

Eminent Domain

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Beatrice wants to spend the night on the porch until morning, so I sit with her even though I don't want to. Because somewhere in our city, the trucks are already in formation, one for each family on our block. I imagine them waiting by Miami International Airport—on that stretch of darkness where you can really see the Milky Way split the sky—the drivers cramped in their cabins. I feel as though I smell their cigarettes, the exhaust from so many engines. There's the sulfur from the matches Beatrice wastes lighting candles. "Hey, dork. You with me?"

It's October. 1983. I am 15. We're playing Monopoly. I am the thimble; she is the battleship. When I roll, she moves me. She leans in close as if to kiss me. She guides me from property to property with her red press-ons, jagged from all the packing we've been doing. She says, "You better roll a ten. If you roll a ten, you'll land on GO, and you won't lose the freaking game." All of the board is quivering under the flickering devotionals. Maybe that's why it reminds me so much of our block—the little green plastic houses on the blue properties. And when I roll, my terrible luck strikes. I advance to jail. She laughs and reminds me that I'm a bag of spilled salt, and though I know she's only trying to get under my skin, she says, "It's probably because of you. All of this. If only you'd rolled a ten, little brother. Or not played at all."

Not played at all because tomorrow the whole block will be evicted—everything on our side of the river. That's why we're awake, playing this game. Something about staying up, in the now, delays the movers. What we don't talk about is that we're both bags of spilled salt. Okay. Maybe that doesn't translate well. But she was the one who led me to the river, beneath that tree. She said she wanted to practice making-out so she'd know how to do it better with other guys. I thought it was weird. She pleaded. She made me pretend I was somebody else, and she made me pretend that she was somebody else, and something about the drool on her chin, her clumsy tongue, excited me. Look. I'd kissed girls before. Two. Kind of. But this was different. I touched her chest, fingertips against her blouse, her nipple in my hand. When I put my lips to her neck, she said, "Gross," but she kissed me more. Nothing happened. She's my sister. Suddenly, I wasn't sure where the line was anymore. She made things clear: "Nobody finds out" and "Never again" and "You're a good kisser." But it was already too late.

The following morning, process servers knocked on our door. And by the end of July, each house in our neighborhood had these orange notices flapping out front. I thought it was my fault. What I'd done with Beatrice. I imagined God, in his kingdom of clouds and sunshine, had seen right through those leaves and branches; he'd seen me in the shade and had punished me and everybody

on my side of the river. I thought this, but I didn't really believe it. Then walking home from school, I told Beatrice and she laughed and laughed. I thought He might smite her right there because it got really dark and rainy, and there was lightning and everything. When I told her I wasn't kidding and that I needed to confess, she stopped laughing: "Nobody finds out, remember?" I swear to God, she'd just sworn me to secrecy and a bolt of lightning split the old fichus—the one we'd kissed under. Parts of the tree were still on fire, even after the strike. Beatrice was shaking in her shoes; she said, "I need to get away from you," and "you're tremendo saco de sal." Maybe I was bad luck, but this was proof to me: we were being judged.

With my guilt came dreams. Always, I'd be in the bathtub, the water warm as piss, and just as I'd close my eyes and touch myself, Papi would storm in, shocked. And Beatrice would appear next to me, just as naked and thin, and Papi, naked himself, would grab my skull and push me under. I'd wake up clawing at nothing, wishing I'd never gone with her by the river, under that tree. But I'd think about her too, the shape of her nipple in my hand, the drool on our chins. It was too much.

That's why the night before the move I decided I'd tell Papi everything. I thought if I could tell him, maybe the nightmares would stop. Maybe he'd help me. I entered his study; it smelled of sage. He hadn't heard me walk in; he was fidgeting with a pencil sharpened down to its eraser. I was on the brink of touching his shoulder, on the brink of telling him everything about our kiss when he swiveled in his chair and looked at me—face unshaven all month, sweat soaking through his sleep shirt. He said, "Richie, hijo. How are we going to live like this? In my club? How can anyone make it in this Godforsaken country?" I still don't know. How does anyone? Before I could respond, Trice found me, pulled me outside and said that I looked like I was going to do something stupid. She twisted my nipple, reminded me: "Nobody."

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"Nobody!" She loved swearing me to secrecy. At the community pool, all those months before the eviction, where we waited for our dispossession, she'd turn over all sun-speckled and bronzed and smelling of coconut oil and say it. Or she'd say it across the dinner table, her fork deep in a chunk of chicken breast, with our parents looking on confused and everything. "Nadie," Papi would say. "What's this no body thing you two are up to?" Pronouncing the "n" made her lips pucker, those thin lips, the little bleached hairs above them. The "ee" of the "y" made it seem like she was smiling—her chin-length bangs loose and falling, always falling onto her face. No scrunchy or hair clip or headband could keep those bangs back for long—hair falling like some chick in a chewing gum commercial, turning just so for the camera, obviously hiding something. "Nobody," Trice would say to me, eyes alight, dark, in a sea of blue mascara, and she'd poke, and I'd laugh and say it back, "Nobody. Nobody. Okay!" But it stuck with me. In my 30s, on a flight to San Francisco, I asked a flight attendant why we had to power down our phones in the air. When she nudged me and joked, "Nobody knows," it was as if I were hearing Beatrice. The attendant's face, which had seemed pale and unblemished, appeared dotted with freckles, her skin a bit darker. She was closer, no doubt, standing in the glow of the overhead reading light, but she reminded me so much of Beatrice, who I hadn't seen since I moved away. Even the fragrance: Love's Baby Soft. Was the attendant really wearing it? And last September, I was on Michigan Avenue meeting my attorney for drinks at the Ralph Lauren restaurant. This was to be a celebration, my share of my parent's estate rightfully mine. When I caught up with her, warm and toasty in front of the fire, she said, "You believe this. Happy hour and there's nobody here." Maybe it's because she had long bangs too. I don't know. But I kissed her. I couldn't help it. I thought of Beatrice poking me, playful, insisting, "nobody!" I spent all of dinner apologizing for my behavior. I even tried to explain it, but how? One moment I was wishing my attorney a good night and, the next, I was nobody—a kid. Fifteen and sitting on the porch the night before the trucks arrive. "Remember. Nobody finds out. Not even God," Beatrice says.

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We're on the porch. She's sitting with her legs crossed, a long shirt up to her knees. It makes me uncomfortable, how casual she can be with her body. I'm supposed to pretend I don't notice her legs, long and smooth-looking. Does she really need to taunt me this way? Does she really need to keep the door open when she changes? Do I really need to find her underwear, dark and stained by the tub? When she walks around the house in a towel, I'm the one that has to think about cold water, the way the bathroom smells after Papi uses it, the way that the drawbridge falls for ships that have passed—all to avoid picturing her under the tree, in my arms.

"Your turn," I say, handing her the die.

"Want to spy the neighbors instead?"

"No. No. I agreed to play Monopoly, not spy."

She stands and accidentally flashes me. I look away.

"Ay, don't be weird," she says and walks off. I follow.

