Wesleyan University The Honors College

At Corona Plaza:
A Novella

by

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Note:
While the descriptions of locations and histories
have been greatly enriched by reading, news articles,
photographs and experience, they have also been fictionalized
and should not be considered factual.

At Corona Plaza

Chapter One:
Teeth

"This whole morning," Leila was saying, "with all the stuff that's been going on, all I've been able to think about is how weird my teeth feel."

"What?" Connie says. She wipes down a table and nods to a customer as Leila follows her.

"Like, here I am, just graduating from college, you know--on the path, approaching that big moment--and the thing that's really bothering me is that my teeth feel so strange."

"Uh huh." Connie nods, picking up a stray pen and crumpled napkin from the floor and dropping them into her apron. She makes her way down the main, amber-lit aisle of the restaurant, nodding hello to Jeremy, the lean, black bass-player who she suspects Anya has a crush on. Jeremy sits at his corner table every afternoon, where he eats two enchiladas and composes sheet music for his stand-up bass, a string quartet plucking away in his head.

"It's just *weird*." Leila continues. "Like all of a sudden realizing you have a third arm you never noticed before. They just feel more *soft* than usual. And I keep pressing on them with my fingers to see if maybe they'll give way." She presses down to show Connie. "It feels like they're going to dissolve, or crumble if I bite down too hard. Or, like, float out of my mouth. I don't know. It doesn't feel right."

By now they've reached the back station, where Miguel has just come out from the kitchen, two delivery bags in his hands.

"Oh God, Miguel," Leila moans. She throws her arm around his neck and puts her small hand on his chest. "Is there anything you can cook up back there that will make my teeth stronger?"

Miguel looks at Connie, bewildered. Connie throws up her hands--'like I have any idea.'

"Like spinach or something?" Leila asks. "Something with lots of iron."

"Your sister's crazy, you know that?" Miguel tells Connie, who has just caught a glimpse of herself in the glass of a framed watercolor, noting her short black hair--puffed and flattened in strange, uneven places. Miguel extracts Leila's arm from around his neck and pats her head. "I have to go deliver these."

Connie sometimes wonders what her sister might have been like working here. She can imagine Leila in her own sleek, black uniform, breezing into the kitchen to kiss Roberto on the cheek until he blushes, catching a pecan in her mouth which Miguel has taken from the pancake batter and tossed across the kitchen.

Connie likes them--she does. She gets along with Simón and likes to gently rib Roberto, the white-haired dishwasher who speaks the least English of all of them, who sits on the edge of the sink when he is finished with a set of silverware, swinging his legs and eating a slice of watermelon. But Leila loves them. "Everyone here is so nuts," she likes to say. "It's fantastic."

Leila's favorite at the moment is Anya, a fairly new waitress from Moscow who has just turned thirty but whose constant intake of cigarettes seems to be aging her rapidly. Anya takes every spare moment of her shifts to pace back and forth

across the restaurant, outfitted in a hiked-up black miniskirt and junior high platforms, alternately yelling into the phone in Russian and sneezing into her hands.

Then there's Jamila who, bird-boned and wide-eyed, occupies the position of head waitress. In her visits to the restaurant, Leila has become familiar with the way Jamila touches her arm when making a point and becomes quietly giddy when her DJ boyfriend comes around for a veggie burger, which he does every now and then: friendly, stoned and sleepy-eyed.

Leila even enjoys Chloe--the restaurant's resident alcoholic. Although she has not yet seen Chloe purposefully changing with the bathroom door open or drinking tequila in the basement while the restaurant bustles above her, antsy and unattended.

"What's wrong with your teeth?" someone asks in a thick Russian accent. It's Anya, who sidles up to Connie and Leila, a stack of half-empty coffee cups balanced in her hands.

"Anya!" Leila says, and kisses both of her cheeks. "Did you dye your hair?"

"I did. What do you think?" Anya sets her cups on the counter and poses to this side and that, pushing her hair around and looking up coyly towards the ceiling.

"You know, I was pretty skeptical when you mentioned black, but it looks great."

"Yes? You think so?"

"Even better than the red."

"You're so sweet," Anya says, then looks down toward the front window. "Oh no. I have to go check on that crazy woman with the paper bags. She probably wants

a thirteenth free refill for her tea. Oof. My sinuses." She sneezes into her hands and wipes them across her apron before walking unsteadily to the front of the restaurant.

"Has she ever heard of Kleenex?" Connie whispers to Leila, who laughs.

The bell sounds and Connie moves towards the kitchen, motioning Leila to follow her.

Connie thought that her sister must have already met everyone who works here; but she could tell, when Leila burst through the swinging doors and into the humid, radio-filled world of the kitchen, and, in a rare moment, froze and stared, that Leila and Simón had yet to meet.

It's hard to describe how a little thing can make you feel. How Simón's knee, bent from his foot being placed on the metal bar of the counter in order to give him leverage for peeling carrots into a large, shiny metal bin, instantly communicated confidence, competence, and, finally, sex, to Leila.

He didn't notice her at first. It was Roberto who stopped washing dishes to smile, Alberto who gave her his customary once-over, eagerly spanning her thin, five-foot-six frame from his five-foot-two vantage point. Simón, meanwhile, continued to peel carrots, razzing Jesús in Spanish for missing a delivery while he concentrated on the growing orange mass in front of him. When Connie kicked his shin and said, "hey, dude, this is my sister," he turned his baseball cap around, looked up, and shook Leila's hand before going back to work.

It was just when Leila was about to turn to Roberto, to convince herself that Simón wasn't as beautiful as he first seemed, that he looked up again.

*

"So tell me about Simón," Leila says, as they walk down First Avenue and under rows of scaffolding porticoes, passing the corner deli where Connie buys two bags of ice every morning for the restaurant's incapacitated ice machine, the Korean cashier yelling to her heavy lifter in some mixture of languages that Connie can't decipher before depositing two cold bundles in Connie's arms.

"What about him?" Connie asks.

"Come on."

"Look." Connie says. "Even if he was interested in you, those guys never have time for *anything*. They work like a million hours a day. And when they're not drinking themselves into oblivion after work, they're fast asleep in their tiny apartments in Queens."

"Connie! I'm not planning to elope with him, I'm only curious."

"I know, I know, I'm just saying."

"Besides," Leila raises her eyebrows and looks knowingly at her sister. "I don't see how you're in a position to judge me when you're basically some forty-year-old's long distance *mistress*. That's not exactly my idea of a healthy, steady relationship."

Connie gives Leila the finger, half-heartedly. "Michael is thirty-nine, thank you very much," she says, and they cross in front of St. Elizabeth's red brick home for girls, the East Village streets slowly coming alive on this Friday night as young

hipsters and old homeless men navigate under fire escapes and around bursting, disemboweled garbage bags, the bags' slushy contents lit and coming into focus under the occasional street light.

"God," Connie says. "You should have seen Simón when he got here. He was this scrawny, pissed-off kid. Total jerk to everyone in the restaurant. All sullen and homesick. I dropped a plate once, on one of my first days, and he just came out from the kitchen and stood there, muttering and shaking his head."

"Really?" Leila laughs. "Maybe he was intimidated by your tattoos and formidable demeanor." She thinks for a moment. "But he doesn't really seem like that now."

"No," Connie says quietly. "I guess he's not."

