor, as she interpreted Paul's horoscope.

"See, you feel that way because your moon is in Cancer. It's all intense. Your Virgo sun demands that you be precise, and your Libra rising makes it mean you care about being liked."

Paul made the only face someone being accused of wanting to be liked can make.

Joan plowed on.

"Lila is a Virgo too, right, but she's a Virgo rising, so she's very transparent as to who she is and how her opinions matter more than anyone else's."

Here she stopped. Lila shrugged and so Joan added: "To her."

"And her Gemini moon makes her a menace. Your Venus is in Aquarius, Paul, which explains why she's still with you. Let me check what house it's in."

Paul's desperation was naked.

"What Venus is Ezequiel in, huh?"

His plan worked. Joan couldn't stand violations to her peculiar brand of incorrectness. And Ezequiel commanded her attention and speech the most when he wasn't in the room.

"That's not how that works."

"Show some respect," Lila chimed in. Apparently she had taught Joan how to read a birth chart. They both had an app downloaded and were friends on it. She'd done Paul's ages ago, was sulking he didn't even remember.

"And he's a Sagittarius Venus. But a Capricorn moon!"

“Oh no,” said Paul. “Not the Capricorn moon.”

Joan laughed while Paul pocketed his phone. I figured he would delete the app next time he got up to use the bathroom.

“Paul, you don’t even know the half of it.”

“Aren’t you a Sagittarius, Joan? Isn’t it good that it’s not all the same?” I asked.

Big mistake. All eyes turned to me, my back to a laptop screening a ten hour crackling fire Youtube video.

“What a Gemini thing to say,” Lila observed.

How did she know I was a Gemini?

“Girl, I know the degree of your Mercury.”

“What?”

“You’re a Gemini sun, Pisces moon, and Aquarius rising,” Joan said, focused on her phone’s screen. Was she reading that off the app? Or did she already know that? Why did Lila?

“What does that mean?”

Joan’s eyes suddenly came up to mine.

“It means I don’t trust you for a second.”

\*

In a dream I was back in my bedroom in Chile, but I was about six, rummaging through clothes, looking for a bright yellow dress. I couldn’t recall anything but that moment the following morning. There was a time in which my father would bring back Disney princess dresses for my costume drawer. I had almost all of them except my favourite, Jasmine, because her bellybutton showed and he said he wasn’t raising me to be a whore. I didn’t have

the word for déjà vu when I watched Gloria unwrap a Birkin bag for Christmas, Moschino shoes for the hell of it, a Banana Republic gift card for someone forgotten anniversary. My father devoted himself to one person at a time, like precise clockwork, on its station several years before the pointy long needle ticked to its next station. Only just one at a time. I'd had my turn. I knew that.

\*

I had the feeling one had when running to the subway doors on the opposite side of the platform, knowing they were bound to close, imminently. Except I didn't take the subway to Ezequiel's pet shop. I walked.

\*

The pet shop had a bell that rang really too shrilly when rang. It was a terribly suspicious looking establishment. A faded sign outside said "Al's". Another, handwritten, said "SALE! 2X1 goldfish!!!". I was Al's customer. I walked in with the blood drained away from my face. The cold. Great start.

"May I--"

He had been leafing through some magazine. He saw me and the leaf dropped. He raised a very expressive eyebrow.

I was quiet. My face wasn't. My breath wasn't either.

"How did you find out the address?" he said, annoyingly unsurprised.

I didn't want to tell him I had looked up all the pet shops in his neighbourhood and followed the process of elimination. That necessitated effort, interest, affection.

"This is Elvis," he said, pointing to a beard dragon his with left shoulder. Very green. A hint of blue. Reminded me of someone for sure.

“Hi, Elvis.”

“I know a woman who keeps one in a bathtub. She buys bugs here.”

He gave me a tour of the space. Out front was where they had intricate fish bathtubs, or whatever they were called in English. Those tanks with little castles and other *Finding Nemo* kind of decorations. In the middle they had the boring dog food and some fancy golden millennial brands. By the counter, catnip. And in the back were the squirming worms, if I wanted to see. His uniform shirt was baby blue and collared. I wanted to see.

I followed through a door into a darker room, a maze of unused fish tanks and supply boxes. There seemed to be some live creatures on the right wall. We went there, and the door closed behind me.

Ezequiel had his hands in his pockets as he looked at the fish that up close looked really quite sick, as detached from the sight as if it had been a lava lamp. Then he looked at me.

I realized he would never do anything about the suggestion written all over his body the last month. Even at that moment. His eyes, shoulders, angled.

It mattered to me that I didn't go home empty handed. He must have realized I was dangling on a precipice.

“Entonces?” He asked.

Entonces?

Then?

I walked a step. I had pictured a kiss over the counter, clutching, as I walked there. Something romantic and passionate. Kissing him was less than what I imagined it would be. It was half as painful. Just as strong.

I found the balance of pressure against his lips. I tugged at the curls at the back of his neck. I gave into something. His hands were sometimes on my waist, my shoulders, my face. At points holding and at others stroking. He was a good kisser. Entertaining.

His nose nudged at my neck.

My head was gone. I hadn't planned this far. Hadn't shaved. It could have been twenty minutes, it could have been five. I still pulled down my sipper and took off my socks.

When my shirt was on the ground and goosebumps on display he turned me around, so my palms were splayed on the fish tank in front of us. I made claws out of my fingers on the railings. Found out those cabinets would move anyway. Boxes shuffled. A little water of the top tanks was splashing onto the floor. It moved to touch my naked toes, cold, and it was more erotic than it should have been.

The most curious thing happened. He was breathing by my ear, his hands on my hipbones now, and I could feel sweat sticking to the hairs by my temple. Seeking the cold kiss of the glass, I moved my face and opened my eyes. I stared straight into ones I recognized. It was an axolotl.

That should not have been possible. Axolotls could only be found in Mexico. It didn't belong there in Al's Boston pet shop. I almost asked Ezequiel to stop moving, panting, immediately and explain. Of course I didn't. As he pushed into me like an animal I wondered if Al was a powerful man, if Al sold or bought in some strange aquatic black market. Then he made me stop wondering. I made a noise I didn't know I could make, and it cut across the whole pet shop back room.

\*

Axolotls are the walking Mexican fish. They're actually amphibians. Critically endangered and everything.

\*

My head itched all morning. I was stalling going home, in a Harvard square bench. I didn't really feel guilt. It felt like it had happened a million years ago to someone else. It had been forty-five minutes ago, to me.

Whenever I had lice as a kid it was a nightmare because my hair texture really disagreed with the fine little combs that Fernanda insisted my father should use. Aunt Belinda would have put a product in and called it a day, but Fernanda had a whole system, and she had a way of persuading people. Last time she visited us in Chile, she got to me. Raked through my curls. First I had to see her do it to Joan. Twelve by then, going to her first parties. Much cooler than I. From the rim of the bathtub I watched as Fernanda plowed through Juana's hair savagely. I half-expected the comb to come out wet with blood. It didn't. But Juana was crying, right there on my toilet seat.

\*

From a website called Animal Fact, in an article titled "17 Astonishing Facts about Axolotls", Professor Stephane Roy of the University of Montreal:

"You can cut the spinal cord, crush it, remove a segment, and it will regenerate. You can cut the limbs at any level—the wrist, the elbow, the upper arm—and it will regenerate, and it's perfect. There is nothing missing, there's no scarring on the skin at the site of amputation, every tissue is replaced. They can regenerate the same limb 50, 60, 100 times. And every time: perfect."