We approach the old people's bedroom window. It's open, the lace curtains snagged on blossoms. Though it's a full moon, it's so dark in their room. Trice is next to me, surrounded by hibiscus. She says she sees el Viejo's croqueta de jamón: "Coño. Not bad for a geezer." I still don't see nobody except a crucifix over their bed. All I smell is menthol; they must be doused in one of those creams. But then I see the bed sheets—red, satin—and la Vieja's hair infested with curlers. Fragments of their bodies emerge from the darkness only to withdraw into the satin. Their skin is pale, knotted in blue veins and scars, but when they move, it's gone. I press the darkness from my eyes. I'm not sure what I'm looking at. The headboard jerks against the wall. La vieja moans, she croons: "Ay, Julio. Julio!" Trice takes my hand, whispers, "Ay, Julio. Julio!" And for a moment, her voice reminds me of an earlier time, before God and school. I was lying with her in our parent's bed, tossing around beneath the sheets, all sweat and diffused sun light and laughter and those deep I-love-you-forever hugs. Now there's only stillness. The old guy jerks up into the moonlight—farts, super loud; it overpowers the menthol. I'm surprised his wife doesn't wake up. And he knows it stinks. Look at him pretend it doesn't. "The torture," she says. "Imagine how many stinkers she lived through?" She covers her laughter; she's trying to crack another joke, but can't stop giggling. She giggles so much it's infectious. We laugh everywhere, ribbons of it streaming in all directions, and we run back to the porch. Mami comes out and says, "Coño! Nobody can sleep with this noise," before returning to bed herself. Her authority takes the joy right out of us. As it cools, Beatrice moves between my legs. The breeze becomes stronger, almost violent. It puts out the devotionals. I dig my fingers into her shoulders, her neck. She laughs—something left over from seeing the viejos. She laughs until that fades too, and then we run out of things to say, and back on the porch, she does fall asleep. So do I—a sleep that could have been an eternity. Because by the time I opened my eyes again. Well. I'd missed my stop. I was at the Howard St. station on the Red Line, the same conductor I'd seen in past times, nudging me: "End of the line." Where I wanted to be was dreaming, back on the porch—somewhere between the Uptown and Howard stops—the familiar stack of Monopoly bills in hand, back on the porch where Beatrice was still sleeping, her feet on my lap. And where Mami would come out in the morning with her broom and dustpan to sweep up the game pieces around us—all the little neighborhoods we'd built, all our little possessions to be swept and discarded.

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The attendant watched me step off the train: "All clear. Nobody else." When the doors shut, I was alone again on a slick platform surrounded by a train-worth of Chicagoans, all waiting for the southbound. How had this become my ritual? Missing my stop? I recognized some folks; we were on the same schedule, but people don't really talk during rush hour. They're among me, but elsewhere, caught up in their devices or staring off. I guess it could have been any workday, but it's

important now because Beatrice's husband called, the ringing so jarring and unexpected that it split open the silence of that snowy platform. When I answered, people looked at me like I'd offended them, like the sound of my voice was getting in the way of something peaceful and private. So I walked down to the platform's edge and looked to the tracks, at all the garbage. Rafa sounded excited or nervous or something. He was talking, but I wasn't listening. Not really. And, truthfully, I was getting ready to hang up; he'd called me before—Rafa, the sleaze-bag peacekeeper—but this felt different. Because when I said, "Got to go," he yelled, "She's sick, bad, Richie. Don't be an asshole." And it wasn't like Rafa to be so confrontational with me.

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Look. I don't want to get into it right now. I don't think she wanted to see me, but Rafa had a point. I needed to be there for her; it was the least I could do, so I flew to Miami. Beatrice didn't know about this—about me being in Miami. I'm not sure I knew either. The city looked so different. At MIA, I took an Uber to an AirBnB on Brickell Key. It was a nice ride; the driver, Alexis, this young arrival from Cuba, even put on some rock. But no matter how cool it felt sitting in that dark interior, AC and music blasting, gliding through Miami at night, I was confronted by a skyline, new and foreboding and looming over me like a large wave set on crashing down; it was an immense wall of sleek, reflective, ultraviolet sky scrapers, sectioning off the bay from the suburban sprawl. "How do you live like this?" When we got to the top of this bridge, it was break lights to the beach. "Settle in," Alexis said. "It'll be un minutico." So, I laid my head against the window, and my mind went where it goes when I've got time.

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It's morning. The moving trucks are coming. Mami, resourceful as ever, has stacked the boxes so we're facing each other as if at a table. We're drinking milk and eating old Cuban bread, the kind that's hard and breaks into a million crumbs when you bite down. There's a thud at the door.

After the Cuban Revolution, soldiers forced their way into my father's home; they stole his mother's jewelry, his comic books, and they demeaned his father right in the kitchen. This is what comes to mind when I hear the thud. I'm so relieved when Mami says, "Coño, didn't you cancel the subscription?" And relieved more when Papi brings in *The Miami Herald*.

After he browses through it, I pour through its pages, searching for a mention of us. "Nothing," I say and toss the paper. "You'd think this would be news worthy?"

Papi smirks. "Hijo. What difference does it make? We're done here."

My parents are certainly dressed for the end. Mami's in a red cotton dress, snug and frayed at the neckline. She smells of vanilla, and she's blow-dried her hair so it's wavy and elegant and so stiff with hairspray. Papi's in a short-sleeve button-up, tucked into khakis. He's wearing his good watch, leather band, gold face, and he checks it often.

We eat. Papi sets his shoes on the boxes along with our breakfast; he spits on them, rubs until the leather's new looking. When he slips them on and ties the lace, completing his outfit, we hear the moving trucks pull into the block; it's a symphony of air breaks. I could smell the tinge of exhaust in the living room. The trucks look like a train from where I'm sitting—old rusted containers in formation, no insignia or nothing. Ours pulls into the driveway, honks.

"This is it," Mami says, and she stands by the window. Papi cleans his mouth with a napkin and then comes up beside her, a piece of bread in his hand. "Eat, mi amor. We have a long day ahead of us." He embraces her, and in the dull morning light they sway like they're the last two on some long-lost dance floor. Something is up. I can feel it. How familiar these relocations must be for them: first from Pinar Del Rio to Chicago, and then to Miami, and now from our home to a nightclub in South Beach. She holds the bread at the tips of her fingers like she's not sure whether to eat it or not. Then she breaks off a little and bites, crunchy as it is.

I find this all so moving that I pray right there. I know better than to think anything will come from my prayer, but I do it anyway. Mainly, I pray that something interrupts this chain of events. I pray just like Mami taught me. I make the sign of the cross and kiss my fingers. It feels good to do this—to appeal to a higher power, to feel the world outside embrace me.

Beatrice shoves me: “Oh, brother.” She dips her fingers into my cup, sprinkles me with milk. “Feeling blessed now?” Then she runs to her bedroom. She can be a real bitch like that. I follow her, cup in hand, ready to retaliate. When I enter, she’s standing by her window, lifting her tee over her head, all bare and naked as the house itself. Pale around where the pictures and frames were hung. And I find that even though I’m ashamed to look, I don’t walk away. Because I want to run my hands along her skin. It’s not sexual, just beautiful, the same as when Papi rolled up the rug in the dining room, revealing the floorboards, and how I knelt there feeling the smoothness, wondering whether it was me caressing the floor or the other way around.

Later, me and Trice take our breakfast outside. The exhaust is really pungent. I’m so stressed and scared, I pray again. “Oh brother, you think He’s listening?” She presses her bread into my cheek, hard. “You look dumb. Please stop that,” and she hugs me too so that we’re swaying like our parents had. Now when I look at those moments, they’re so complex; it’s a wonder I ever had a handle on them. Was it her comforting me, or was it the other way around? I don’t know. It unstitches me, knowing that Beatrice was merely pretending to be light-hearted and antagonistic and annoying, while hurting so deeply. Realizing that she is somewhere in this city, dying, still pretending, makes me want to go back to that porch, before the move, so I could do it right. This time I’d say, “It’s all right, Sis. We can pray together. It’s all right to be scared.”

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Ours wasn’t really a neighborhood, not like Coral Gables or Little Haiti or Overtown or Hialeah or Liberty City or any of those places. It was just a bunch of old houses along the river, a community between neighborhoods, inhabited by people with little interest in being near each other. On the drive to my AirBnB, I thought of leaning towards my driver and saying, “I used to live here,” but he wouldn’t have understood. *Where? On the highway?* He’d be right, though. Yes! The land I was raised on is buried under concrete, pavement, and the weight of Miami’s rush-hour, easing forward one car-length at a time. Back when I was growing up there, who could have predicted the city would build a highway through us? Maybe we could have come together, done something to save our community, but we didn’t really know our neighbors, not really. Our parents weren’t friendly toward people who weren’t Cuban. And since most of our neighbors were darker, we were instructed to stay away from them. But when those trucks pulled up on our street, none of that mattered. A good crisis can do that—create solidarity. All morning, sure, most people were pleasant, but it was so much glass shattering, couples arguing, a whole slew of people who’d clearly done no prep for the move, tossing their things in garbage bags. The pair across us, a young Haitian couple, was taken aback by all the commotion. Papi snickered and said “Esa gente no valen,” which confused me because weren’t we getting evicted too? Maybe it was just my father, so prideful, always obsessed with being decent, decente, compliant. Most of our neighbors hadn’t packed a single box, and there we were, a mover’s dream, boxes stacked, taped, labeled, you name it. Seeing that Haitian couple fighting across the street, yelling, unprepared, made me wonder whether we should have been more indecent. Maybe we should have yell, too. Stood up for ourselves. Resist. I think Papi might have hit me had I suggested it.