"You know what I was thinking about tonight?" Leila says, when they are two blocks from their shared apartment on Avenue A.

"What's that?"

"I never heard the story of how Mom and Dad met."

"He was investigating some arson incident and came to her door."

"Yeah, I know the circumstances. I mean the *story*."

"Oh."

Leila looks off into the distance and runs her hand across the sky. "A young, Texan archaeologist and her scruffed and wizened detective beau."

"Scruffed and wizened? Dad would have loved that."

"They saw each other at the rusty corner gas station," Leila goes on. "Mom was leaning against her Ford Pickup, her shirt blowing in the wind. Just an inch of

her stomach showing, her rubber boots hiked up from an expedition in the marshland earlier that morning."

"They met at her house!"

"Right, this is their second encounter! Mom realized she didn't have enough change to fill the tank. Dad sauntered over, cowboy hat in hand--"

"Oh God."

"--his investigative notebook steaming on the sun-beaten passenger seat of his car."

"You are such an idiot."

"Hey, you can't call me an idiot anymore."

"Why?"

"You're in your thirties."

"What difference does that make?"

"You're supposed to be mature now. And therefore nicer to me."

Connie shakes her head and they continue to walk.

"It's funny," Leila says after a while. "I know our parents were young. But it's impossible to think that they were young like *us*."

Connie nods and stops to light a cigarette. She knows the way Leila imagines their parents is off, and likes to tell Leila so. But that's all she knows, really: that this particular sunlit image isn't *it*, when Helen, just a borough away, knows what was, in fact, the case, as Hank had before he died.

Chapter Two:
Sunbirds

She was assembling a ship on her kitchen table when they met.

Hank knocked on her door late in the afternoon, disrupting Helen as she carefully glued down the ribs of the boat's belly—lean strips fashioned from pieces of cardboard and shards of her wooden dining room table, the legs of which, to the dismay of her roommates, Helen had recently sawed apart.

On the other side of the door Hank stood on the step. He could hear some crashing around inside, but no one came to the door. He ran his hands down the sides of his pants, his thighs and build still lean and muscular, his palms surprisingly sweaty for such a mild afternoon. He thought about turning around, about heading down to headquarters, thinking: forty is too old to still be investigating arson and forgery; thinking: my back is killing me; thinking: there's no way these neighbors know a thing.

He closed his eyes and wished again that he had better things to do than to chase some makeshift Molotov cocktail and the arm that had slung it.

He had just turned around when the door swung open. A small, twentyish woman stood there barefoot, her hair piled on her head and falling in pieces over her dark eyes, what looked like some sort of glue gun aimed at him in her right hand.

"Good afternoon, Miss," Hank said, taken aback.

"You can call me Helen," Helen said reflexively, immediately wishing she hadn't. She liked how it sounded when he called her 'Miss.'

Once it was clear that this girl had no information about either her neighbor Ms. Delgado or Ms. Delgado's reportedly abusive boyfriend, she invited him inside--to her unfinished-looking kitchen, where curtains were missing and frying pans piled in the sink.

"You build boats out there?" Hank asked, eyeing the wavering mast of Helen's kitchen ship.

"No, no," Helen said. "'I'm just a student. But I'm doing research on that boat they just found."

"Yeah, I think I heard of that," Hank said, and cleared his throat. "I work with a guy who's pretty into that kind of stuff. Pirates and things." He put his hands in his pockets and took them out again. "So what's this for, then?"

What Helen was doing, she explained once she brought Hank a mug of tea, was gluing together a replica of what she imagined the boat had looked like. One of six French ships that had sunk on an expedition to colonize Texas, the life-size incarnation of Helen's kitchen model had recently been discovered by a band of nautical archaeologists. These archaeologists, with whom Helen had recently been put into contact, would come each morning from the University to plunge into the site, searching for the long-lost pieces and membranes of a vessel that had once sailed across this very bay. And if she was punctual and not too disruptive, between divings Helen was allowed to interview the archaeologists. And they were more and more willing, their hands burning with excitement from the musket balls they had just fingered among rushing waves of splinters and sediment.

Then, at night or on Sunday afternoons like this one, she would set up at her kitchen table and build her boat while formulating questions for the next day. She was in the middle of this when she heard the knock, which, for the moment, she had ignored, hoping that a solicitor would turn around and that a roommate might remember they had their key after all.

And yet if she hadn't answered, which she was certainly on the verge of doing, Hank might not have wasted his time in coming back. He might not have asked her about her ship. He might not have sat down at her kitchen table, surprised at his own willingness to eat an omelet made by a woman who seemed a bit strange and was much too young for him anyway. He might not have sat down to talk with her for what turned out to be only an hour but carried the weight of something much longer.

And Helen, for her part, might not have lost track of her research, spending days and suddenly weekends in Hank's kitchen and living room and bed. She wasn't even sure how attractive she found him, but she felt something when she was with him that she hadn't felt with a single boy from her Corpus Christi high school or among the lanky misfits in her diving or archival research seminars--a kind of intimacy she had only felt between herself and the keel of a ship she had just assembled, or, when she used to read novels, between herself and a book. It was the same feeling--wanting to kiss the boat, the book, Hank, when no one was around. When she had them to herself and everything was secretive and quiet and safe.

Weeks later, finally overwhelmed by the string of unanswered notices sent by the two terse, middle-aged secretaries from the A&M archaeology department,

Helen came back to find a cofferdam surrounding the shipwreck site: two impenetrable layers of steel with a beach full of sand compressed in the space between. In her absence, the archaeologists had sucked the water out from within these steel walls, the planks and mast of the aging ship suddenly feeling the weight and lightness of air as they hadn't in almost three hundred years.

Soon after, Helen decided to drop out of the graduate program. It was practical, really. She could save the money and conduct some independent research. Maybe get her diving certification someday soon.

And then a year had passed and Helen, having done neither of these things but feeling content nonetheless--with her new job at the local museum and an official place in Hank's home--found out, on a warm day in September, that she was pregnant. It was not what she wanted. Not at all, and certainly not at that time. And yet, she was not unhappy. Not as her increasingly out-of-contact friends had predicted. Not as her parents, two towns away, had warned after learning of their daughter's affair with a man almost twice her age. She was lonely, yes. But who wasn't? And sometimes, when Hank came home from work early and they sat on the deck, the Texas sun shining on a strip of Helen's exposed, ballooning belly, Helen thought: Look at us. Like two sunbirds.

And so they had Connie, who grew up for eight years in Texas before Hank decided to move them to New York City. He claimed a more practical reason, but in his heart hoped to immerse himself in the gritty world of urban crime--to climb the precarious ladder of the detective world. Which he did, ascending slowly in the

NYPD while his family settled into their new, even smaller apartment on the Lower East Side: the apartment where Helen became pregnant again, where Leila was born, two weeks early, and where she grew up--in a city her parents and older sister barely knew. A place that seemed to Connie strange, to Hank thrilling, and to Helen at once too big and too small.

And yet, even in the noise and commotion of New York City, even when buying Leila applesauce at the claustrophobic corner market or walking Connie to the steps of the L train before school, Helen never lost her Texan, open-plains, shipwreck sensibilities. She liked to close her eyes and to imagine New York before the skyscrapers and the congested avenues, and when she opened them, to tell her girls what she had seen.