\*

I had to face Joan and there might have still been semen in my thighs. He had pulled out, so at least I didn't have to worry about the very worst case scenario-- another young baby being announced on the family groupchat. Ignacio's step-uncle. My head still itched.

My CharlieCard beeped against the reader and I thought of what to say when I walked into the apartment. What gestures to make. How I could explain my smell.

Joan pulling out the inflatable mattress.

"That was here all along?"

"Mom is coming," she answered.

Her hands were on her hips and she was worrying her lip.

"What? When?"

I hadn't seen Fernanda in seven years. We talked on the phone, of course. But flesh was another thing.

"This afternoon."

I helped Joan get down the mattress and then inflate it. We both tried to catch our breath.

"I need a beer, or a ginger tea. Or Xanax."

"Amen," I said.

Spending half a summer with Joan was very different from an afternoon with Aunt Fernanda.

"I'm not ready to see her. Which is why she never lets me. She called this morning, she's spending the night here on her way to some conference. She's using me as a layover."

"At least it's short."

“When God closes a door...”

She drifted off, then snapped her fingers. They were painted purple.

“Let’s invite everyone we know for dinner. We’ll scatter her attention with more people.

We’ll tell her it’s a traditional end of the week dinner. Genius.”

\*

“I see you friends are still deadbeats,” was the first thing Fernanda said a few stress-fuelled hours of cleaning later, after kissing us both on the cheek. She must have meant the Blue Moon carcasses by the front door, which Joan and I had actually polished off ourselves. It wasn’t recycling day yet.

“At least I have them,” Joan said, not with a glance at me but its suggestion.

“You’ve gained weight. I can barely recognize you. You think beauty is free, Juana?”

Joan raised her hands and eyes to the ceiling.

“I’ll go get you a glass of water, ma.”

Fernanda’s outfit had many lines in it. The line of her corduroy blazer. The lines of the squares in her skirt. She turned her sharp cheekbones in my direction.

“Oí que hablaste con tu padre.”

“I heard you talked with your father.”

\*

“Neoteny” is the word for animals that look like they did when they were younger as they get older.

\*

Fernanda explained and apologized she couldn’t stay long, once she was settled in the kitchen. In fact, she wouldn’t even unpack. She had taken a plane from Washington, deciding

to change the destination last minute and land here to see us, then take the bus to Maryland in the morning. It had been so long, after all. I asked what her conference was about, expecting some boring answer about work. It was a Jesuit one. When my father used the word “conference” it meant he would spend five days in some Sheraton’s lobby, having too many Mai Tais. Shaking hands. At least that’s what I gathered from the pictures he’d send Gloria, who’d lean over the kitchen island and cereal bowls to show me.

After talking about the flight and the weather Fernanda got to what I knew she would.

“Te enteraste, me imagino?”

“You’ve heard, I take it?”

Fernanda had recently won the lottery (a small one) and would not stop posting about it or God being good on Facebook. She had been the first person to send me a Facebook friend request when I made one at fourteen.

“Of course.”

“Por supuesto.”

I didn’t like that one. Made me want to crinkle my nose. I wanted it to mean “as supposed.”

She moved on to the church involvement. Joan had mentioned it. Honestly I had not gone back to see Segundo or his dying church, but the translation work was done.

“Too bad your father is a pagan or a heretic.”

“Que pena que tu padre es un pagano o un hereje.”

At least she didn’t say sodomite. And did she know her daughter was bisexual and her friends polyamorous? Said daughter had made up a shift and left fifteen minutes in. Smart. Genius, she would have said.

“Como te decia, tu papa me dijo que al fin hablaron. Mas que nada es por eso que estoy aca. Y la plata de la loteria. Y bueno, para eso esta la plata.”

“As I was saying to you, your father told me      And the lottery money. Well, this is what  
you finally talked. It is mainly why I’m here.      money is for.”

She reached over and pinched my cheek. A gesture I hadn’t felt in years.

Did my father send her then? Classic him, delegating. Or did she come on her own accord? Why? To check on me?

Fernanda started coughing.

“Juana!” she yelled, even though she wasn’t there. “I just swallowed one of her little seeds. Why does she get dates with seeds on them?”

She gestured at the packet Joan had laid out next to a cup of coffee. She expected an answer. Fernanda always did.

“They’re organic,” I said, in her defence. Odd to speak to in English. Wasn’t sure why we were doing that.

“I can’t believe I raised her sometimes. That reminds me.”

She handed me supplements to take, from deep within her brown leather bag. Also her carry-on.

“Este invierno mata, hija.”

“This winter kills, daughter.”

That sounded strange, translated, but it filled me with warmth whenever her or Belinda, each with her eccentricities, verbalized me as their own. I gulped down four foul tasting tablets, showed Fernanda where the towels were (I was sure she knew just as I was sure she would not forgive the lack of manners), and excused myself to my computer for some axolotl digging.

The fact was I couldn’t. I was trying too hard to act normal, and the past had sucked me in. If it wasn’t five hours ago, at the pet shop, water dripping, fish swimming, Ezequiel

saying my name in its fullness, with the correct verbal fluctuations, so, so close to me... Fernanda had taught physical education at a college before retiring, recently. When asked about his family abroad, my father only said she was a college professor and left it at that. She was the oldest, at 62. Joan was somewhat of a miracle, being born at 42. Belinda was the youngest with 54. My mother would have been 56. As an only child (for now) I couldn't really imagine having siblings, but it didn't take much to imagine that the middle one dying first, at 36 at that, must have been odd for them. I was glad I never met my grandparents. That would have been too sad.

A few hours later Joan was back and they were arguing in person instead than over text and the fridge was the fullest I had ever seen. Fernanda had gotten it into her head that she should make dinner for all of Joan's no-good friends. Usually the fridge was populated by a couple of soaking chickpeas, chia seeds being "activated", a croissant Joan stole from work. Fernanda happened. There were fresh strawberries in plastic beds. Extremely yellow corn. Boneless chicken breasts. A five kilogram bag of potatoes (how did Fernanda carry all that with her scrawny little Catholic arms?). And dates. Pitted and unpitted. A note on the fridge door, between all the concert tickets Joan had taped there: Gracias. Their handwriting was exactly the same. Large letters, pointed, a mix of half cursive and the other kind. I didn't know who was thanking who.

\*

All axolotls fuck early in the year. Say March to June. They can have up to three breeding cycles in captivity.

\*

All day my head screamed *Ezequiel Ezequiel Ezequiel* and the second I swung open the door and saw his face his name escaped me. He seemed an unnamed thing commanding my attention, too big for a word. He took off his snowy shoes like nothing. Hugged Fernanda with all the familiarity in the world. Right. Of course they would know each other. I wasn't sure why it hadn't occurred to me. She was his potential in-law for two years. She didn't smile but he was the only other one he allowed to help with the cazuela.

Me and Joan had been at it for over half an hour now. It felt like biting my tongue. She kept cracking her knuckles, shooting glances at Fernanda. Sometimes smiling the widest I had seen that summer. Too volatile to notice me noticing her. She was wearing a turtleneck that hid most of her tattoos, and the music she had playing from the speaker was more mellow than usual. Jazz was mellow for Joan. At one point she snuck me a thumbs up. I found that looking at her, there was pain, but no shame, strangely enough.