The police patrolling our street frightened me most, even if they weren’t directly threatening us. This one guy, El Enfermo, was testing the patience of those cops; he was circling the block with a machete, and it wasn’t to cut open coconuts. No. He was tapping the tires on the moving trucks, occasionally striking hard, trying to puncture them. *Yes!* I thought. *Yes! Finally! Somebody doing something.* Maybe he didn’t consider the consequences because he was already so sick—a young man,

cool-looking, with slick hair and a red bomber jacket. Sure, he was frail. Ambulances showed up at his house at least once per week. And sometimes we'd see him napping out on his porch, still in a metal rocking chair. Mami said he was una mariposa, afflicted with the gay pneumonia. At the time, I'm not sure anybody knew what HIV or AIDS was, but we'd seen reports come in, hundreds of young men, wilting away, the cause: a mystery. Needless to say, we kept our distance from El Enfermo. On this morning, though, Beatrice and I were cheering him on with smiles and thumbs-ups when he'd smack a tire. We wanted to see something break. We wanted to see him make a tire explode—the whole truck collapsing and careening onto its side. As much as he swung, he never punctured a tire, and when the cops finally decided to do something about him, he lost it. He was hacking at people's mailboxes. I can still feel the sound of his blade hitting metal in my teeth. He was zigzagging down the street, in and out of view, a group of cops in pursuit. Surrounded, guns drawn, he threatened to hack at himself; he held out his arm, gestures that he'd machete off his limb, but at the moment he was about to mutilate himself, he passed out. It seemed more like he'd deflated, collapsing first onto his knees then bending over at the waist. The cops took his weapon, cuffed him, then carried him off. "Pobrecito," Beatrice said, as if she were really sorry he didn't get a chance to hurt himself. "Pobrecito," she repeated, staring at his red bomber jacket left behind in the mud.

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I spent the morning helping Mami clean. Cops came around frequently, leaning against our things and smoking. They were gringos, friendly, though I suspected they were secretly happy to see us go. Since the 60s, they'd been watching their kind flee north after the "invasion," as they liked to say. Ha. Ha. Yeah. *Will the last American please take the flag?* That was the refrain, repeated in confidence, or emblazoned proudly on bumper stickers. Why is it that I respected those men, not for their uniforms, but for their whiteness? And why did I, do I, covet "American" women—blond, blue-eyed, thin-things? Papi did well to remind me: "Those gringos. They're real Americanos" and "Esa muchacha. *Ño. ¡Que pelo más linda!*" It's no wonder I was intimidated by the police. I remember on that day, one cop, maybe 18 years old, thin, acne-ridden, asked me for water. He was so nice about it, yet I trembled at his voice. Maybe it was his gun, his clean uniform, his smile. I thought of El Enfermo, who preferred to sever his own arm than be taken in, and I prayed. I must have crossed myself and everything because the cop looked worried.

"Dear God. Sorry," he said, touching my shoulder. "Do you speak English?"

Mami answered for me. "Por favor, Ricardo. Don't be rude." She handed the young man a mug of tap, engaged in small talk, then asked me to double-check the kitchen cabinets. That's where she found me later, trying to peer into the highest shelves. She grabbed me by the waist and pulled me down with a level of force I didn't know she had, "Don't pray in front of them!" She yelled this and must have seen the confusion on my face because she followed up with, "And don't look at me like that! With everything we still have to do, you look at me like that?"

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The boxes counted, the inventory sheet signed, and the rest of our things packed into Papi's old Dart, we said our goodbyes to the house. La vieja saw us; she was hunched over, cutting her hibiscus flowers. She called out to her husband, who was supervising their movers, though, truthfully, didn't they have someone who could help them with it all? Some child or grandchild? There we were, having said goodbye to our home, ready for our next chapter, and the viejos decided they'd send us off too. They lurched themselves over, following the sidewalk rather than braving the lawn. Papi was so anxious to get going already; he paced towards them like he might shove them along faster. But I'll never forget it. El Viejo was leaning on his cane and also his wife, intent on this ritual. When he lifted his face and made eye contact, he was smiling, but when he looked at the ground, he was grimacing. His face looked as distressed and fissured as the very sidewalk he was on. La vieja was

holding her little basket: scissors and the flower's she'd cut. When they reached us, el Viejo leaned against the truck, panting, enthusiastically shaking our hands. "Not saying goodbye," la vieja accused.

"No. Of course not," Mami said and hugged them. "Where are you moving to now?"

They shrugged.

"Where are you moving to now?" she asked, louder.

La vieja kissed my sister's cheek. "Que linda. Tu siempre eras tan linda. Cuidate."

"I will," Trice said, smiling, swaying back and forth.

"Y tú. Cuida tu hermanita."

"Si, Señora," I said. I was so moved by this gesture that I prayed for them right there, aloud, even though it was clear that praying would do nothing for any of us. Papi grabbed me by the ear and said, "Stop with all this mariconeria." He sent me inside to check the kitchen cabinets, even though I'd already checked them twice before.

The house was bare, the walls faded where all the pictures and frames had been. I was in the kitchen, watching the last of Mami's sage wither in a small dish when I heard the front door slam shut, then footsteps. Beatrice found; she punched my chest and said, "I don't know what's more depressing, us leaving the house or you praying—doing all this praying to something that isn't real. When are you going to get it? There is no fucking God. There's just us right now."

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Before they built the highway over our house, we had to take NW 36th street to make it down to Miami Beach. Days when Papi would take me to MANTECA to help or simply relish in some band he'd contracted to play there, I enjoyed looking out the window, at all the large junkyards bordering the river, or at the way the tracks disappeared in-between the mechanic shops, used-clothing distributors, and the occasional cafeteria. There was Jai Lai, Club Pink Pussy Cat, its marquee lit up with dancing babes. And there was I-95, of course, which *goes all the way to New York City*, Papi liked to say. All this concrete and sun-burnt grass and iron fascinated me more than the crystalline waters of the bay. On this day, leaving our home forever, I was mesmerized by the heat and the silverware jangling with each bump on the road. We were following the moving truck. On the Venetian Causeway, the top of its trailer downed tree branches and crashed into palm fronds the whole way there. The truck was so big, it was impossible to see what was coming ahead. Beatrice was looking out the window. Beautiful. If I was into photography then, I would have snapped her picture: the sunlight winking through the clouds, making her hair go from brown to rose gold; and how graceful she seemed, her little dimple chin up, her chest rising and falling. She was watching the tide. "You think its God flushing his toilet?" she asked.

"What?"

"You know. The tide. You think God has this super big toilet so when he flushes, the currents come in and out. In and out. Flushing his shit. He's got to go some time, right?"

"No, Beatrice. That's not it at all. It's the tug of the moon. You know that."

"You think the moon is your God's way of making the toilets flush."

"What?"

"Deja a tu hermano solo," Mami chimed in.

"Geez! I'm trying to understand my God-loving brother."

"There's no toilet. It's the ocean," I said.

"Of course, it's a toilet, Richie. This is shit. So, it has to be. And it's where all the shit ends up. Tubes everywhere empty into the sea, and the fish eat the shit and we eat them, too much shit, if you ask me, which is why we're so full of shit."

"Some more than others."

"And on the seventh day, God said, 'Damn. What a piece of shit I've made.' May it all go to shit and may the shit of heaven rain down on all that is shitty. And he flushed."

"I don't appreciate this," I said.

"But you know what happened? It was bad plumbing, brother. Because all that shit came right back up, more than ever, so that the whole fucking city was drowning in it."

"Remember the tree. The lightning."

Trice laughed. Then she reached under a pillow, took out a fork and poked me.

"Be good," I said, pushing the pillow into her face.

"Like this," she said, and she reached into my tank top, took my nipple in her fingers.

"Don't. Don't do it!" I said, scooting away.

But she squeezed, twisted. "Say you worship the one and only shit god. Say it!"

"No."