She often did this when Leila was small. Helen would take her to Tompkins Square Park, and on a curved green bench surrounded by heroin shells and homeless men in cardboard crates, she would explain to her daughter how once upon a time this—all of this—used to be marshland. Swamp, like they had in Texas, where Leila's big sister had grown up.

On one of these visits, Helen spanned her hand out in front of them, rippling her fingers like a body of murky marsh water. Leila crouched on the ground by the bench, coming up to balance handfuls of dirt on top of her mother's hand--for the landfill that covered the marshlands and turned them from Texas to Manhattan. She followed the dirt with a clump of grass--for the post-war rubble that was shipped from decimated London across the Atlantic Ocean to fill in the city's swampy gaps. As a final touch, Leila climbed into her mother's lap, smoothed back her hair and

placed a woodchip just below Helen's knuckles--for this park, opened in 1850, in which Leila now sat, bouncing on her mother's thigh.

On those afternoons, Helen would walk with Leila at three o'clock to Connie's school. She would take her girls home and wait for her husband while reading a book or cooking an early dinner, feeling neither anticipation nor dread, but a kind of peace.

And then something happened, which Helen came to understand had not happened before that moment: she fell in love with her husband. And Hank, who had always felt strongly about Helen, wanting to stay near her from the moment she opened her front door to him, never acknowledged the shift but experienced it deeply.

And this, finally feeling not only the absence of unhappiness but the presence of happiness itself, took an invisible burden off all four of them. In those years, Hank got promoted to the homicide division while Helen finished her degree and accepted a teaching post at Hunter College. They moved to Brooklyn, where Connie graduated from high school, as, years later, did Leila. And that was how they lived their life. Until, suddenly, Helen's children were grown and her husband was dead on the street, caught in the crossfire during a domestic abuse call, the police cars hurtling toward the scene in twos and threes.

Helen later told Leila that when she heard the news, first over the phone and again at the scene of the crime, Hank's body cordoned off and awash in lights--from the storefronts and the cameras and the slowly rotating sirens--she waited for the

wave to hit her. Standing there, she expected to feel like she had when, at sixteen, she first had sex: as if a numbing, protective layer had been ripped from around her, making her suddenly aware of the mortality and vulnerability of bodies. Of the possibility of getting pregnant, of getting diseases, of being wounded and infected. But it didn't come. And so she thanked the medics and her husband's stricken co-workers. She took a taxi to their new, Park Slope apartment and sleep-walked into their--or was it now just her--dining room, setting down her keys and feeling, strangely, like nothing at all.

Chapter Three:
Simón

There was a thought Helen often had after it all happened. How strange, she would think. To be two in the morning and one that same night. To be in Brooklyn, arguing with him about some article in the paper, asking if there are strawberry seeds in her teeth from breakfast and to have no idea that the same man shaking his head, the man saying no, not that I can see, would in twelve hours be splayed on the Manhattan concrete by a curb she hasn't seen before, leaking blood and gone already.

When Helen was younger, she didn't often consider the vast unknowability of the future. Instead, the future and choices of one's personal life had often struck her as bleak and delineated: to have your heart broken or to never sleep with another person again, to die too young or watch your parents die before you. Discoveries and revelations seemed, instead, more hopeful and interesting in the past, among the shipwrecks and the archives.

But now, this new set of facts, grim as they might be, have filled Helen with a sense of the unknown, and what some might even call a sense of wonder.

Helen didn't know that a similar thought had struck her daughter, but in a completely different way. How strange, Leila would think, to have a father one moment and to be fatherless the next. But even stranger, in a way, to wake up every morning in the East Village, in her own world--her own patch of ground, a discernable Leila. To go to school, to sleep with the same sorts of boys, to walk home with her sister. And then one night to find herself side by side with this young

Mexican man, tangled in his sheets and surrounded by a neighborhood that she has never seen before and that feels like a completely different world.

It all starts when he decides to tell her a bit about himself.

He has worked in the restaurant for three years, almost three and a half. Since the second week he arrived in New York. He is from a small town, originally, although he moved to Mexico City before coming here. He's a year younger than Leila but already has twice her life experience--from washing the windows of Mexican skyscrapers with a piece of rope slung around his hips, from rebuilding nurseries in California and boxing blue and yellow crayons at a factory in New Jersey before coming to Manhattan as a prep cook and delivery boy.

For the most part, he works hard. He can pay for his room in Queens, for his cousin's wedding, for his mother's rent back in Mexico. He can sew, cook and mend a broken window. "All from mi mamá," he tells Leila.

He can also speak English. An impressive amount. He began learning three years ago, during sporadic sessions of ESL taught by a group of old, Italian women in the back of a Catholic church in Queens. He didn't want to be like Roberto, whose fingertips are permanently white from the hot dishes and who has barely learned ten words of English in his eighteen years here. Whose wife was sent back to Mexico while Roberto and his daughter stayed, living, always anxious, in a crowded studio apartment an hour and a half and three transfers into Queens.

He tells Leila all of this when she visits the restaurant. When the manager isn't around, Simón will lean against the back station next to her, his gaze ahead

towards the tables, until he turns, when he is making a point or asking her a question, and looks steadily into her eyes.

He is, objectively, incredibly good-looking. And there's an ease about him--a sort of confidence and sureness which Leila had rarely seen in men her age. But more than anything, and more than Leila would like to admit, it's the way he puts his hand on her back when he moves past her to reach the freezer or the bucket of vegetable knives--his touch casual but assertive, almost possessive. "International men," her friend Eliza might sigh. "So much sexier than what we're stuck with here."

*

"So what do you want to do with your life?" Leila asks Simón one afternoon after he's sewn together a ripped piece of Connie's apron. "Become a seamstress?"

"A seem-stress?" Simón squints at her.

"Oh. It's, um, a person who sews for a living." Leila mimes the needle in the air.

"Ok, I know the word to sew."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry," she says, turning red.

"Tranquila," he tells her, and puts his hand on her shoulder before explaining that he's not sure. "It seems an American question," he says. "And I don't know. Maybe I will be stuck here, in this place--this kitchen--for the rest of my life. I don't know. Pero tengo otras esperanzas." He explains that the manager, Tom, who knows how hard Simón works, has talked about helping him take some business classes. About giving Simón a loan and rearranging his hours.

"You're interested in business?" Leila asks, and he nods.

Leila doesn't think much of Tom, from what she's seen. He's the kind of guy who lets a door swing shut when you're holding a tray behind it. Who shakes your hand without looking at you. Short and oblivious in a hard-edged, Napoleon-complex kind of a way.

But she says "that's great." And it is, really.

A moment of silence passes between them until Jesús swaggers over, pocketing his new, mysteriously acquired cell phone. If the kitchen were a family, Jesús would be the petulant younger brother. "Hey Papi," Jesús says to Simón and punches him in the shoulder. "Fútbol mañana?" Simón nods and they discuss the time, settling on midday.

"You play soccer?" Leila asks, once he's gone.

"You understand Spanish?"

"I understand 'mañana.' 'Fútbol.'"

"Well, when it's our day off we play. Fútbol. Me and Jesús. In Queens."

"You know, I used to play soccer, in high school."

"You?"

"Why? Does that surprise you?"

"I don't know, you're so...flaquita."

"What does that mean?"