Paul, a glass of Pinot in, entertained us with the story of a date gone awry at an amusement park I hadn't heard of. It had to do with Lila's BPD. I didn't know what BPD stood for but smiled a bit, like Lila was doing, and so did Fernanda even though I was certain she didn't know what it meant either.

We folded Dollar Store napkins and got what Joan called the nice plates out on the new Ikea living room table. One thing I would say for Fernanda is that she was always generous with her portions and pours. A good cook, too. Belinda could only bake. But the meat was tender, the pumpkin sweet, the oregano proportioned perfectly. The taste of home was nourishing and delicious. I wanted to write Fernanda a very nice note too. Maybe I was getting Yankeeized. Them and their cards.

"Y los chistes como van?"

"How are the jokes going?"

She must have known several of them were in Not Constantinople but she asked Ezequiel, specifically, in Spanish. I supposed as the ex-boyfriend he still mattered the most to her.

He nodded. Answered in a mix of Spanish and English: “Muy bien, señora. We’ve got a gig coming up next month.”

Yeah, his Spanish was a bit wobbly. Anyway: Would I be gone by then? Did he like the cazuela? Could I ask him if he saw the axolotl too?

Fernanda was looking at me, even though Lila was saying something now. I made quick work of my plate. Heard the end of an exciting opportunity for them while trying not to feel like a fish hooked on a line.

“I see,” said Fernanda.

\*

Fernanda was gone with Saturday’s morning sun, although I had a vague sense I had heard her and Joan hugging and saying their goodbyes. Maybe. Sundown replaced her with a snake.

The appearance of an orange reptile, however small, kind of put processing her visit in the back burner. Which was already delaying processing the pet shop sex. The snake sat on Ezequiel’s left shoulder. It was a small string with eyes, really. Not something you had to worry about stretching out to measure if it could eat you.

“Which happens,” Lila informed us.

Joan was pacing. Everyone else was on the ground. I had opened the door to Ezequiel and the snake, and then Joan called Paul and Lila, who rushed over. We could all see her

thinking. Every now and then the snake's split tongue would venture outside its mouth, and Joan would interrupt her pacing to coo.

"Okay, how much does a dead rat cost?"

The situation, Ezequiel had explained, was that the snake had been at the shop too long. Owner wanted to be rid of it. It was this or the municipal city bin. Clearly, because Paul was sitting very, very far away from it and kept looking at the door. Lila had probably dragged him to see the snake, with his heels leaving comical dents on the concrete.

The snake. From the pet shop.

"Not as much as you'd think. And I know a guy a pet shop."

"You've got pet shops plugs like that, Z?"

"I am the pet shop plug, Paul."

"Give me Britney."

Communal confusion.

Joan scoffed. "Obviously I'm calling the snake Britney. It'd be better if it was yellow but it's close enough."

I thought Ezequiel might make fun of her or protest his snake being named after a Britney Spears performance. Instead, he gingerly passed the snake on to Joan. It looked at home in her. It? He? She?

"Do we know if it's a girl or a boy?"

"It's a snake."

"Do snakes have biological sexes?"

"I know they have cold blood."

“Everyone shut up,” Joan said, dancing a little with her new orange necklace. “Come see our room, Britney.”

As she left, Paul breathed an audible sigh of relief. Ezequiel rose and dusted off his jeans.

“I knew it. I’ve got the terrarium hidden behind some mail in the lobby but that won’t last.”

As he left the door clicked, and Paul turned to Lila. Eager.

“I don’t think pet shops work like that.”

“Five dollars he bought the snake,” she said.

“Does no one know how betting works in this group?”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted. “But what?”

When their heads turned to me I felt like I was intruding on a couples aside. Whatever. My heart was in my throat.

“Joan’s into snakes,” Lila clarified. Helping no one.

“Fuck yeah,” Joan said, with no small of amounts of morbidity, when she waltzed back into the room. “I really should be mad about all these surprise visits to my apartment but I can’t bring myself to care.”

Did I count? I was just relieved this happened after Fernanda left.

She lied down, the snake on her stomach.

“I guess he’s not through, then,” Paul mused.

“Through?”

“Trying to get me back,” Joan said, nonchalantly. “Fat chance.”

“Good effort.”

“Good effort.”

Good effort.

“Except now that I have snake I’ve never needed him less. All this reminds me he still has my rope kit. Let’s see if he brings that around.”

The snake was friendly. It had a slow way of blinking. I stroked it like a cat while Lila tried to find its latin name. Joan decorated the terrarium, now under the windowsill, by my bed. Britney. So she had been at the pet shop yesterday? While we fucked? I kept touching the thing. Ezequiel was back. He watched me do that. Like it was a whole activity. What was going on behind his curtains? Eyes like being ground into a thin powder. His mouth didn’t move but I pictured him saying: “You can’t leave anything alone, can’t you?”

\*

Julio Cortázar wrote something called “Axolotl” that I hadn’t read. One of the few South American writers (people, even) foreigners seemed able to name. An Argentine. Pablo Neruda was one of ours but people always seemed to assume he was Argentine or Cuban. He was the one who wrote *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*. In English it’s translated to *Twenty love poems and a song of despair*. A song of despair doesn’t have the same ring to it. And it wasn’t of despair, it was despaired. If that was even a word. Anyway, that collection was published when he was nineteen. A few months younger than me, which I resented. What else? Neruda was a communist.

\*

I did something bad. I called the pet shop. Hadn’t fully meant to until it was dialing.

“Hello?” said a gruff voice. Presumably, Al.

“Is Ezequiel in?”

No answer. Should have asked if he owned axolotls. Shortly, he was there.

“Hey. Who is this?”

“Vero.”

Oh God, what had I done. I kicked at some pebbles with my shoe. I looked for an exit even though I was already outside, bundled up in some cobbled street I didn't know. I might as well go through with it, I thought.

“Did you mean to hurt Joan or win her back?”

To his credit, he didn't play dumb.

“Why not both?”

It felt like the sort of thing someone said while throwing off a cigarette butt off a balcony, if that made sense.

“She's my cousin.”

“So why are you calling me?”

Who knew. Who knew if in the back room just a few meters away from him as we spoke he had thought of Joan's shadow. The way I thought of her ghost, every now and then, when we were alone.

“Listen, I'm at work. I'll call you later?”

“All right.”

Every Sunday, at the lunch table, my father laughed at my habit of leaving sides on the plate, but licking salt off bones.

\*

The axolotl measures between 15-45 centimeters in length at the adult stage.

\*

The sound of Joan lighting matches for the stove (for the morning pre-coffee ginger tea) had been my alarm. Now it was Britney devouring mice. Although I was told it would only happen every three days.

“Or so,” said Joan. Said Firefox, really.

Joan was pleased with the snake and although she didn't say it, with her mother's visit. I watched from the couch/bed as she packed a slutty enough gym bag for her pole class and hummed. All day, Ezequiel didn't show up at the front door. He didn't contact me in any way. But I remained optimistic.

My father's WhatsApp profile picture had always been the same picture I had chosen for him when I was nine. Arms crossed, a waterfall behind him. Saltos de Petrohué. The first trip he took with Gloria, who wasn't anything but his boss, then. To my knowledge. It was as relief, unblocking him and seeing that picture. I dared to text.