I kicked her; she squeezed harder. "Say it!"

"Fine. Fine. I worship the shit god. There. You happy?"

"The one and only."

"The one and only."

She kissed my cheek. "That's my little brother. Look. Look outside. No lightning. No clouds. Nobody who cares at all. Proof, wouldn't you say? That He doesn't care about us."

I did look. Where, moments ago, there were clouds, the skies were blue. A group of sailboats headed south in the bay, their sails in every color I knew. I smelled the sea, the salt, the brine. It was disappointing that the winds didn't howl, that we didn't get a flat tire, or that schools of fish didn't die off and float to the surface. I wished for anything. A bug splatter on the window. But nothing happened that day. It took thirty years for God to come out of hiding. Because just remembering about the fateful drive to MANTECA, the way my sister had injured me to prove He didn't exist, brought on a storm of sorts. My driver, who'd been jamming up until then, said, "Homey. Looks like we're getting rain." And we did, curtains of it, followed by two lightning strikes, one that branched off over the city like fingers, another which struck the CenTrust Tower, or that's what it was called at about the time I left the city. Thing is, that second strike killed the power everywhere; it seemed the city had vanished behind a veil. And all I thought, feeling alone in a river of brake lights, was: *don't take her from me. Please, God.*

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Beatrice is leaning against a car, healthy, young, looking up at MANTECA. That's the name of the club—all caps in purple neon letters, glowing. It's supposed to mean smooth, cool, but it's really just lard—the kind people throw on pans and cook with. It's not even good for you. Sure, it has flavor, but too much clogs arteries. It can kill you. Some kinds get harvested from whales. People rub it on their skin, fatten their soup. Seems like a waste. All those bodies harpooned, piled, tongues as big as elephants, for what? Soup? Some fried eggs in the morning?

Papi tells the movers to take the boxes and furniture upstairs. Then he invites us in, even though we've been here like a gazillion times. Still, he's formal and proud that he's prepared a place where we can live—a cramped loft that doubles for liquor and janitorial storage. That's Papi, a showman to the end, guiding us around like we're clients being coaxed into something we're going to regret later. "You're not even going to recognize the place," he says and smiles.

Beatrice and I played in the loft as kids and those were always good times, especially when we'd go through all his memorabilia. There were always so many boxes, newspapers, posters advertising gigs. We loved how old it was—the musk, the crispness. Sometimes we'd lie in all that dust and look up at the wooden ceiling beams, at the cobwebs swaying among them. With all the music rising from below, we'd imagine we were inside an old guitar. But Papi cleaned this space in anticipation. All the junk is gone. The wooden floors gleam. The rafters are cobweb free. Whatever was wonderful seems disinfected and polished to oblivion.

"What do you think?" he asks, rubbing his hands against the cinder block.

Mami's inspecting the place, the small kitchen appliances, the bathroom. "It's a nightclub, Arturito! This is a stupid idea. What kind of home is this for our daughter?"

"Mi amor, you are being very dramatic. Besides, you haven't seen it all." Papi directs us to a metal ladder behind the club's small stage and suggests we climb, so we do. It leads to the roof—mostly tar and asphalt, though there are also a couple of air-conditioning units chained down. Near the edge, empty beer bottles lie in a puddle. He collects them, embarrassed.

Looking out at the other buildings, I hear the ocean, but I can't see it. It's humid on the roof. Clouds smolder overhead. We stand around waiting for Papi to tell us what we're doing up there, but he walks, gesturing outward with his arms, assuming we already know. Then he lights a cigar, puffs. Clearly annoyed and well past her threshold for bullshit, Mami says, "Que coño?"

"This," he says, pointing to some wood. It's stacked up, bound with yellow rope. "We can build raised flower beds. You can still garden, mi amor." He fixes the wood up just to make his point, but Mami is not impressed. He struggles bad. At one point, it seems he's making a crucifix, and he falls onto it—our father, Christ. "Shit!" he says, and he gathers himself. "It won't be terrible. We can carry dirt up here. Plenty of sun. We can make this nice. Your own little roof top garden like in Nueva York. Y la playa. It's around the corner. And the schools aren't bad. You two will still go to school, you know? You can get those high school diplomas."

"But Papi," Trice says, punching his arm. "Why you got to ruin everything for us by mentioning school? Don't you know I've practically graduated already?"

He runs his hands through my hair and says, "Richie, will you help me with things around here? I think it's time that you start putting in a day's work, don't you?"

"Don't take advantage of him," Mami says. "He's just a boy."

"¡Cállate ya! Are you just going to complain about everything!"

"I don't want him mixed up in your business. You should pray to Jesus Christ that he doesn't end up like us. You should pray," she says, "that you can get us out of this club soon."

Pray. Pray. Pray. There's that word again.

Mami's the one that taught me to pray. She's the one who insisted I complete my communion. She's going on and on about all the praying we should be doing, and all I keep thinking about is that moment she told me not to pray in front of other people, and what good my little prayers did for me. One lousy kiss with my sister and God turns his back. Papi's fumbling with the wood again, like he's trying to deliberately make a cross, and I speak to God in my head. I say it, afraid, but tired: *What have you done for me?* Now the clouds are forming. I imagine hundreds of little orange eviction notices flapping all over them: *How would you like it? Forced from your heaven?* Beatrice mouths "the only shit god," and I laugh; it rains so hard, for a moment, all the shame I've been feeling is replaced by our laughter and our wet clothes and the smell of tar and the possibilities that MANTECA will be "cool" as Beatrice likes to say.

#

But it's not cool. Living in a bar sucks. Nights are loud and filled with smoke. Mornings, nobody gets sleep. Mami wakes us all up with her throat clearing; she scales the ladder, its iron grating against the cinderblock and the rusted bolts. There's the squeaky hatch, the way it slams shut. And Mami's footsteps, loud, each seeming like it'll crash through the ceiling. It's hard to sleep with her banging around up there, cultivating her garden. When she runs the hose, some of the water drips off the roof and streams against the loft window. In the delirium of my sleep, I imagine all the water weighing down the ceiling, making the concrete mush and porous, and if I'm really tired, I get to feeling that I'm buried in her little raised garden bed, among the carrots and potatoes and herbs and whatever else she's planted. I can hear her singing—old Cubans songs her mother sang to her—and I feel the water running down my legs, warm. It's embarrassing and annoying, yes, and a mission to clean up. But there's something wonderful about it, too, in the moment, this letting go. A few years

ago, in Chicago, I stumbled out of Tavern on Rush and into the snow. And I met a woman, who had stumbled out too; she was giddy and kept calling me Mr. Grumpy. "Por qué estás tan grumpy, Mr. Grumpy?" Well. She invited me to her place where we drank some more, surrendered to her bedroom—a room of windows and skyscrapers and a view of the lake, which could have been an abyss. And we did it. Whatever. But that night, wrapped up beside her, I heard her upstairs neighbor stomping about, and I dreamt it was one of those mornings from long ago, the sound of Mami's footsteps above me. The loft seemed so real; I could smell it. Beatrice climbed into my cot, snuggled up. "Jesus! What's Mami doing up there?" When she pressed her nose to mine, I whispered, "Trice. Trice." And the stranger beside me shoved my face: "What the fuck, Mr. Grumpy? Whose Trice?" How strange to be driven out of bed at that hour, the city gazing upon us, a hundred lit windows. I tried to explain that she was nobody, but the stranger led me out anyway, said "Sorry, but really? She doesn't sound like nobody." She shut the door. And I walked home through snow-covered streets, which were quiet and vacuous like those days before we lost the house.