"Skinny, you know." He brings his hands parallel to each other. "Delicada."

"Delicate? I'm not delicate."

"Ok, ok, entiendo," Simón lifts his hands in mock surrender. He looks into her eyes. "Is this a challenge?"

Chapter Four:
Corona

Leila has never been to Corona before. She has barely even traveled into Queens.

The afternoon following Simón's challenge, Leila boards a 7 train from Times Square and settles into a bright orange seat before the crowd begins to form around her. She has heard this particular train referred to as "The International Express," and the title seems fitting. At each stop, the train fills with torn issues of Vogue in other languages, with bilingual dictionaries, with kids and men and women in basketball jerseys and saris, wearing eyebrow rings and leather jackets, plaid-button ups and floral jersey dresses. They sprint into the doors as they slide shut. They graze Leila's knees with their legs and the hems of their clothing. They jostle past each other. They stare at their hands and feet and books and shopping bags while sending up a mixture of languages into the crowded air of the train that streams past Leila in a Slavic, Mandarin, Spanish jumble.

It's strange, Leila thinks. These New York moments. Moments when you watch the panorama on a subway train or find a black guy and a Hasid arguing in front of the apartment you are house-sitting at in Bed-Stuy. When life seems somehow outside of itself and instead a removed, perfect representation.

Leila forgot her book, so she stares out the window. She is familiar with the above-ground tracks in Brooklyn, but has never experienced them in Queens. Now, seeing this landscape for the first time, she squints past the sunlight to watch the metal rooftops and graffiti, the construction sites and open spaces that sometimes look beautiful and sometimes like a wasteland. She tries to watch it all but after a

while it becomes a blur: the bright, white billboards with black lettering advertising lawyers and auto parts, the vast supermarkets and tall high-rises where laundry flutters out of the windows near sneakers that have been flung over telephone wires all the way down. The storefronts advertising Angelo's pizzeria, Locksmith 911, Tony's Fridge, Morales Family Meatmarket, Iglesia Pentecostal Unida Latin, YoungWorld Toys.

Finally, the train stops at Corona Plaza. Leila steps into the open air and under the overhang, which casts a shadow across the platform. She walks down the stairs to the street, unfolds the small map Simón drew for her and locates the X he put down by FLUSHING MEDOW PARK.

The park is huge: filled with kids running around, sprawling grass and men who lounge across benches while their girlfriends perch over them, laughing and occasionally punching them in the chest when they say something rude. When she reaches the field, Leila is put on a team with Jesús. Simón, on the other hand, is one of their rivals. She shakes hands with the other players, who are all boys. None of them can be older than twenty. Simón is the last one to grasp her hand. "Ready?" he asks her, and winks. Leila raises her eyebrows and nods before huddling together with Jesús, pretending to whisper strategies in order to make Simón nervous.

Before the game begins against the backdrop of August trees and the giant silver globe that marks the center of the park and looms not too far in the distance, Leila stretches on the sidelines. She watches Simón juggle a few feet away until one of the boys yells "vamos!" and the game begins.

Within five minutes, Jesús heads the ball into the net and Simón's team counters, Simón driving a perfect pass toward a tall, Ecuadorian boy who guides it smoothly past the goalie. Leila makes a few nice passes, botches an assist, and doubles over at Simón's less-than-flattering impression of how she holds her arms when she runs. The game goes on for an hour, until they are all tired and sweaty. Leila's team, having lost by only one goal, shakes the winners' hands again. She tells them all "good game," and then she wipes the sweat from her cheek and accepts a beer that Simón takes from a plastic shopping bag. When he hands it to her, he touches the small of her back and the pulse in her stomach quickens.

"I haven't played in so long," Leila manages, still out of breath.

"You play well," he says, and she can't help but grin.

Leila's small euphoria is cut short, however, when she comes back to the restaurant the following night. Hoping to crumple a paper bag into a makeshift kitchen soccer ball or to flirt with Simón over paper plates of fresh tamales, Leila is instead met by a somber expression and an uncharacteristic focus directed toward the food Simón delivers, chops into fine pieces and occasionally flips in a frying pan.

At the end of the shift, Leila stays near the host stand, chatting with Anya and trying to hide her growing disappointment. For the first time, the high volume of Anya's voice seems bothersome. All Leila wants to do right now is walk home with her sister.

When the floors are clean and wet, the three of them head outside. Anya kisses their cheeks and walks the other way while Connie tries to simultaneously smoke a cigarette and dial Michael's number.

"Shit, he's not picking up," she says to herself.

"Has everyone left already?" Leila asks. "Are we free to go?"

"Miguel and the rest of them leave through the basement door," Connie says. "So yes, we're free to go." She reaches up to pull down the restaurant's metal gate.

"Oh!" Leila says. "I forgot my bag in the kitchen. Just a second."

"Make it quick" Connie says. "I'm supposed to meet Michael soon. He's just in the city for the night."

It's dark in the kitchen. Leila is unable to find the light switch, so she fumbles through, locating her purse by the small glow of the corner refrigerator. She is about to leave when she hears someone come up from the basement.

"Hola?" Someone says from outside the door. It's Simón.

"Hi," she says. "It's Leila. I'm in the kitchen."

She feels the air move as he pushes the door open. He walks toward her and then he says something--something small and quiet that she can barely hear, and then, to her surprise, he steps forward in the dark kitchen and kisses her.

She closes her eyes before she pulls back. "I thought you weren't interested," she can't stop herself from saying. "You were ignoring me tonight."

Simón laughs. "When the manager comes, I need to be good. But don't worry. How can I not be interested? Es imposible."

At first his lips feel strange--like rubber or something firm. But then he continues to kiss her and they feel soft and he pulls her to him against the steel freezer door and soon they are outside again, Simón pretending to walk the other way, Leila making an excuse to her sister who waves Leila on, immersed in a phone conversation with Michael. After Leila walks two blocks, she turns to find Simón

jogging up behind her. He takes Leila's hand, they cross the street, and ten minutes later she finds herself on the train to Queens, a part of her thinking what am I doing, the rest of her intoxicated with Simón's hands and the way he kisses her and the buzzing sensation in her sternum.

After they get off at Corona Plaza, they walk. Across the main avenue that Leila has been down before, past now-dark awnings and into a set of smaller, residential streets that are mostly empty besides the lines of rusty cars, two girls eating popsicles on a curb and a man wheeling in slow circles on a kid's bicycle. Leila and Simón have become shy again, since the train. They look ahead until one glances over and the other looks back, causing them both to turn to their feet again, Simón trying to think of something to say, Leila's stomach light and bubbling. They fall into the same step and their fingers occasionally, accidentally, graze against each other.

"This is where I sleep," Simón says after they have been walking a while. Leila, who has become immersed in the sound of their feet tapping the concrete in unison, looks up.

Simón lives on the second floor of a brick house on 104th street. It reminds Leila of the other houses she has seen in this neighborhood: patched together and incongruous, the porch surrounded by a wooden banister and followed by a set of pink stairs that lead to the street. Up on the second floor, a young Latina woman with red hair answers Simón's knock. She lets them inside and through a small room filled with cardboard boxes and a worn, orange couch. There is a stove in one corner and a small TV in the other, where two older men sit and watch the screen intently.

"*Telenovelas*," Simón whispers to her.

"What's that?" Leila whispers back.