“Como se siente la infidelidad para ti?”      “What does infidelity feel like to you?”

My phone buzzed sixteen minutes later.

“Para mi? Que has hecho Vero”

“To me? What have you done Vero”

When the soul tugs you listen. So I had some of Joan's Haribo gummy bears. When in America, I figured. If one lives with Joan for about three weeks, one learns it simply cannot be her, being comfortable, all of the time. Because one can never be, truly, around Joan. She is so at ease it puts everyone else on their guard. Honesty and transparency that comes with protective spikes. The point is I didn't hide that I was eating her gummy bears. Joan didn't mind. She came out of her sanctuary, the bedroom I had only glimpsed a couple of times, and stole some from the bowl. Joan mainly had bowls. Just in different sizes.

I watched her chew sugar. She stood there, contemplative, eyes unfocused. Like it was a whole activity. I wondered if we would go another five years without speaking to each other. If in fifteen I could lean in close to her ear at someone's funeral or wedding at say, you know, it's funny now, isn't it, but when I was staying with you all that time ago I fucked Ezequiel. If she'd laugh. If until then I'd be wondering: are you healthy? Are you happy? Are you well?

I rummaged in the bowl for the colours I liked, the blue ideally. Two weeks into the depths of February. I left in a bit over a fortnight. She kept chewing.

And me, already: Are you fine, Joan? Healthy? Are you well? Loved?

\*

There are things I have ethical qualms about. I have always known I would not read Franz Kafka's diary, for example. Fucking my cousin's ex-boyfriend is not one, apparently. I would have thought it would be. Privacy seemed to matter more to me than property. What a thing to learn about the self. I could write it down, to remember, and run the risk of having it

read. Nailed to paper like a dead moth in a museum. Poor Kafka. A diary is a diary, no? I wouldn't read anyone's (but I'll fuck their ex-boyfriend).

Last July someone brought him up in a class. I remember it was July because we were all shivering in that poorly-lit room, and the mountains were coated; I had thought them uncaring before, before I knew winter in Chile was gentle, before I learned that there are no mountains in Boston, you just push against a wall of cold wind. I remember it was a girl that everyone liked so naturally I was suspicious of her. I remember the glasses that were in style and how she cleared her throat before bringing up Kafka in our group discussion about telling apart affective disorders. I don't remember which one she argued for, or what passage from his diary she made a vague allusion to. All I knew and was blown away by, still and beige in our little desks, is that she diagnosed a corpse.

\*

Joan was picking up more shifts. There were no empty or invitational bottles lying around. There was no faint cannabis in the air. Some fruit flies, though.

This made me restless. Like I was stuck in a half-finished symphony. Notes buzzed around like in a pinball machine, and I found myself where I always end up, steeled in front of a closed door.

He was home. He let me in without a word. The proper bedroom, Lila's door, was closed. It had a way of making the living room seem so intimate. At least more than Joan's and the couch/bed. Here, the water stain in the ceiling were romantic. Before he could sit down on his mattress again (we both slept close to the floor, did that mean anything, does anything), I interrupted.

"Do you have any drugs?"

The subtlest tension.

“Are you going to give me a talk?”

“No. Can I have them?”

Ezequiel gestured to an unlabelled bottle in what could be considered a nightstand. Good enough for me. I marched over. What kind of liquor and manners, forgotten things. He had taken me. Why shouldn't I take from him?

Juice. It tasted like juice.

“It's cranberry,” he said, lounging panther-like in his dingy mattress. “And some MDMA.”

“Are you going to a party or something?”

“I was. Now you're here.”

Fuck this man. Fuck this man, fuck this man, fuck this man. I buried my anger and the imperative in the neck of the bottle, like some sort of reverse ostrich.

I sat down on the bed. There were approximately ten centimetres between his knees and mine.

“I've never done molly. What if I get scared?”

He shook his head dismissively. Strangely reassuring.

“You can only be scared of things you know.”

Ezequiel was not a philosopher or smart in the ways I usually considered but he had his unusual wisdoms, and the overwhelming sense about his person that he had thought a lot about himself and the world. I could deal with his drug habit as long as it wasn't all he was, and as long as he shared. I could deal with his questionable actions better than the moralizing and damning people in the church only Gloria went to these days, or the Tweets from my

university peers. Which made me think. Lectures on the exclusion of the Other, on the psychology of totalitarian states, etc. Isn't this what Joan said he was all about? I wanted to argue, be right, and I wanted to connect on what mattered to him. Joan's friends, so eclectic and electrifyingly different at first, had come to bore me. A competition in originality. No one ever talked about anything with substance.

"That's not true. We fear what we don't know, or understand."

"Think smaller, Vero. You're afraid that the worst thing you know will happen again."

Unexpected. He struck me as macro. He struck me as far away. Even then he was phrasing it in a way that distanced himself from the concept of fear. Like my father before me, when my pride was hurt, I poked at wounds.

"Are you?"

He almost choked on the liquid. I watched him cough and did not pat his back. One intimate encounter with him and I knew we were both sadists.

"What is it?" I asked, when he finally caught his breath, but stayed quiet, with a small amount of mirth in those eyes.

"It's a joke."

\*

Was it surrendering to the obscenity of it that made it so delicious? Was it that he seemed to know that I liked to be cornered, pressed down, unable to choose? Was it that he could play that role so confidently, leaving me unable to pity or make fun of a failed attempt at domination? Was it that he let me do it back? People had recoiled from my nails and teeth before. Not him. I was on my elbows, on my back, on my stomach, he was everywhere, all the time, again and again. He made me into something feral, pleasantly unrooted in any sort of

context. Sinking to the earth and compliant to its laws by way of him tracing the arch of my nose.

After 2 AM I knew it was most likely the drugs and that they weren't so much in our systems anymore and that I had missed the subway. I would have to Uber back to an empty apartment, an empty stomach, and an empty fridge.

He had fallen asleep. First I put my clothes on. Then off. I made a decision, then a cave of out his elbow crease. I took the liberty, which had a melodic quality. I will leave a part of me here, I thought. When I need it it will be here, in these muscles. Tattooed. I will stay here.

I fell asleep thinking about nothing, nothing.

\*

Foreign beds always made me rise earlier. So did empty ones.

At least this was an opportunity to scavenge around somewhat. Some things were obvious. The enormous Mexican flag above the mattress called attention to itself from any point in the living room. Closer inspection revealed the corners were frayed, one in particular burnt. He kept his books, sociology textbooks mainly, under the bed. There was a drawer with vitamins, lighters, rolling paper, assorted chords, NyQuil. An Android phone charger in almost every outlet, waiting with its tongue in the air. The kitchenette had more of Lila's influence in it-- the fridge had some disturbing stick drawings plastered on its door.

Speak of the devil.

I hadn't heard her come in. I turned around and she was there, her back to me. Would ducking make sense? No. It would make it worse. I was so used to her always being at Paul's that it had come back to bite me. Got too comfortable. Ezequiel most likely had not told her.

Why would he? What would I? Lila took her headphones out, one by one. Time to face the real music.

When Lila saw me in her kitchen she took some deep breaths. Then she unravelled her scarf like it was normal I was there. She lost all her layers (did she usually move that slow) until she stood in last night's party clothes. A glittering sequin dress.

"You're why he never showed up, huh?"

I had no clue what to do. What had happened was obvious. I was in my little shorts.