#

On my first morning back in Miami, I woke up in an apartment more luxurious than I'd ever known. I had coffee on a balcony overlooking Biscayne Bay; manatees swam beneath me; boaters sped through, unaware. Afterwards, I walked the path around Brickell Key, taking in a bit of the ocean air. Though there were other people on the path, exercising, walking their dogs, their babies, nobody acknowledged me. At noon, I took another Uber. I was disappointed to see that it wasn't Alexis. But why would it be? In this city of a thousand Ubers, what were the chances? This new guy's car was clean to the point that I wondered what he was hiding. It smelled like too many bars of Ivory soap. He didn't say a word to me, except "Thank you," when he arrived at Casola's Pizzeria—a joint on US-1, close to where Rafa and Beatrice now call home. He drove off, and I ordered a slice of pizza the size of my head then sat, eating, waiting for Rafa. This is what Rafa has asked me to do. He wanted to talk to me about Beatrice so that I wouldn't be shocked by her when I'd visit. But I was already shocked. The traffic, God, an unmoving river. Outside the restaurant, there were speakers set on some local radio station. And a song by Bacilos played, about a man who wants to make his first million, to buy a house for his love. It was a pleasant song, but it offended me too. Is that what it costs nowadays to make a family? Whatever happened to sitting around a crappy coffee table and playing board games?

#

Before we moved into MANTECA's loft, Papi used it to store old boxes, crates, liquor. Though he cleaned out most of that stuff, the liquor remained. This never felt like a home, no matter his efforts. I remember that on our first Halloween, we carved out Jack-O-Lanterns and set them on the racks between the liquor bottles and Mami's devotionals. Then, it was especially creepy when Mami would light her candles and pray, and we'd look up all groggy-eyed and find her kneeling and chanting or handing us amulets and asking us to keep them in safe place.

Why did she believe in that crap? In the old neighborhood, friends would come over, find those protective amulets. If it wasn't Halloween, I'd have to get serious and explain that my mother is into that stuff, and they'd look at me scared with the *you're one of those people* look on their faces. I've learned that people respect sacred things. Even Papi, a non-believer, had a reverence for her rituals, her candles, the half-smoked cigars she'd leave for the Ellegua.

Mami also kept a small statue of San Lazaro on the frigidaire, a saint she especially revered. Papi once said that San Lazaro's dogs looked so much hungrier than us, and though I didn't find the comment offensive, Mami pinched his nose until he screamed; she made him ask San Lazaro for forgiveness. All I'm saying is that it was weird trying to sleep at night with that tortured saint looking at us, eyes of judgment, so whenever I got the chance, I'd turn it around, eyes facing the wall. And my mother, when she'd notice, would turn it back and curse us to hell.

My father made contributions to the loft too. For Thanksgiving Dinner, he purchased one of those electrical turkey cookers and burnt the flavor out of the bird. He also pinned a photo of Pinar Del Rio's mountains on a case of rum—something that was supposed to make the place feel more like home. Yes, Papi. Good old Cuba. But really, what was it he was trying to reproduce with that photo? Having to smile and pretend I understood his longing bothered me, especially since we were more American than anything—eating turkey, not pork. When he pinned it up, proudly displaying the full color photo that he'd scavenged from his office, neither me nor Beatrice said what we were really thinking: that this home-making was a sign we were in MANTECA for the long haul; he'd be pinning more photos on liquor boxes, more vistas of Cuban mountains or tobacco fields. If we didn't put our foot down, we'd probably walk into a loft filled with statues of saints, lit candles, photos of the good days in Cuba—a fucking shrine.

#

We had to escape. Living in MANTECA was claustrophobic. My sister shared a bed with our parents. There wasn't any room for her elsewhere. My poor sister. No privacy. Nowhere to hide her womanly body. That's why she rushed out and got a part-time job at a bank that first week. She wanted her own place so she wouldn't have to smell Papi's farts. What's messed up is that our parents made her help with groceries. She didn't want to help around the club; she wanted to save, live in Coconut Grove, be closer to the scene. When she wasn't at work, she was always in the bathroom, looking at her face, pulling at it, smearing cream onto it, or hiding out on the roof, feet hanging over the edge, smoking cigarettes. I'd join her on the roof, and she'd ask me to massage her neck, her back, her shoulders. It was nice being with her, away from our parents, on a ledge that was our new version of the porch, upgraded with steady traffic and cool neon signs.

My sleeping situation sucked too. I had a cot near the window; it was hard as the street and the window leaked when it rained. Some evenings, Beatrice would climb into my cot and sleep up against me, even though we were older and shouldn't have been sharing beds. That's what our parents had told us, like they anticipated nothing good could come from a brother and a sister sharing a bed. When she'd sneak into my cot, I'd sleep facing the wall; she'd tuck her arm under mine, sling it across my chest. With the brass and percussion popping at MANTECA, we couldn't sleep. We tried. We smothered our faces in our pillows. There was no peace.

What my parents didn't know and were too busy to realize was that sometimes my sister and I snuck out. We'd get stoned and explore; we'd walk up and down the edge of the roof, or we'd roll up and down Washington Avenue. Or we'd go to Burdines, stuff clothing into our pants and run out the front door, or we'd go to the beach where we'd drink, smoke, and dance under the moon. We'd sway in each other's arms, and she'd look at me like there was something I should know, but didn't, and we'd run out of things to talk about. Often, we'd go to Rafa's apartment and practice disco—he was our friend; the pizza delivery guy turned Beatrice's boyfriend. We'd dance and spin and tear his place apart like we might be preparing for an audition for Saturday Night Fever. Rafa's the whitest guy I know. I used to call him Bombillo. He was skinny. All those bellbottoms and silk shirts danced on his body when he walked, but it wasn't an elegant dance; he truly had the rhythm of a light bulb, those crazy Christmas ones that are all spaz and no sequence. But he was a decent guy, still is. I'd go to his place and help him shave his head every week; the guy trusted me holding a razor to his white head, didn't even flinch when I'd cut him. Gave me a dollar each time. I remember when I saved twelve bucks, I showed Beatrice; she counted it, said, "Holding out from Papi, eh? Don't let him see it."

#

After months of this, of us hounding Rafa's pizza joint, or roaming Miami Beach and stealing candy bars, Beatrice loses her cool. She takes cash from the club's register, right in Papi's face, and walks

out the door. I follow her. It's late, the sun set makes me feel like I'm in a movie. We're surrounded by so many people and city lights. She chugs from a bottle, hands it to me.

"I lost my job today. Spent the day at the beach."

"You're kidding," I say. "I'm so sorry."

"Manager heard me speaking Spanish to a coworker."

"So?"

"I know! I know! I wish I'd said some nasty stuff about him."

"You're so incredible. You'll get a new one," I say, handing her the bottle back.

"Does it stop?" she asks, shoving me. "Does it ever fucking stop?"

"What?" I ask. "The sunshine?"

"No, Richie! Living here. We can't stay here. We've got to do something."

"Like what?"

Beatrice takes me to Rafa. He's feeding dough into that grimy pizza oven on Collins; he doesn't have time to listen to us complain. Even though Beatrice is the one who asks for the keys to his Ford Bronco, he tosses them to me along with a bag of garlic rolls.

"Treat her well," he says; I think he's referring to his truck.

I hand Beatrice the keys, and we step into the street. "Where to?"

"To see what the hell happened to our real home. Where else?"

#

We drive onto the Venetian Causeway. One Biscayne Tower presides over Miami's skyline in all its illumination. Beatrice checks the rearview. "Five months. Probably bulldozed."

"Our home?"

"Sure, Richie. What'd you think they were going to do with it?"

On the bay, shrimpers flood the water with light; they canvas the waterways with nets, following the run. I drink rum, pass the bottle. We're near the mainland. The air smells like chalk and dirt. We take NW 14th street towards our old neighborhood. I'm grooving along to the radio when Beatrice stops. "What? What is it?" I ask. We're nowhere important until I see it too, or, rather, the lack of a thing. "Where are the palms?" There used to be a whole bunch of them, palms growing atop palms even. It made our little dive of a block look regal. More than the palms, it's the lack of houses that surprises me. I'd expected rubble, a giant bulldozed crater, not this—a street grid intact, cavities where the homes once stood. It's as if the houses walked off.

Beatrice drives further into the construction, weaving in and out of concrete pillars and dormant equipment. "What are they building here? The fucking coliseum?" she asks.

When we get to the river, we're thrilled that our house is still there, along with a few others. In the shadow of the skyline, everything is darker. Planes come near for landing, the roar of their turbines so familiar. We park, shut off the engine, step out. And we're there again, standing in our neighborhood for the first time in five months—if we can even call it that.

Beatrice jogs to our home, through mud and debris. I'm surprised she's so nimble, especially in a sundress and those platforms she so loves to wear everywhere. I follow, even though what I want to do is get back in the truck and drive off somewhere else.