"It's a...a show? On the television? With the women crying and the men doing bad things."

Leila looks up and notices a wooden board nailed to the ceiling and next to it a damp stretch of plaster. Two drops of water fall onto her arm.

"I need to repair that," Simón says, looking up.

In the kitchen, the woman who let them in is slicing a peach. Simón introduces Leila to her and then takes her to the living room to meet Hector and Jung-Su.

"Hector worked in our restaurant in the past, but now in a factory," Simón says.

"Oh," Leila says, and smiles.

Simón tries to explain what each of them do, moving his arms and hands if he doesn't know the words for midtown maid, soda-can collector, construction worker. He tells her that his other two roommates come home late since one works in a bar as his second job, the other at an all-night bakery. He shows her their room, which barely has enough space for the child's bunk bed in it. Then he asks her if she would like to see his.

"I am afortunado," he says, once he has closed the door behind them.

Leila's whole body is tingling and she can barely get out "Why's that?"

"The last week, I lived in that bed with Alejandro. Now, I switch with Hector, so I am here alone for a month."

"That is fortunate," Leila says. Then she steps forward. So close that she can feel his breath on her cheek and eyelashes. Their noses touch before he kisses her.

After they kiss for a long time --long enough that the light in the hallway goes off and the sound of the telenovelas fades into the distance--she wants to sleep with him but thinks she shouldn't, until, after he lies across the mattress and she climbs on top of him, after she makes him come in her hand, her toes and stomach moving against his, her bra--she can't stop thinking--not the one she would like to be wearing, she accidentally puts her palm on his shirt, trying to steady herself for a moment but instead leaving a long streak of semen across his chest. She covers her eyes and looks away, wondering what she has done with it before. Has there usually been a tissue nearby? She can barely look at him for a moment, but then Simón takes her hand. He wipes it on the sheet and kisses her. His hands move across her back and hips and she puts her hand on his cheek and he looks at her, and then she wants to and doesn't care if she shouldn't but thinks that by this point he doesn't, until it's clear that he does, clear that he's already hard again. And soon her leg is thrown over his shoulder and Leila, making small noises in that small, dark room, notices Simón's stomach trembling from what she thinks must be the uneven mattress, but from what she hopes, what she hopes is nerves and maybe, if she isn't terribly delusional, which she knows she should tell herself she is, from real passion.

Lying there afterwards, Simón's thin green blanket wrapped around them, Simón asks Leila questions about school, about her sister. She asks him about Jesús and the restaurant and wants to ask him how he came here and why, but is not sure how. He tells her more about his brothers, still in Mexico.

"You know my Dad died a year ago," Leila says.

"Shit." He draws back from her to see her face. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah," Leila says.

"How did this happen?"

"He was shot."

"That's terrible."

They sit there for a moment, listening to the shaking train pass over their heads.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Leila says.

"Oh. All right."

"It's down the hall?"

"Yes. To the right."

She puts on her shirt and closes the door behind her. The bathroom tiles are cold. She closes that door too and rests her hands on the cracked edge of the sink as she stares into the mirror, not knowing what she hopes to find, her face illuminated in strips by the street lighting that comes in through the foggy window pane.

When she comes into the room again, Simón takes her hand. He pulls her toward the mattress. He touches her face.

"Let's go to sleep," she whispers.

"You're sure?"

She nods.

"Ok," he says. "Ok."

They lie together, their warm hips touching. Their breathing comes out in alternating waves: Simón's natural, Leila's halting and self-conscious, her stomach feeling like a balloon is trapped inside it, leaking air in uneven spurts.

Soon he's asleep. Leila, exhausted, wants to sleep too, but is worried that when she wakes up the world will feel murky and pale, that the awful feeling which is lately always threatening to overcome her will begin to settle in her stomach. She worries that tomorrow morning, like every morning after since her father died, she won't be able to look at Simón without feeling nauseous.

At some point, her mind gives into her body's exhaustion and she falls asleep.

When she wakes up to find Simón's hand resting on her stomach and the small room filled with sunlight, Leila knows immediately that she will be back here again the following night--back on the 7 train and into his apartment and bed, which, in this morning light, doesn't feel murky or awful in the slightest.

Chapter Five:
The Fact Itself

Leila can remember when she would counsel her friends in high school, through a pregnancy scare or over a pain in their tilted uterus that stabbed at them when their boyfriend would thrust away on top. On the surface, Leila was calm and offered reasonable advice; but all she could ever think of was how remarkable it was: to go about one's day, one's *week* after someone had been inside you. For Leila, who in high school found it hard to imagine sex ever happening to *her*, pregnancy, tilted uteruses and any other number of ailments seemed besides the point to the momentous fact of sex itself.

And then it happened to her. And slowly, what was at first new and strange became normal and expected. Until this week. This week, with Simón, sex seemed different again--wonderful, new and strange.

Chapter Six:
Sliding Down Concrete

As the week wears on, Connie picks up every extra shift she can find on the bulletin board. She is not in the mood to hang around the apartment and play into her sister's fantasy that she is clueless about her and Simón. And she needs the money, besides.

This afternoon, the restaurant remains fairly empty--the few occupied seats filled by Jeremy-the-bass-player, a whispering couple and a middle-aged man who nervously reads Nicholas Sparks, concealing the cover with his hand and napkin as if someone might find him out. Connie notices that the boisterous group of tattooed lesbians (at least, Connie assumes they are lesbians) has not come in. They usually drop by on Wednesday afternoons after their basketball game, sweaty from bounding down the court and ready to eat as many orders of blue corn nachos as they can manage.

Although there are few customers to wait on, Connie keeps making mistakes. She floats to the kitchen or the back counter only to forget what she has come there for. It's that feeling she used to get in high school when she hadn't slept the night before--a sort of film that develops between her and the world that she can't seem to break through. Now she has that feeling all the time, and it makes her feel sleepy and cocooned and a bit helpless.

Lately, when she starts to feel this way, Connie thinks of her sister, and how her life has always seemed strung out in a straight line ahead of her. Each foot placed in front of the one before. Not carefully, or compulsively, but linearly. Leila

has grown up and spent her twenty-four years here: playing on the subway, ringing the elevator to their East Side and then Brooklyn apartments, going to high school, university and now law school.

Connie, instead, grew up in Texas, near the bay and the marshland, not quite spending her childhood playing with rattlesnake heads in the sand, but almost. She was eight when her parents took her to New York, to the same neighborhood where she saw her little sister born and finished high school only to start art school and drop out at nineteen. Afterwards, she spent her adult years moving--always moving. First to Portland, then Seattle, then back to Texas. Even to Grand Rapids, Michigan when the Midwest seemed like a place to be quiet, to take a few breaths.

In this last decade, she has painted a few portraits now and then but has mostly spent her time in restaurants: staring at an aircraft carrier from a Corpus Christi patio while serving fried mahi mahi, bringing out pots of "jasmine harmony" on wooden trays at a locally-owned tea bar in Portland, not doing much of anything at Michigan's premier Olive Garden; and now back here, back here again in the East Village, serving fake chicken to the neighborhood's constantly-evolving batch of students and leftists.

So, she had been around. She had even been married. They had lived together. They had camped together, gone to parties and concerts together, fought, made up. She had once found his best friend inexplicably dead on the couch. She had *lived.* Which wasn't even how she thought of it, really. Only when Leila was acting like an idiot. The point is, Connie thinks as she delivers two waters and manages a smile, that she has been around.