"What I don't get is why you're throwing your lot in with him."

My answer had to be considered carefully. Lila had sensitive information and an insensitive personality. Joan was her best friend; she owed me nothing. I thought that, maybe, she would respect truth.

"I can't help myself."

The words did not sound nearly as pathetic as I thought they would. They came out rather matter-of-fact. I didn't dare ask if that was satisfactory enough to her. Or if she would tell Joan where her cousin was last night. Nevertheless as she nodded and as she left I had the sense we had agreed on something. I gathered my scattered belongings with the shower running in the background.

\*

There is a "New International Version" of the Bible. Available online. In it, Genesis: 33 reads: "That night they got their father to drink wine, and the older daughter went in and slept with him. He was not aware of it when she lay down or when she got up."

They do the same for the younger daughter.

That information made me close the computer. I didn't like it and I didn't know why. The clouds outside were a layer or curdled milk. At least no one in the Harvard library, brimming with North American talent and self-assuredness and soft green lighting, knew anything about the Delambre family. That was a comfort.

\*

"You can't fool me."

"I don't even know which of the things I'm fooling you on you're talking about."

Paul mumbled something that sounded suspiciously like "motherfucker" and lunged over the cards at Ezequiel. It was all playful. Probably.

"Who's hungry?" asked Joan, rising from the couch and avoiding the thrashing limbs. "I've got quick oats. These babies can be done in three minutes."

Lila leaned, all suggested conspiracy, towards me. I tensed, somewhat. My sense was that, barring Paul, Lila would lean over only to threaten. I missed the days he talked to me often.

"There's a catch. They're not good."

"What's that?" Joan, almost at the kitchen.

Then Lila did and said something I thought would make me like her forever. She reached into her knitted bag.

"A cookie."

"What for?" Joan's voice was distraught. Her hands looked a bit more skeletal by the day.

"Later," Lila said, even as she split one in half, spoils falling to the carpet floor. White chocolate and macademia nuts. She handed me the left side. "You look like you want one."

“I do?”

I did. I'd had oats four times that week already. Better than Britney's dead freezer rats.

I had that cookie and another and more rum (I suggested the pirate theme after stalking Keira Knightley and Joan agreed because apparently she had gone to prom with a woman) and my head was very, very close to Ezequiel's lap. The crack between the couch cushions, the San Andreas fault. Bound to give. I'd lost track of conversation. The entirety of the ceiling was spinning; maybe if Joan had a fan it would have stayed still. In the background, I was aware that Joan wanted post-oat lipgloss and apparently Lila had some. She used her finger to dab some from the fluffy end to her lips.

Lila: “Are you kidding?”

More: “We've literally kissed. I've kissed everyone in this room.”

That made me tune in.

Lila's voice. Proud and sweet. I had heard her sing beautifully at karaoke and yesterday in the shower, seen her avoid stepping on an ant with her platform boots. It is so funny how some people try to be dark and from their guts comes sugar.

“Except for you, Vero.”

I suppose in that situation you either had to look at me or at Lila. Lila, crawling through the garden of litter, at the shore of the couch, kneeling in front of Ezequiel's seated shape and my horizontal one.

She kissed me, quite briefly. Like a contract, or a letter's wax seal.

“There.”

Her hands were by her sides so it must have been Ezequiel's in my curls, tugging, shielded from Joan and Paul by Lila's body. She must have seen it. God, what was her

allegiance? Her roommate, her best friend, or her boyfriend? Who she was kissing people in front of. Me.

“A full set.”

\*

“How did you meet Lila again?”

Joan did not interrupt her yoga routine. Her limbs were twisted like vines.

“Couldn’t tell you. She kinda crept up on me.”

She released her bind.

“Why?”

“No reason.”

“Was that the first girl you kissed?”

It had been. And that had not even been a fragment of what unsettled me. At least she wasn’t my secretary and I wasn’t married and expecting a child and still fucking her on the desk from behind. I mean, that part I assumed. But people talked and tongues wagged and I didn’t particularly want to imagine my father being fucked. I poured some half cashew half almond unsweetened vanilla milk into two jars of coffee, the one with honey hers. The white spread like paint, maliciously.

“What have you been up to these days?”

Finally she asked. Almost with a bit of pride that I had gotten a life. I had a practiced answer.

“I’ve been cold.”

What I had really been up to was ignoring the two missed calls from my father, pulling Ezequiel closer, weighing if there was more warmth in his eyes, wondering if that’s the way

Gloria had spent her nights before every tabloid and Chilean citizen wondered with her, worrying for a baby that may possibly grow up unwanted by both parents like those rape kids, reminding myself to buy baby clothes here before leaving like Belinda asked me to, trying to find something that kept me away from Joan and myself and any sort of blood.

“I dreamt of a man who ate a swan,” I added.

This gave Joan pause.

“I thought you were smarter.”

\*

My father’s birthday was coming up. Last year he had a whole production about it. Rented venue, metallic grey balloons. Open bar and a disco ball. Gloria announced her pregnancy. Nothing dramatic like his microphoned thank you speech. It was the subtle gesture with which she refused any drink. All throughout the dinner I was attuned to the sound of his cutlery against the plate, the diameter of his smile, the small things I knew to look for, the tight knots he was always so good at hiding.

This year he would have to hide himself, I figured. Maybe there were one or two loyal friends who would pay him a visit, go get some steak somewhere. If they existed they had not been by before I was shipped off.

The plan I had was to unblock him the day before, ask his plans, text him happy birthday the day of, and ask how it was the day after. Then block him again. Grovel for forgiveness when I was back. If I even lived with him still. That should be obvious, no? Yet I felt there was a possibility my father would not claim me, now that he was lost at sea or free of his shackles, and it loomed. If it were me, I would have thought about it. So he must have too. The saying goes:

Cria cuervos y te comeran los ojos.      Raise crows and they will eat your eyes.

Except maybe we were both running around, eyes covered by hands.

\*

He liked Lila kissing me because the next two times were easy like melting butter, and that was the only thing I could think of that had changed. Other than the blinking. He blinked more when we were alone, and lately, with increasing frequency. He liked it when I spoke Spanish in bed. What was sex with Joan like for him? He must have compared our bodies and attitudes. There must have been a conclusion, drawn.

“What will happen when I leave?” I asked, cross-legged, on the mattress. Lila sealed in her room. Me, feeling bold. The lines of his muscles taut, instrumental.

“You’ll go,” he said. He was doing that thing where he crossed his arms behind his head. It killed me.

Would we talk? Could he know I was thinking of him, way down in the Southern hemisphere of the world, with the same sun and the same moon but not much else?

“There are certain obligations that you have to me,” is what I said.

This surprised him.

“As a man,” I added. My father always relaxed when something was asked of him as a man. Ezequiel was looking tighter, however. Maybe he was not as latin as he fancied. He could not have it both ways, to my mind.

“You’re ambitious,” he said. That’s what he settled on.

“I could eat the world raw.”

I crawled back to him and him inside me and we did some Sudoku on his cracked phone, after. He commented on my strategies and I took it to mean something larger, a shadow of a compliment.

\*

It was starting to be that my nerves would only quiet around him. In a long-standing tradition of desperation, I took two buses and went to the church.