The closer I get, the more concerned I become. There are steel rods drilled into our home's foundations. The foundation sitting on a series of hydraulic jacks and iron support beams, each marked with reflectors. It's raised a good distance off the ground, high enough that I can crouch under. When I kneel, I actually see the swirls and cracks of the foundation's underside.

Beatrice climbs up on the porch. "Holy shit, Richie. You seeing this?"

She reaches down for me; I hear the porch settling under her weight. Seeing the porch from this angle, it looks so fragile—three or four inches of concrete at most.

"You should probably get down. It won't hold us."

"I miss this so much, Richie. How quiet it all was."

"Quiet? Did we live in the same house?"

"No, honestly. No music. No cigarette smoke."

"I know. I know," I say. "You said that already."

"Look! Even the viejos' house is gone."

"Why do you think they left ours?" I ask.

"Climb up, Richie! Climb up already."

I jump and pull myself up too, even though I'd prefer not to. Truthfully, I'm no good in these situations. Even when me and Beatrice are messing around on Miami Beach, she's the one who makes me feel safe. The porch makes this loud snapping sound when I'm on it; it's like thin ice. Beatrice must notice how scared I am because she caresses my neck and says, "It's okay, little brother. We're not going to break the house more than it's already broken." She caresses me until I'm smiling, and I do feel okay. And she's right about the view. I can see the neighborhood on the other bank all sleepy and lit up in the evening. Seeing it makes something in me furious. Why was it our neighborhood that was taken, and not the other way around? I'm about to complain to Beatrice when I see headlights come on. There are pickups parked along the bank. The glow of their cigarettes burn into the dark. Now I hear laughter; another pickup drives in.

My instinct is to climb off the porch; Beatrice tries our old front door.

"It's locked," she says, jiggling the handle.

"Knock."

"Knock? Funny. You're so funny. But look. I still have a set of keys."

She opens the door and slips in. Doesn't even wait for me.

#

Inside, I'm taken aback by the stench, something like musk and dark coffee. It's home, undeniably, but it's ripe, like it's been buried. I know there's a wall in the hallway made of Florida Pine. The slats run horizontally; they're as hard as concrete. I feel them now, the familiar grooves. Slowly, my eyes adjust until I see the shapes of things. I see Trice's figure move across the living room. Then I see the bathroom door propped open, so I enter, light a match. And everything is familiar again: that tacky nautical theme; the ship-themed wall paper; even fish-themed plumbing fixtures. "What would happen if I flushed right now?" I ask, joking. I test the water in the sink, out of habit. It runs orange, spiraling into the drain, until it sputters out.

"Beatrice? Are you still here?"

I light another match. My bedroom! The carpeting is marked by my bed. Something about the room is dreamlike under the flickering light, both familiar and unfamiliar, mine and not mine. I'm intimate with it, the crevices, the scuffs on the wall, but seeing it now reminds me that it was waiting for me the day I was born, and it was there, home to another, before me.

I light my last match and look around. Off the grid and raised this way, our home doesn't feel inviting or warm like it used to. It's just another repeated structure—concrete, wood, wires, plumbing, hollow walls, pests—likely on its way to be wrecked or who knows what.

"Beatrice? You better not be playing a trick on me."

"Here," she yells.

I hear a foil wrapper, and I follow it to Abuela Nana's old room. Beatrice is kneeling on the carpet and holding a piece of candy, the cream-filled kind wrapped in strawberry printed foil. She twists the wrapper off, holds it out on her palm—a little ruby-colored gem of sugar.

"No way! Where'd you find that?" I ask.

When Nana was living, we'd spend time with her after school. She'd give us little candies and ask us about our days. She was senile, thought she was a fifteen-year-old girl, even had a crush on the mailman. Every piece of correspondence seemed a love letter to her. When she died, a fall off

the bed that resulted in a broken hip, later complicated by pneumonia, the mailman attended her wake. We joked that he brought the last of her mail. Trice said she saw him standing over her body, crying, but she's a hopeless romantic and of course she'd make something like that up. She says Papi had to fish the telephone bill out of the coffin. "Still got to pay it," he'd said.

What I don't understand is how we missed this candy. All those years. Even after she died, and we cleaned out her room. Or when we packed and moved out. We missed it. But here it is now, fragrant, fruity, unraveling in Beatrice's hands like it's risen from the floorboards for this very occasion—a sweet and crystalline gift from Nana, which costs only cents at the drugstore.

"I miss her," Beatrice says, rocking the bottle between her legs. She bites through it, hard, and shoves half in my mouth. Then she lies back, kicks off her shoes. "Let's spend the night."

"Come on. Be serious."

"It was our home. It's quiet. Doesn't it feel right in here?"

"It is quiet."

"Well then." She sits up, pulls me back. "Lie down for a bit."

"But the rug smells."

She pulls me back and cups my mouth with her hand. The gesture is more aggressive this time. I'm taken aback, honestly. It sounds like she is a car engine, revving. It's all so disorienting. I'm about to sit up and give her a piece of my mind when headlights cross the window slats, then bleed into the room. They circle around, settling on the closet.

A car door slams.

"You hear that?" She asks, un-cupping my mouth.

Engines rev again. More lights dash across the walls, rising, failing. A door slams. Another. We hear men's voices, just murmurs. Cigarette smoke seethes in through the windows.

Beatrice pushes me, whispers "Cállate," even though I haven't said anything.

I kneel by the slats.

"They're going to see you," she says.

I peek outside—the lights are too bright.

"What if they're bulldozers? What if they bulldoze us? What if we die here?"

"Shut up, Richie. Why do you have to say shit like that?"

There's a beeping sound like a truck is backing up to our wall. It's growing louder, reverberating through the floor. The sound stops. And Beatrice takes my hand and squeezes.

Then the floor shifts. Cracks blossom on Nana's walls. The house rises, tilts, and we fall like we're falling into hell. It sounds like the floorboards are ripping apart, the way the house is shifting. I crawl to Beatrice; she's rubbing her shoulder, looking at the lights coming in through the slats. Then she tumbles into me, and I hold onto her with all my strength.

I hear the cabinet doors in the kitchen opening and slamming. There are so many lights. The bathroom mirror shatters. And just like that, the house settles. The lights seep back through the slats. We hear footsteps on the roof so I peek through the blinds again and see men wearing hard hats, signaling with glowing batons. Others throw thick straps onto the roof, while others secure them to the foundation. It's a production, whatever they're doing. And there is a cop supervising it all, his squad car lights flashing.

"Maybe they're shipping us to China," Beatrice says.

"This isn't funny. I think they're getting ready to move the house."

"Yeah right."

When the men are done working, they gather by the police cars. Then it's Bowie's *Space Oddity* blasting through the walls. The men with the glowing batons signal ahead, and we're moving. The initial impulse almost throws me into Beatrice, but I grab the blinds, breaking a few. We pass Rafa's Ford Bronco, the giant columns, the mound of uprooted palms. Eventually we're on the road,

cruising by the Miami River, merging onto a highway, into a slow procession of three, maybe four, other houses atop flatbeds, heading heaven knows where.

#

When we're on the highway, I swing the front door open. The pavement is a river. I sit at the edge of the porch and call for Beatrice, but she guides me back inside and leads me to the kitchen, even though we should be getting off. "Don't you feel like we're picking up speed?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Okay, Richie. I know you're scared. But what about all that resistance talk? Here we are. Rebels. Criminals in our own home. And you want to run?" She reaches into my shirt, runs her nails along my back. "Don't be a chicken. Let's see where they take our home."

I nod.

"Does this make you feel better."

"It does."

"Can I tell you something?"

"What?"

I lean over the kitchen sink and look out the window. We're moving a bit faster now. The walls are trembling, the cabinets still opening and slamming, only more violently. Beatrice comes up beside me and turns my face to her. She kisses my cheek. "Take it easy, little brother."

"Beatrice! This doesn't feel safe."

"I want to tell you something."

"Then tell me already!"

"It has to do with kissing you."

"Jesus. You want to talk about that now?"

The truck transporting the house hits a bump, which sends us careening into the wall. I hit my nose bad, but no blood. Beatrice gets to her feet, steadies herself on the table. One cabinet slams shut so hard it breaks into pieces. "We need to get out of this house right now," I say.