"Hey, Connie!" Edward yells out from the host stand, breaking into Connie's reverie. "Space Cadet. Come over here."

Edward, whose Filipina fiancée lives with him in their small apartment in Brooklyn (waiting, like her future husband, for their immigration lawyers to make some progress on their case), is a hard guy to figure out. When he isn't palming loose-leafed bunches of Buddhist propaganda, passing them out to Chloe and anyone with a half-baked sense of spirituality who will listen, he enjoys himself at the host stand, sometimes playing air guitar to the Metallica he puts on when the manager isn't around, but more importantly proving himself to be decent company.

"So I was thinking," Edward says. He discards his invisible guitar when Connie reaches him. "Would you be into going to this Belgian bar on Avenue B when we're done? I hear it's pretty nice."

"How expensive?" Connie asks.

"Eight dollars, maybe nine?"

"Yikes. Let's just go to the Cherry Tavern."

"We could go to that Showtunes place."

"Showtunes?"

"You know, where they crowd the piano and yell requests?"

Connie imagines yelling out Broadway favorites on the anniversary of her father's death.

"Actually, I just remembered that I told an old high school friend we'd meet up," she tells Edward.

She hasn't been thinking about it tonight, not really; but when she does, it's a small moment in particular that keeps coming back to her. A moment that, she realizes with some shame, has little to do with her father.

A few weeks afterwards, she had quit her job and was spending most of her time cross-legged on the bathroom floor, reading old music magazines. Sometimes she would spend the day alone, or with her sister. But often Edward or Michael would come in, would pull her up, bring her out to do things. One day, Michael was watching his friend's dog, a beagle named Marilyn, and he convinced Connie to come to Central Park and "throw a stick around," even though she hated dogs and at that point hated leaving the house. "And what's this," he had said, pointing to her black dress and torn tights, to his own skinny, dark jeans. "It's June. It's a park. We need new outfits."

When they emerged from the department store, they were new people. Michael looked especially strange dressed in khakis, and she remembers thinking that they were both crisper and cleaner than they had ever been before. And while they lounged in the grass, in their pastel clothes, throwing a crushed plastic bottle to the eager beagle like a young, younger couple, she thought, for a moment: so that's why people want this.

After the shift draws to a slow and painful close, ending with an unfortunate incident involving a couple with matching wheat allergies, Connie changes and walks out with Roberto and Jesús. On his way out, Jesús nods to the delivery boy next door, Connie thinking: do all the delivery boys know each other? Thinking: I should ask Leila; thinking: maybe not.

She walks to the corner and steps around a pile of discarded to-go cups, the blue and white borders and stenciled-in "we are happy to serve you"s speckled with dirt and maybe dog shit. But the night's not too cold and Union Square, with its long-awaited bench and cigarettes, is just a few avenues away, the skateboard kids and their pre-teen groupies spinning and sliding down concrete, their boards probably borrowed from cousins and older brothers who have moved onto girls and other hobbies.

And it's unlikely that Leila will come home tonight, judging by Simón's hurry to get out of there, so Connie can just sit for a while and watch the kids spin by.

Chapter Seven:
Mollusks

A few days and two train rides to Queens later, Leila wakes up at eleven a.m. and, momentarily disoriented by the angle of the light coming in through the window and the nearness between her and the floor, realizes she is in Simón's apartment. After coming to, she stretches, surprised to feel the wind from the cracked window move across her naked breasts and back--an uncommon feeling since she almost always sleeps in a tee shirt and her beloved, ill-fitting NYU shorts.

Simón is gone--that's clear. Probably into his third hour of carrot-peeling and pancake flipping. A morning already filled with wiping counters and bicycling across the city, plastic bags filled with other peoples' meals resting easily on his handlebars.

She reaches for her pants on the floor and instinctively draws the covers around herself although there is no one there to see. After she pulls her shirt over her head, she climbs carefully across the imbalanced, propped-up mattress, and comes across a note to the left of her pillow, scrawled on a receipt that was probably plucked from the pocket of her pants, so eagerly discarded the night before.

Layla, the note begins. *At work. See you soon, espero.*

She pockets the note and tiptoes out of Simón's bedroom. The kitchen, so full the night before, now seems neat and desolate, as if a maid had come in to wipe away the traces of a quickly departing guest. She fills a cup with water from the tap, and examines the rows of neatly-lined boxes in the cupboards until she sees the time on the microwave clock and realizes that she is late--she is supposed to meet her friend Eliza at the Museum of Modern Art in fifteen minutes--a distance that will surely

take her at least forty, depending on the flow of subway traffic and the lines in Queens, the frequency of which she knows little to nothing about.

She puts down the half-drunk glass of water and runs back to Simón's bedroom, where she grabs her underwear from between the sheets and stuffs them into her purse before racing across Roosevelt avenue and up the muggy steps to the 7 train.

*

"Where were you?" Eliza asks when Leila arrives, breathless. Eliza takes off her sunglasses and raises her eyebrows, faux-exasperated.

"Connie had, uh, she needed help putting her paintings on some website," Leila falters. It's not technically a lie, since Connie had asked for her help with the online artists' collective the week before.

"Oh," Eliza shrugs. "That's cool. I didn't know your sister still painted."

"Yeah, she does." She catches her breath. "Hey, I like your dress."

"Are you serious?" Eliza looks down at what for some people would amount to a belted flannel nightshirt. "This was the only thing at Matthew's apartment, and I didn't have time to stop at mine. It's hideous. I have no clue why I bought it."

"I kind of like it. Anyway," Leila says, pointing to the ticket counter. "Let's go! I'm excited to see this exhibit."

Standing in line, they roll their eyes and smirk at the couple in front of them--a rail thin twosome whose hips, hands, and various body parts seem to be connected by magnetic force.

"You know, I was thinking about it the other day," Eliza says, eyeing the man's hand, deep in his girlfriend's back pocket.

"About what?"

"About sex."

"Of course," Leila says. "What about it?"

"Just how *primitive* it is."

Leila laughs.

"Well, it's like, with Matthew, he make's this *face* when I'm on top of him. This teeth-gritted, focused, *animal* face. It's really sexy, but kind of, I don't know, scary at the same time."

"Scary?" Leila asks.

"Yeah, or I don't know." Eliza shakes her head and steps forward in the line. "And it's weird, because the other day, we were passing by this dog on the street, and Matt was ruffling its fur, really focused on it, really ruffling it good. He loves dogs." She pauses. "And then I *looked* at him, and he was making the same animal *sex* face, and I thought--"

"Tickets?" the stern, small woman in front of them says. She holds out her hand and scanner.

Eliza turns, taken aback, and embarrassedly offers her ticket. They pass behind the woman and up a white-washed set of stairs before entering the main lobby of the second floor, where they immediately duck down, startled by the

illusion that a fan, whirling and careening around the room from a string attached to the ceiling, is about to smash into their skulls.

"Jesus, talk about aggressive art," Eliza says once she's straightened up.

They watch the fan spin for another moment and then skitter under it in order to enter the exhibit across the lobby, where the glass doors part to reveal the first installation: a giant mural, covered in what look like pink starfish and sloping white sea anemones, their fibers rippling across the canvas.