Alone. Segundo was there, because in his words, the house of God was a better house than his or his wife's. He was very glad to see me. He was wearing a hideous belt. Didn't his wife warn him before he left the worse house? I found myself wondering how often she thought of his patched moustache and how often they fucked. A church, with its candles and the memory of better churches with painted suffering, erotic, made such thoughts inevitable. He got crucified, and for what?

Segundo did the weather small talk, and then the comfortable silence, side by side on the pew.

"Que te paso?"

"What has happened to you?"

To my knowledge, I did not look bad. Maybe what I looked was obvious.

"Yo me pase."

"I happened to me."

He informed confession started at five.

\*

I fumbled my way through the opening in English. We should have made new posters asking for a Spanish person to tell sins to.

"My stepmother is pregnant," I told the invisible priest. Not sure why.

"What a blessing," he said.

Light was coming in to the wooden confessional by diamonds. Reality had a softer quality to it, all my problems cotton.

“I suppose.”

“You’re not happy about it?”

“I’m terrified.”

I found that to be true.

“Why is that?”

“Everything has a price.”

“And you think you will be the one paying?”

The priest thought I was a narcissist. This was about baby Ignacio, out there in a stomach, lost in a patrimonial equation of how much we owed each other before even breathing once.

“I might already be. I’m in love with a difficult person.”

The words so neutral when out loud. I didn’t even listen to the priest for a while. All love is difficult, etc etc. What did he know? Wasn’t he celibate? The confessional started to feel like a coffin, or a meat locker. I’d only ever seen meat lockers in horror films, and once, in a brief boyfriend of Aunt Belinda, who really knew how to smoke pork. Did Walt Disney ever actually freeze himself?

\*

“What’s this taxidermy shit?”

“It’s the opposite, actually. The preservation of an alive body. When the bodily temperature drops-”

“Joan! Your cousin is a cannibal.”

Whatever. I closed the laptop and moved towards the kitchen after him. If Paul wanted to be that way, who was I to stop him. Maybe he was more mad about his girlfriend kissing me than he let on. I didn't understand the whole poly thing. Myself, I was constantly aware of where Ezequiel was in a room (under an orange painting), positioning my body accordingly (3/4 profile), almost as if waiting for an order to strike and go straight for the jugular. He had nice veins. Visible ones.

"That's pretty fucked up, Paul," he went. "Remember the miners?"

"Don't get me started on the Chilean miners," said Joan. A strange thing, to position the tragedy like a personal opinion. What did she know? She was more North American than South. She took the u out of her name. She was sitting right next to him.

"We could always do Hard Truths," said Paul. "It's been a bit."

I thought about praying. I thought about how not to look suspicious. I thought about how I mustn't look at Ezequiel, either. A month ago this game had been rude and exhilarating. Ripe with honesty neither Americans or Chileans usually employed in conversation. When the axe kissed the back of my neck I realized why.

Lila waited for no one.

"Paul. Change the new cologne. It's not working."

OK. Not me. There was a possibility I could get out of this alive.

"Brutal," I said. Paul was sniffing himself. He seemed to reach a conclusion.

Paul to Joan: "You could use a hamburger."

Bad for Joan, good for me. His damaged and badly-cologned ego was poking hers. Joan made a noise alike a croak. Buried into her margarita (we all knew it had no juice

because it was too much sugar). I hoped this curtain of smoke wouldn't cost my cousin more protruding ribs.

"Well, Paul, you're quiet during sex. It's creepy."

While Joan cracked her knuckles, Paul turned to Lila, but also away from her, now genuinely hurt. I thought about the English word of what was unfolding- scapegoat.

"You said that to her?"

"You suggested the game, babe," was Lila's first defence. Her second was an attack to Joan. "Your mother loves you. Stop being a cunt to her."

Jesucristo.

Jesus Christ.

Time to make this not about my family, and also defend my family, and also get Lila to sew her mouth shut. I needed a strategy. I needed Ezequiel to step in but the man was as silent as a tomb or Paul when fucking, apparently. Maybe I could tempt Joan away from the game with some grand statements about the universe. What I settled on:

"Honesty without tact is cruelty."

Lila downed her drink.

"Is that so?"

This was not good.

"Maybe we should stop," Paul said. How like him, to think of a ceasefire only once the attack wasn't directed at him. Lila was rubbing his bicep and he was still. "We're all sensitive tonight."

Not all of us. Ezequiel kept drinking, unbothered. Maybe it got to Joan too, like it did to me, because:

“I wish you hadn’t given me the snake,” Joan whispered, eyes on the floor tiles, not wet.

We all knew to whom she was speaking. It was very quiet.

“You don’t love it?” And he sounded unsure for the first time since I met him.

“Of course I love Britney.”

It was true that she did. I’d seen her nuzzle her face into its scales. Hiss back. Pay seventeen dollars for mice. Joan busied herself with a window latch, and a gust of wind swam through the cramped kitchen, full of glass carcasses and some broken rice noodles, like bones. The night had slowed down to an eternal crawl. We all had our arms crossed.

“I just wish you hadn’t done that.”

The grief danced behind her words. Shadows through a curtain.

“I’m not sorry,” he said. He was standing so, so tall.

“You never are.”

“Your cousin is fucking your boyfriend,” Lila said.

“Ex,” was all he added.

I couldn’t think of a thing to say. It had unfolded. In a way it was so certain. Like nothing had been real until then. The whole world suddenly tangible. People made of flesh standing in a room full of sharp knives. Something about prophecies.

Joan was looking at me. Joan was looking at me. I saw my mother’s drooping eyes, only known by photographs, in her horrified face.

It felt like several things happened all at once, all from Joan, and yet what transpired in the room was a perverse sort of silence, weighed down by the thick stench of truth. Joan didn't ask if it was true. She didn't have to.

It stretched. I wondered if she would hit me. Or him. The window was still open and I had started shivering, alone save for my tank-top. Of course what I craved was the arm of Ezequiel around me, as a defiant confession or a wordless stance. He was not moving. Not at all.

Joan did. Joan strode past us in the tiny kitchen. Joan reached into Britney's habitat.

"Put the snake down," said Lila.

I could not disagree more. Snake in hand meant no hands on me. But Joan wasn't looking at me. Britney wasn't either. It was too busy wriggling for its life, conscious of the increasing pressure along its spine, somehow accepting the fact its owner was threatening to kill it.

This got Ezequiel to move. Hands up like there was a police officer.

"It's not the snake's fault," Ezequiel said.

Joan kept gripping. I thought it might never stop. I had forgotten what it was like to see her angry, truly. Now it was her mother I saw, a shadow of Fernanda animating her body, righteous wrath and the kinds of blows that bruise more than the body.

The fists said: Whose is it, then? Whose fault is it? Was she upset at Lila, who knew and had kept quiet? At my betrayal? Ezequiel? Certainly not Paul, although I had never liked

him less than then. Still in the kitchen, leaning against the fridge among the tensed bodies, with the manner of someone who had seen this show before.

“I let her into my house,” Joan said, still focused on the snake.

I didn’t know snakes could yelp.

“I fed her,” she continued. “I was nice to you, we talked-”

No.

“-and the whole time you were fucking her?”

Addressing him. Juana was addressing him. Blaming him. Me, I was getting fucked. I knew I could not tell her it was the closest thing I had felt to loving someone, I knew I was supposed to grovel for mercy or forgiveness at her feet. Removal from the situation did not induce this-- I had been removed from the real situation all fucking summer, it was why I was here in the first place. She didn’t think I had chosen this. Him. Something good as the fabric of life fell apart.