I return to the porch. She follows, and I don't think she thought that I'd jump. She couldn't have known I would. I think she might have tried to hold me back if she believed I would. I sat on the edge of the porch. The pavement was glittering in the streetlights. I lowered my foot, let its sole drag along the highway. Beatrice put her hands on my shoulders, and I let myself off the ledge. My right foot hit the ground first, and I tumbled. I tumbled on the street. Then it was all a whirl, a tumble—the speckled pavement, the stars tumbling too. I rolled into a concrete barricade, plenty scraped. From the side of the road, I dusted myself off and watched those few houses—dark, aglow by occasional brake lights. They were getting further and further away. I saw Beatrice standing at the threshold; she was waving or yelling, the distance between us growing. I worried that she wouldn't jump, but she did—a dark figure rolling along the pavement and into the grass. I ran to her, watching the last of our old neighborhood driven off.

#

I thought she jumped because she didn't want to leave me behind, or maybe because she didn't want to be alone in that old house, but when I reach her, I learn that she hadn't planned to jump at all; she'd fallen. "Thanks to you, I left the bottle in the house," she says, dusting herself off. She pats her mouth, rubs the blood on her forearm. "We need to go back and get it."

"Look. It's too late for that. We won't catch up."

She punches my shoulder: "First I get fired. Then my brother wusses out."

"Cover yourself up," I say.

"This," she says, ruffling her ripped dress. "From who? Even the moon's not looking tonight."

"Seriously. I can see your whole bikini bottom."

"What? I make you uncomfortable?"

"I don't appreciate the way you're talking to me right now," I say.

She laughs real loud. It's forced. I resent her for it.

With all our squabbling, we don't see the police escort pull away from the procession until its already on us. It speeds toward us, strobes flashing, then hits the brakes and comes to a dramatic stop. "Fuck." We walk along the side of the road, pretending we haven't noticed that the cop is now standing outside his cruiser, shining a flashlight at us. In fact, Beatrice is walking even faster, like she expects to casually saunter away from this confrontation. But it's hard to ignore the red and blue lighting the pavement, and the officer's boots grinding against the pebbles and street. "Turn around," he yells, so we do.

The cop is wearing sunglasses even though it's dark. His light-blue uniform shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a t-shirt of Meep from the Muppet Show, faded to near oblivion.

"You're not a real cop," Beatrice says.

"Not cool," he says, shining the flashlight in my eyes, then lowering it and dragging the light across my body. He does the same to Trice. "I saw what you two did," he says. "You hurt?"

We don't respond.

"You both speak English? *Hablar Ainglaises?*"

We shake our heads. The cop shines the light at her pale legs and at the rip on her dress.

"Why were you two trespassing?"

I open my mouth to respond; Trice elbows me in the gut.

He takes out some cuffs, shakes them.

"Who you kidding?" she asks. "You're not going to arrest us."

"Want to find out?"

"We used to live there," Beatrice says.

"IDs."

I don't have one. Trice hands hers over, and he studies it with his flashlight, jotting down notes. Then he slides her ID into the band of her bikini bottom. "I'll be damned. I guess that was your house got driven off that way." He laughs plenty hard. "And you, I need some form of ID."

"Hey," she says. "Hands off creep."

"Settle down there, princess. What were you two really doing in there?"

"Just looking," I say.

"Looking, huh? Sure. Looking."

"He's my brother."

"What? What'd you think I meant? You got a dirty mind, you know."

"I know what you meant."

"Well. You're confused."

"You meant that we were doing it."

"God, *chica*. Now that you mention it though. Anyway. I'm not one to speculate. Do you know what they're building in your old neighborhood? Well? Do you?"

The cop shines the light back toward the construction as if it could illuminate the scene. "They're building a freeway," he says. "Out to the Everglades." He moves his flashlight, like he could conjure a freeway himself. "For all them alligators, right? Fucking alligators. Next, they'll build one to Cuba. Then Haiti. And Puerto Rico. And every shithole country in the Caribbean."

"Are you going to arrest us?" Beatrice asks.

He smiles. "For what? Did you vandalize the house?"

"Our own house?"

"No, sir," I say, but I'm eager when I say it.

The cop paces around us, adjusts his crotch. "Then go. Go home. Get out of here."

"Really?" I ask.

"Really. I got better things to do tonight," he says, winking at my sister.

We walk away from him. When I'm sure he can't hear me, I whisper, "We were lucky. We're real lucky, Sis."

She shoves me. "You're not going to say nothing about him touching me."

"What?"

"Touching me."

"Seriously. That's what comes to mind right now?"

She nods. "You're right. So sensible. I guess we should throw a party."

Before I catch her sarcasm, she turns around like she's going to run at the cop. He's dragging his feet back to the cruiser, looking off to the stars; he's got no idea she's coming. And she's coming. All that pent-up frustration with living at the club, all that music, smoke, bullshit. It's all in her, charging at that cop in her. She's an empty beer bottle someone's flung at a garbage bin, only she's going to miss; she's going to shatter into a bunch of pieces. I see it all happen, even though it hasn't happened yet: Beatrice hitting him, him hitting us, us in jail, our parents bailing us out, putting the club up. Us losing it all. Dispossessed again. Where to next?

I grab her wrist and pull her towards me. She's trying to wiggle her hand free and saying, "Do something Richie. Do something." But all I do is tug at her wrist and watch the cop get into his cruiser. When he drives off, she tries to punch me, misses, and falls.

"You all right?" I ask.

She's kneeling now, her knees scraped. She refuses my hand when I offer.

"Sis. We're going to do something about this."

"Now you want to do something?"

"We'll file a complaint."

"Oh, brother. You're pathetic, you know that? I really wish I hadn't brought you."

I reach to touch her; she slaps my hand away.

"And what I said about us," she says. "You've got no comment."

"What?"

"Oh, fuck you, Richie. Don't pretend you didn't hear me."

"You're clearly upset. Maybe we should go home."

"No," she says, rubbing her knees. "Not home. Home just got driven off on that highway over there. You just threw yourself off home and let it get away so don't talk about home or this home or that home. Just take me to Rafa's. At least he gives a shit sometimes."

#

It's almost five in the morning when we get to Rafa's street. He rents in a small art deco walk-up at the end of Ocean Drive, has ever since his folks moved up north—West Palm—to escape our kind. Elderly men play dominos on his building's stoop, clouding the entrance with shit-talking and cigar smoke. There's a modern floor lamp, no shade, lighting their table. Moths fly about it, beating their wings against the bulb. This is the brightest spot on the street, which says a lot considering how gaudy some of this art deco can be. Coming up the steps, the men notice Beatrice's legs. Of course they do with her torn dress. Plus, she's got those God-awful platforms on, which make her thighs look muscular. And she flashing everyone her bottom. These crusty old men—not quite balseros, more like barnacles—jeer and whistle. Considering I did nothing around the cops, I step in front of them to shield her from their gaze. They laugh. One, bearded, shirtless, offers her a seat at the table. "We don't bite," he says, pulling his chair back, insisting.

"Maybe another time," Beatrice says, smiling, so we enter the building.

"Was that better?" I ask.

"I don't want to talk right now."

"But I stood up to them."

“Them! Those nice old men. Jesus Christ!”

#

Rafa's not expecting us. When I ask if she's afraid of waking him up, she rolls her eyes and bangs on the door. Every one of Rafa's neighbors open their doors, glare at us, slam them shut. Rafa doesn't answer. She bangs on the door again, harder, yelling “Habre la puerta!”

"All right already," he yells. "Who is it?"

"Me."

There's silence. Beatrice bangs again.

"Ok. Ok. I'm coming."

When he opens the door, he's got the nylon closures of a garbage bag wrapped around his forearm; it's stuffed. It's clear he's been tidying up a bit, but the place is still a mess. He's shirtless, waving us in. "I thought you were the cops," he says. “It's been a long night.”

Beatrice sits on some boxes, settles into the armrest. I stand by her side.

"The truck ok?" Rafa asks.

"Your truck. Your fucking truck? Your truck is fine," she says, tossing him the keys.