"I want to put my hand on this part," Eliza says, as she moves her fingers an inch away from the coral seascape. "It's like mollusks."

She moves her hand parallel to the surface for another instant before turning to Leila. "Hey," she says, "did you know that they use coral reefs to treat all kinds of diseases? Like HIV and heart problems?"

"I think my mom told me that once."

"Yeah? That's right, your mom loves all that underwater stuff. Well, I had no idea. It says on that plaque."

After the seascape, they walk into a room full of photographs. Although she pauses in front of each one, Eliza seems unaware of them. Instead of looking at the pictures she looks down at her nose, as if trying to figure something out. "That's the thing about being so social sciences and arts-oriented," she says. Leila notices that this is her friend's favorite opener: that's the thing.

"Because people like me know next to nothing about science, everything about the natural world, about biology and chemistry and ecology is amazing and inexplicable, but simultaneously totally taken for granted. Like, I am so willing to trust anyone who seems even marginally knowledgeable about science, business,

medicine...I'm sure you could give me an explanation that some moderately-with-it fourth grader would challenge, some inane reason for why the sky is blue or how our hearts pump or why the leaves change color, and I would totally buy it."

"I know why the leaves change color," Leila says. "I remember that from elementary school."

"Well, good for you. But seriously," Eliza says, as she steps around a video installation of two donkeys moving in concentric circles. "I feel like the fact that I've basically given up on that kind of practical information, the fact that I'm only invested in this, you know, wishy-washy emotional, psychological realm is sort of dangerous."

"Eliza's book of armchair wisdom."

"I'm serious!" Eliza says, a bit too loudly, and the posh, French women to their left turn towards them, wide-eyed.

"Ugh, whatever," Eliza says, more quietly. "I don't know what I'm talking about. Anyway, how are things going with your delivery boy?"

"Good I think," Leila says.

"Yeah? Have you slept with him yet?"

"We haven't even been on a date!"

"So? You played soccer. That's kind of a date."

Leila waves Eliza away with her hand and approaches the sculpture in front of her.

Taking up nearly half the room, molded from what the plaque describes as self-lubricating plastic and spilling across the floor like a set of white marble ruins that are beginning to liquify in the modern age, the sculpture, a sort of sprawling,

dismantled bed, brings Leila instantly to the first night when she and Simón slept together: to her leg thrown over his shoulder and his stomach shaking as he tried to enter her. The marble, self-lubricating bed has a giant headboard which, splitting at the corners, reaches halfway toward the high ceiling. If Simón were here, Leila would have longed for him to push her against it, violating every museum rule imaginable.

"I did sleep with him actually," she says finally, turning back to Eliza and fighting a smile.

"I knew it. When?"

"A few nights ago."

"How could you have kept this to yourself for so long?"

"It's only been four days!"

The French women cast them another, more meaningful look, and Eliza whispers "sorry" then rolls her eyes and comes back to focus on Leila.

"Ok. Tell me everything."

"Ok," Leila says. "Well, I came to visit Connie at the restaurant when they were closing up. And while her and Anya were sweeping and mopping, I went into the kitchen a few times, pretending I wanted some soup. Obviously going to flirt with Simón."

"Clearly."

"But he seemed kind of busy and agitated and eager to get out of there, so I was thinking, alright, whatever, I guess that ship has sailed. So Connie and I walk out a while later, ready to go home, and right before she's about to pull down the gate, I remember I've left my bag on this coat hook by the stove. So I walk back into

the kitchen, you know, everything dark, thinking everyone's gone home, and suddenly Simón's there, and he just grabs me and pushes me against the freezer. And he kisses me and kisses me again and he's saying all these things like, que bonita, you're so beautiful, and kissing me the whole time."

"Oh my God," Eliza says, swooning. "That's so romantic."

"Yeah. It was."

"So did he take you right there? On the kitchen counter? I hope you disinfected it afterwards."

"No, no. Nothing like that," Leila says. "I made him come outside with me because I was worried Connie would catch on. But when we got to the street she was on the phone with Michael and told me to go ahead without her. I called her later to tell her I was going out with you."

"Naturally."

"And then we went to his apartment."

"Where does he live?"

"In Queens. In Corona. Near the end of the 7 line."

"Hunh. And then what?"

"Well, on the subway, it was like he couldn't keep his hands off me. And usually that kind of thing makes me really uncomfortable, but I don't know...I think we made kind of a spectacle of ourselves."

"I feel like I'm turning the pages to some torrid bodice-ripper."

"Do you not want me to tell you?"

"No, that's exactly what I'm saying! That I do."

"Well, the subway ride was really long, and then we got to his apartment, me having basically no idea where I was at that point, and he introduces me to his roommates and then he takes my hand and leads me into his room. And, I don't know. I surprised myself. I wasn't nervous at all. I just felt very...ready."

"Was it good?"

"Yeah, it was. But also...I don't know. Surprisingly intimate. It made me realize I haven't had much emotional sex before." Leila shudders and instinctively presses her legs together, fending off the uninvited memory of Anthony Daniels pumping away inside of her, the air filled with whispered you-like-that-babys and the quiet sound of his socks skidding, trying to find traction on her dorm room floor.

"It was really emotional?" Eliza asks. "That's crazy, you guys barely know each other."

"Yeah, I don't know. It was just really...intense."

"Aren't you worried about the INS catching him?"

"I haven't asked him about that," Leila says, looking discomfited. "Maybe he's a citizen, you know?"

"Oh, get real Leila."

"Yeah." Leila bites her lip. "I guess it was pretty clear from his apartment what his situation is. But how do you bring that kind of thing up with someone?"

"Look, don't worry about it. Just enjoy yourself."

"Yeah," Leila says. "Yeah. God, I'm not looking forward to Connie finding out. I have a feeling she's going to get on her high horse."

"What does she have to get on her high horse about?"

"Oh, I don't know. She usually finds a reason. You know, its funny. I was thinking the other day, for all her tattoos and DEVO obsessions and middle-aged boyfriends, my sister's kind of a traditionalist."

"Yeah." Eliza thinks for a moment. "I don't know her that well, but I could see that. There's something very...measured about her."

"Hmm. That's interesting. Oh shit." Leila glances at her watch. "I have to get going."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah, I totally forgot about this orientation meeting I have to go to. Shit! I wanted to have dinner with you and hear more about how things are going with Matthew. You mentioned something you wanted to talk about?"

"Don't worry about it, pretty lady," Eliza says, and pats her friend's shoulder. "Sometime soon."

"Ok," Leila says." I just want to see my favorite Pollock and then we can leave."

"I made a new friend yesterday," Eliza says, as they make their way up and toward the white room with 'One: Number 31.'

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. He's three."

"Sounds about your level."

"Good one. Yeah, this really cute kid who apparently lives across the hall in my building. I had no idea he lived there until this morning when I opened my door and there he was, this little blonde guy. And then he just wandered into my

apartment. I was like, 'okay...want to go find your daddy? But he just swept past me." Eliza puts up her hand to imitate the boy, turning up her nose and sweeping past Leila.

"Curious kid."

"Yeah, seriously," Eliza says, as she comes to face the mess of splattered blacks, whites and browns. She lets out a breath of satisfied air, failing to mention that she had also met the boy's father, who had eventually come to fetch his son; who had transferred his pack of cigarettes into his pocket and extended his hand, his head shaved, his Eastern European accent curling around the words: so nice to meet you.