“For what it’s worth-”

Joan came forward. Now she was looking at me. Yes. The cousin.

“Nothing now, you little-”

“Get the snake.”

She ducked under Lila’s arms, back into the kitchen. The snake a volatile ray of lightning.

“If you say I’m sorry I will cut my throat right here,” she said.

“What?”

“I’ll look you in the eye and kill myself, I swear.”

“Jesus Christ.” Paul.

“I’m not.” Me. “Sorry.”

“I’m not talking to you, I don’t fucking know you.”

Ezequiel, moving closer to her. Me, motionless. I was the cousin, the betraying cousin, and that didn’t mean anything to Joan. With age we had invented new ways to hurt each other. Hers was that I couldn’t even do so. He was moving away and I wondered for what.

Joan was red, shaking, and she remained so after she tossed the snake out the window, into the snow. Like that. In a second. Ezequiel hugged over the mess of limbs, and she thrashed against him, with him, burying a scream into his grey t-shirt, her now empty fists against his chest, a horrible little melody.

\*

Some neighbour called the police. The yelling. Some neighbour pulled the fire alarm. He (neighbour number two, an elderly man in flip-flops) scolded the caller (young, well-intentioned, stupid) publicly. All of the building’s residents, about twenty odd people, pulled out of their beds on a cold Sunday night, stood outside among the flashing police car and the big red fire truck, like from a movie. Lila we met outside. On her knees in front of the reptilian corpse. Britney. Fuck, Britney. At least my father’s mistakes didn’t have a body count.

Joan was really fucking fond of that snake but there she was, its back to it. Calling me a psychopath. To the police officer, not even to my face.

I had the absurd thought that this would get me deported. It wouldn’t matter, I guessed. Just before Joan went inside, after the questioning, she pointed at me, roadkill on the sidewalk, and I’m not sure to who, she said,

“Gone by morning.”

Venom (like a snake like a snake) dripped from each syllable then.

Paul had disappeared before the police got here. He'd shaken his head and said he wasn't dying for this. Then, to Ezequiel, to my right, the worst thing I ever heard:

"You did this to yourself, man. You made your bed and fucked you girlfriend's cousin in it."

Couch/bed, I thought, as he walked away into the night, hands in his pockets. Ezequiel actually tried to follow him, but Joan made him stop, and then they were yelling at each other some more.

Lila had that strange prophetic face she sometimes put on. She must have learned it from Paul. You get what you pay for, she mumbled, to my left.

"Why did you make me pay?"

The snake would be alive and we would all be well if she had kept her mouth shut. Now Joan's arms were convulsing, Ezequiel kept sighing, Britney was dead, Paul was gone, I was shivering, and for what, Lila?

"I didn't do anything, y'all did. In fact, I did everyone a favour as far as I know."

As far as she knew. We should have that phrase in Spanish. My father could have gotten away with more if so. My anger was brimming and she must have noticed because she changed the subject, or so I thought. She twirled around a braided ponytail.

"Paul was engaged when I met him."

We faced each other automatically. I believe it was then that the cops showed up, because their blue and red lights were there by the time the conversation was over.

"I'm not anal or a stranger to this."

She twirled around a braided ponytail.

“They were high school sweethearts. She’s a social worker. It was doomed to be a lifetime of tediousness. I saved them both.”

Were Lila’s eyes always like that? Like a whirlpool?

“I wonder what’s your excuse.”

“Your turn,” the policeman says, and I was slapped back to the moment. I ordered my body to stand. Two and a half heads below a blonde man in blue. His eyes were green. The sight of him forced me to sober up somewhat.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

What I could tell him was that Ezequiel was somewhere charming his way out of pointed questions, I could tell him he would do the same to me in a couple of minutes or hours. If he even took me with him. Would he take responsibility for me? Who would? I could tell him I didn’t think Joan was going to take up Belinda’s suggestion she come visit us in Chile, not for a few years/not for a life, perhaps. That I was sorry she found out, and like this, and that it seemed the consequences were bigger than the clouds.

It was then something clicked. Much clicking, this summer. All these men and their schemes, their plots, and me realizing too late, embarrassingly late, that it wasn’t love that was keeping me in the dark, that I was being moved.

He hadn’t paid, he had won. As far as she knew. Lila was following orders. If indirect. We always fucked in his apartment. Their apartment. He knew Lila’s nature. He gave Joan the snake to both win her back and rub salt on the fact he was gone. Her, what felt a lifetime ago: five moves ahead.

The officer was looking at me like I was dumb and maybe I was. Maybe I wasn't like my father after all. Maybe I didn't even have the power to fuck someone over. To choose, to want. Maybe I was both the first and second employee to be bent over a desk, and take it.

\*

"I'll talk to her in a couple of days. No use crying over spilled wine," he said, holding open the door to the Uber. Smooth, black, leather. It was too late to take the subway. I didn't think I had it in me anyway.

Ezequiel did not put on his seatbelt. Neither did I. Our driver's name wasn't in Spanish or English. Good. I cornered Ezequiel, metaphorically, and then not so much. Someone had to. I'd seen his behaviour. When he was alone with me, when Joan found out.

"You tricked me."

"Into what?" he asked. One elbow against the misty window.

"Liking you."

"So you don't?"

He knew I did, was the worst part. My patience was at its limit and he knew that too.

"I never lied to you, Vero."

Voice like the Tiger Balm Joan kept rubbing into her yoga-sore joints. Father, lawyer, technicalities. Charm.

"Fine. You deceived me, then."

"Really?"

"Why, Ezequiel?"

I had never said his name out loud, to his face, until then. We both realized it. We stayed quiet.

Britney, flying out the window. Mean policeman with bad moustache grilling me. Joan, Joan knowing, Joan in agony, Joan lost. Paul: Jesus Christ. Vero, I thought, do not climb into his lap. He couldn't give me comfort or violence. The real kind, the punishment only God can dish out. Or maybe they were the same. Maybe I knew nothing.

He gave the driver five stars, I saw. He must have seen how often I crossed and uncrossed my legs.

There was nothing to lose, was the issue. Joan knew. And I knew any sort of affection I had imagined had been imagined. He would have said something otherwise. A pathetic but eventually forgivable: I love her, Joan, try to understand. All he had done was hold her.

The stairs we climbed silent. Yet talking. I couldn't explain it. Why didn't this mean anything to him? To just know what someone was thinking, what was to come; to share like that. Could he do that with Joan too? Could most people?

When he opened the door I went straight to the couch/bed. I sat. I wasn't wet anymore. Now I was sad.

He kept the lights off and the door unlocked. He knelt in front of me. More of a squat, really.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Oh, some power. Or a consolation prize. A reward?

My turn: a test.

"Hit me."

This time I would pay attention.

He took that in stride, like everything. He slid off my pants (ugly, thermic) and lay his hands on my inner thighs (skinnier than Joan's? Not sure anymore). A sting.

“Look at me.”

I had been. At the vein in his bicep, to see if it wanted to come out, land. The how of it. I didn't trust his gaze anymore. Another slap and I had no choice. Eye contact like a leash.

Another and another and with them came quivering and knowing for certain and with them I came too and tears as well, tears, more than anything. I was mourning, I was past it, I was redeemed, I was in the thick of it. I was just noise. Of it against me. I felt red without even seeing the irritation on me. His face, the whole time. Enjoying. We didn't fuck that night but as he snored beside me I thought: I can never see him again. I can never have sex again.