He lets go of the bag; it swirls around until the closures slide off his wrist. Then he kneels in front of her, takes her hand. "You're bleeding," he says. "What happened?"

"Was. It's dry now. But don't worry; your truck is beautiful as ever. I took it through one of the automated car washes so it'd be all pretty and polished for you."

“And you pushed in the side mirrors so they wouldn't get damaged?”

“I'm being sarcastic!”

“So you didn't wash it?”

“Oh my Lord. Your truck? Your fucking truck? You want to go inspect it.”

“What happened to you, Babe? You're torn up.”

Beatrice points at me like I ripped her dress, like I bloodied her up. “Me?”

Rafa rises and jams his finger into my chest: "This how you take care of your sister?"

I hadn't noticed how swollen her eyes were. She's sitting back, trying to act calm, but her arms are crossed, and she keeps playing with the tear on her dress, bringing the fabric together like it'll mend if she presses on it hard enough. “I loved this dress,” she whispers.

"Tell me what happened," Rafa says.

"We were..."

"Not you."

Trice takes Rafa's hand and shakes her head. "Rafa. Honey. I don't want to talk about it. I didn't come here to talk about it. I'm tired and my feet hurt, and I don't want to talk about this. I want to relax, and I wanted to see you because I thought that'd be nice.”

"Okay. Okay, Babe. Okay. Maybe we can get some fresh air, okay?"

"Any leftover pizza? Matches? Weed?" I ask.

“Sure. Whatever.” Rafa tosses me a box with a few pepperoni slices and a lighter. He wraps Trice in a blanket and we leave. I swipe a blunt from his kitchen counter on the way out.

By the time we make it outside, the domino players have retired, and the sun is peaking over the horizon. We go to the beach. The water's rough. I settle near the ocean, into the sand, dig my toes into its warmth and smoke. Beatrice and Rafa meander along the surf.

A stream of seagulls rises from South Pointe pier; they dance over the beach, soaring, falling. I'm tired and hungry and mesmerized. I want to go to the loft and sleep, but I can't leave without Beatrice. Between the smoke and the birds, I fade. See her and Rafa fade in the light too.

I'm stoned. I'm a shell.

I look right: the gulls dart left. I look left: the gulls dart right. In the sea, waves rise then sink beneath the surface. Beneath the surface a plane, all pink in the sun's rays, soars through the waves,

loose as a noodle, not erect like the one above. Beneath, a skull rises. No. They're clouds reflected on the water. The surf kisses my toes, and I roll onto my side, watch Beatrice and Rafa play on all that wet sunlight. They're holding hands, close. Then she throws him onto the beach, lies on top of him. Frisky. I know I should drift over there, say something about my sister's honor and all that, but I don't. Not after today. Still, I'd be lying if I didn't feel left out. I'd be lying if I didn't feel possessive of her. And what I don't want to admit to her, not even now, is that I too think of her lips. And when she kisses Rafa, it's him I pretend to be: long, lanky, and in her arms.

#

At Casola's, I didn't recognize Rafa when he sat before me, full head of hair. He looked like some hip older dude suffering a midlife crisis. The guy had on these white khaki pants, red loafers, aviators, and all I could think was: Is this who you were all along? Hiding? To be honest, I was mad to see him dressed that way. My sister is dying and you dress like this? He set his phone down, face up, said he was happy I'd agreed to fly down. All of this was so impersonal, and, to be honest, the cars on US-1 distracted me. So many. I didn't want to call another Uber. I didn't want to merge onto that highway in any form. I stood, said, "You're not going to hug me, brother? Come on." And I embraced him, hard. "I forgot how ugly you were."

"Gracias, Richie. Pero tu eres más feo."

"Is that you speaking Spanish? When did you learn?"

"How could I not?" he said. "Living here." And he turned to his phone.

"Tell me, Rafa. Does she really want to see me?"

"Of course! Of course, Richie. Why would you think otherwise?"

"You know why."

"Trust me. She wants to see you. I know it."

I sat beside him, offered a slice of pizza. How strange it was, hanging out at a pizza joint with a guy who, for as long as I knew him, worked at a pizza joint. There was something beautiful about that. And when I offered a slice, I thought he'd jump all over it, but he declined. And there was something beautiful about that too. He said something about his doctor and high blood pressure and about the need to stay away from too much gluten. Still, he'd always be the pizza guy to me, even though Rafa's life had so clearly changed. He stopped working at that joint on Collins and snagged a real-estate job in the Grove. I knew that much because we were friends on Facebook, so I was used to his posts, always stupid inspirational messages with exotic images, stupid enough I thought I'd unfriend him, even had the cursor over the button a few times but didn't because of Beatrice, who had no social media account. So he was the one to post the occasional photo or mention. Still, he'd mentioned nothing about her health online.

"Tell me. How long has she been sick?"

Rafa shook his head. "I don't know. We've known for a year."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"Cancer, man. What else? Leukemia."

I took another bite of the pizza, waiting to be overcome with sadness, but there was none of that. If anything, watching Rafa sulk in front of me just made everything more awkward.

"And Kelly? How is she handling all of this?" I asked.

"She's not a kid. She's 24 years old."

"Jesus. I know that, of course. But 24?"

"She's handling it as well as any daughter could. She's useful, loving, smart."

"I can't see her, Rafa. I can't."

"Don't be that way," he said. "Here's what we're going to do. You're going to finish eating, then we're cancelling your AirBnB. I told you. You should be staying with us. Not in some stranger's condo. You'll love our place, man. Travertine floors. Granite counters. New back splash. Stainless

Steel appliances. Glass enclosures in the showers—your own shower in the guest room. This way, when Beatrice gets home from her chemo, you’ll be there to greet her. You don’t know how happy this is going to make her, Richie. She talks about you, you know? Even years ago, when Kelly was just a child, she’d talk about you. She’d tell Kelly stories. Funny ones. She loves you. And when the two of you had it out over your parent’s estate, she never spoke ill of you. It’s true.” Rafa said other things. He painted these really lovely pictures. And watching him speak, in this new look of his, full-bodied hair, fancy clothes, fancy job, made me feel as if he was showing a house, and as if I was a buyer. I was both distrustful and ready to place an offer on his vision. I was especially distrustful when he said, “We’ll play some Latin Jazz, just like the old days.” And when he suggested that me being around would make her dying more meaningful—Meaningful? —he rushed me to eat, shepherded me to his car. I was going through the motions, knowing he’d take me to her in his AC roaring M5, all white leather seats, sleek interior. It smelled like a fucking baseball glove, light-years away from that ill-fated Bronco. He stepped out, opened the door for me: “We should get going before traffic picks up. You can sit on the papers. Don’t worry. I should have cleaned this all better.”

I declined, which he didn’t handle very well. At first, he was just as confused as me, but I stood my ground. I didn’t necessarily know why I was declining, but I knew it felt right. And when I couldn’t explain myself, he went off. Honestly, he said some pretty nasty things like he thought he knew who the fuck I was. Sure, he’d taken off from work to meet with me, but something was amiss here. What he said: “You don’t deserve your inheritance? Where were you all these years? Where were you when we had to run the place, repair it? When we had to put your parents in the ground? Hiding! Hiding in Chicago. Couldn’t even get to know your own niece.” He was so sure of himself; I hated him for it, and I hated myself for wanting to apologize.

Before I walked back to Brickell Key—because I certainly refused to sit through that traffic again—I said three things: “Look. I’m here five more nights. Please text me your address in case I change my mind” and “Do you remember my uncle Cáscara? I wish he’d actually beat the shit out of you” and “This is for him.”

My phone buzzed, no doubt the address I’d asked for. After all, Rafa had been looking at his phone the whole time—so efficient. He stepped forward, made eye contact, and said “What? Cáscara? What’s for him?” And I clocked him so hard he fell back into his car, through the door he’d opened for me, his phone sliding across the pavement, papers everywhere. It was so dramatic, not unlike those early days of Miami Vice, where Sonny couldn’t help punching people to no consequence. Then I walked away as people from the restaurant gathered. I continued down US-1 at a steady pace that eclipsed the cars stalled in bumper-to-bumper, and I felt, for the first time, like in some twisted way I’d actually stood up for Beatrice for once.