\*

Consequences, as lived.

What woke me up was a WhatsApp call. More specifically, a group WhatsApp call. Aunt Fernanda and Gloria. Up until then, I had been too busy being found out and then hit to even consider: what was worse, when I got home? No one knowing, or everyone?

Everyone. Everyone is always worse. Especially if your family knows who was inside you. Especially if your family are the sort of women whose profile picture are their children (Joan had not looked like that, undyed and untattooed, for eleven years). I'd heard them talk about my father, and those were the tame things they deigned to say in front of me.

It started like all conversations back home must go, regardless. How are you? Are you cold?

And Fernanda's flesh was a recent memory. So I asked about her Jesuit conference, and she asked me about Segundo (I lied, I had forgotten about Segundo, I hadn't gone to his dying church or spared it a thought). But Gloria. Gloria! What does a month and half of pregnancy do to someone? She could be throwing up every morning, for all I knew, in our big

empty house. Maybe not mine anymore. I still didn't know who I was meant to live with when I went back. If my father had found something more permanent than that hotel with the pool. It's not like it was one of the small chat questions I could throw out. It lasted for seven minutes, while Ezequiel snored beside me.

We arrived at the point.

"Chequeaste tu email?"

"Have you checked your email?"

Fernanda. No, I hadn't. I did. From [jpablo.delambre@hotmail.com](mailto:jpablo.delambre@hotmail.com), a plane ticket.

"Pero esto es en un par de horas."

"But this is in a couple of hours."

"Y bueno, niña."

And good, in English. Except not. In Spanish it was more like: oh, well. Maybe you shouldn't have done that. At the end: girl.

It had only been nine hours. Juana must have told her mother who told Gloria (and Belinda, I'm assuming) and someone told my father (Belinda, I'm assuming) that I had fucked Joan's ex-boyfriend. It was only barely ten AM over there. Did my father's new, completely lesbian secretary (according to Twitter, on account of her short hair) book the ticket for me?

"Esta siendo en serio?"

"Is he being serious?"

Gloria had been speaking but now she really spoke.

"Te veo mañana."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

So I guess it was her. Although she probably thought I was a dirty little hypocrite and wanted nothing to do with me. She owed me nothing. And her son, inside her, being fed this resentment for me. Or worse. She could file for divorce. He could grow up not knowing who I was. Ignacio, Ignacio, fuck, I couldn't let him leave me too.



His words followed me out the door, down the staircase, down a deeper staircase into the subway system, all the way into her crooked building, my half-home, where she most likely was licking her wounds, ready to rip me new ones, or perhaps not even that, maybe we were just strangers who shared genetic material and a snort when we laughed too hard and the same resentment that boiled down in the spine of every member of the Delambre family:

“I needed her attention.”

\*

“What the fuck? You look busted.”

Thank you, Joan. Thank you for opening the door and letting me into your house. Thank you for your honesty. Thank you for that time you told me that red was the best colour to paint one’s nails so that boys would like us. I was too young for nail polish but I knew that piece of information would be useful so I made a vow to remember.

“Good news for you, I’m sure.”

I didn’t mean to sound so bitter. Or maybe yes.

“Spare me,” she said, although we both knew I hadn’t. “Get your shit and go.”

My empty suitcase stood in the middle of the room, a pillar. It wouldn’t take long. I had not come with many possessions, just big ones. Big fluffy sweaters I was too embarrassed to wear around her. I don’t even know why. Joan delighted in ugly things. She dressed like a clown most of the time.

She looked surprisingly well. Her skin clear, hair washed. Not the mess I expected. It seemed all that lethal anger had vanished, the only evidence it was ever there a slightly hoarse voice, a vacant sort of set to her jaw, a missing glass box.

“Paul came by this morning and took it.”

I must have stared for too long at the place where Britney used to sleep. I busied myself collecting socks.

“How is he?”

“Like always.”

“And Lila?”

“Like never.”

Cool, great, fantastic. I had a scream boiling.

“I wish she had shut up for me. She owes me so many cigarettes.”

So I guess I wasn't getting my shit and going.

“You'd rather not know?”

She didn't answer or say anything as I kept packing. Then I hovered around the zipped up suitcase. I had my things. I had a plane leaving in five hours. I had real problems. I had a cousin who was simply staring at me.

“Goodbye, I suppose. Thank you for having me.”

Still nothing.

“Why are you cutting ties with me and not with him?”

“Because I love him.”

So she didn't love me.

“Because I'm probably going to marry him. Then divorce him and marry again.”

This hurt more than the bruises. Ezequiel marrying into the family.

“Because he never bores me.”

Did I bore her. I knew I did as a child.

“Don't pull that shit again, Vero.”

Again?

“Now leave.”

Again.

I dragged my suitcase down the stairs for the last time, looked at Joan’s window for the last time, felt the dying of each other for the first time.

\*

I thought I would go see Ezequiel before the flight. But really, I didn’t have it in me. I liked when things continued. I like when I had something fly circles around my head in and lose everything else. Too tired. And I was ugly. The swelling in my eye had gone from a minor irritation to something to take a painkiller over. The subway doors kept insisting on showing my reflection. And I was ugly in a way that wasn’t in my body. It could be felt in the body, though.

The lights were flickering. Moments ago.

What I would miss the most was the way Ezequiel looked at people, like he was leaning over the rim of his glasses, despite the fact that he did not wear glasses. I’d miss Paul’s hugs and Lila’s biting comments and having friends. I’d miss having someone around all day. I’d miss it being Juana.

If I didn’t know her, at least I could call her by her real name.

\*

I bought an overpriced coconut water drink in hopes it would fix me. It spilled in front of gate 37A. Breaking point. Absolutely. I had to close my fucked up eye and the normal one for a second. Let out a very audible exhale. Stood up and wheeled my suitcase and body to the bathroom, trying to look like I wasn’t going to just abandon the puddle of coconut water.

One by one I soaked those brown cheap paper towels. All the way through. Until the absorption wasn't immediate, rapturous, wet. The water bloomed and curiously I wasn't ashamed of the spectacle I was making of myself. I felt an acceptance, a kinship with the situation, or the puddle in the Boston airport, or the row of people whose soles were almost wet. I schooled my face to reflect it. I wanted to look like a girl who was used to cleaning up her messes. Domestic and docile. What I looked like was busted.

A woman pointed me to the garbage can, unprompted. Her smile was so kind I almost cried.

On the way back to my seat, I sort of slipped. Not even on the coconut water remnants. It wasn't graceful. Would anyone be thinking about it still inside the plane? Would I? Would I always live so messily? Splatter my life against its walls?

Time passed and I held the line, purgatory of shuffling feet. My burgundy passport. Home with its clean air and its stars in the sky and its common-day cruelty.

There was a spider in the plane. What would it do in a new environment? Would the other spiders communicate with different clicking noises? Can spiders yell? Can anybody hear them? I decided I would be responsible for its eight little eyes and eight little legs. I could carry it and release it in whatever garden I lived in. Take out some sugar cubes for it, if it felt like coming back.

I got ready for my ears to pop and feet to swell and a new hunger to kill.

\*

My father looked every bit like I thought he would. He spread his arms open like an eagle, like Christ, like a benefactor.

I heard Spanish.