Later that evening, Eliza was slumped, cross-legged in her hall in order to write an idea down in her notebook before it escaped her. Lost in the notebook, she was startled when she heard a latch turn and saw her neighbor come out.

"You lose your keys?" he asked.

"No, just trying to write down something. Um. Before I lose it," Eliza finished, lamely

"Okay," he smiled. "To each her own." He went back into the apartment. Eliza's heart was beating and the sound of the man's wife cooing to their son echoed into the hallway. Eliza realized she had never seen his wife, only heard her voice through the thick, red door.

When he came back a few minutes later, he had a cigarette in his hand. "Now it's time for *my* break," he said, and nodded to the closed door as if pleased to get away. He headed toward the stairwell, where he turned, to say, "If you need anything, anything at all, just ask."

"I will," Eliza said, and brushed her hair from her eyes. "Thank you."

On their way out, Leila steps off the escalator and onto the main floor. She closes her eyes and thinks about the white marble ruins and Simón's hands on her body, unaware that two feet from her Eliza is trying not to think of how finally, finally Matthew broke down and told her he loved her, leaving her strangely unmoved; that Leila's mother, Helen, has taken to looking up flights to Texas and sketching ships again in her old, giant notebooks; that Simón is chasing Jesús' soccer ball across Spaghetti park, having thought about Leila at moments during this hot morning but mostly about the game and his brothers and how unpredictable and frightening life can be.

Chapter Eight:
Cocaína, Merengue and a bit of Spanish

Leila comes to spend almost as much time in the restaurant as she does in her first-year law classes. Dancing clumsily with Miguel to a loud Merengue tune; turning red when Simón kisses her for the first time in front of her sister; pretending to be disgusted when Alberto shows her the stack of pictures the chefs keep under the dishes by the stove--photos of naked, South American women made to look like collectible baseball cards. "My sister's told me all about you, Alberto," Leila will say as she shakes her head.

In the meantime, Roberto teaches Leila a bit of Spanish. When things are slow and his dishrack is empty, he'll come over to Leila, drying his hands on his apron before he hands her a fork. "Cuchillo," she'll say, while he shakes his head. "Cuchara?" He laughs. "Tenedor!" she will finally say, her attempts at a misplaced, trilling R petering out in a soft gargle--a puff of air.

She has come to enjoy herself, to like them all so much, to become so settled in how amazingly *uncomplicated* it all feels, that when one day Jesús takes her and Jamila to the basement to show them a bag of fine white powder, smirking and mumbling qué maravilla, she simply says, "Jesús. Please don't show me that," and walks away, convinced that it has nothing to do with her or Simón. He's ok, she thinks. Just a stupid kid. Jamila will deal with it. She knows him better.

On Wednesdays--Simón's day off--Leila gets on the 7 train after class and secretly hopes to run into one of her old acquaintances from NYU before they get

off at Jackson Heights. "What are you doing in Queens?" they might ask. "Visiting my boyfriend," she would reply. "He lives near Corona Plaza."

Once she's there, they play soccer in the park. She tests out her new Spanish words. They make love.

And on evenings when Simón is too tired, when she doesn't ride the subway from the East Village to Queens, doesn't anticipate the exact moment when the train will emerge from the tunnel to open air, past the sprawling, near-vacant parking lots, the tangled webs of telephone wires, the bright stores with Spanish names and cinderblock siding, Leila lies in bed in her sister's apartment, sometimes putting her hand on her stomach and wondering how it has become so linked to Simón touching it, almost as if it doesn't quite exist without his hand there.

Chapter Nine:
Caribou Skulls and Twin Cappuccinos

One night, Leila works up the courage to ask how he got here.

"En un camion," Simón answers, in the dark. He stretches his legs and turns toward her. "In the back. In a box. With my brother."

She's not sure what to say. It's so hard to know if sympathy is what people want. "You know," she says. "My sister told me you were kind of a jerk when you first got here."

"A jerk?"

"Not so simpático."

"Really?" Simón laughs. "Ay. You know, those times are not so clear for me now. Supongo que era triste. I was missing Mexico. Missing mi familia."

"And now?"

"Ahora?" She can feel him shrug in the dark. "You know, I choose to come here, Leila. It's a choice."

"But it must be so hard," she says. You work so much. You can't go home. You can't see your family."

"Why so serious tonight?" He rolls over and pins her hands to the mattress.

"What are you doing?"

"Tranquila. Nada. Nada."

"Ow!" Leila laughs and struggles to get away. "I'm trying to ask you something." When she finally kicks him away, he falls asleep quickly, like he always does, his leg swung heavily across hers, Leila awake and wondering what the other

men are doing in the other small, humid rooms of the house, each one shaken every hour by the passing 7 train.

The next morning, lying in bed with his girl before the sun signals him to get up and moving, Simón asks Leila if maybe they could meet up with her friends some night after his shift. "I like to meet them," he says, "and we sleep in your sister's apartment after, if it's late?"

"That sounds fun," Leila says, rolling to face him before quickly changing the subject in order to encourage him, yet again, about the business classes--about the loan for admissions and the materials she got him on applying for a green card. "Ok, ok, I know, you seem like a mother," he says, and he kisses her shoulder before he steps out of bed.

Leila watches him get dressed. First the jeans, then the fitted green and red soccer jersey. The hat and grey no-slip sneakers are the last to go on. Simón often tells her that although the waiters have their tips and flexible hours, he's glad of this--that he doesn't have to put on black clothes each morning.

"I had a dream about my dad," she says as she watches Simón bend down to tie his shoes.

"About your dad?"

"Yeah."

Simón comes to the edge of the bed and puts his hand on Leila's shoulder. "Ok?"

"Am I ok?"

"Yes, are you ok?"

Leila shrugs. "Yeah. Well, it was weird. In the dream I was little again, and I was sitting in this desert, playing with a giant skull. I think it might have been from a moose or a caribou. And then this horse comes riding up to me--" Leila stops, realizing that Simón probably doesn't know the words 'skull' or 'desert.'

"You know, I can barely even remember it now," she says, and puts the pillow over her head. "Oh my god, I'm exhausted."

Simón uncovers her face and takes her hand.

"You know, I wonder what he would have thought of you," Leila says.

"Your father?"

Leila nods.

"What do you think?" he asks.

"I think he would have like you," Leila says. "He was very industrious. Or, you know, a man's man. But also nice. Like you."

"Hmm." Simón says.

Before he goes out the door, he looks back at Leila, curled up under the covers. "You want to ride the subway with me?" he asks. "Go to sleep again in your apartment while I work?"

"I was actually thinking I might walk around your neighborhood this morning. Get to know it. Explore."

"Ok," Simón says, and picks up his backpack before he walks to the door. "I'll see you tonight, then."

That afternoon, back in Manhattan, Leila asks Eliza's advice while they sit and chat over twin cappuccinos.

"What's something fun we could do together?" She wonders. "I want to do something fun."

"Something involving me?" Eliza asks.

"Definitely not," Leila says. "It's too early in our relationship to deal with joint trauma." She sips her drink. "God, I'm drawing a total blank. What did you do with Matthew when you started going out?"

"What did we do," Eliza says, slowly. "Oh, I know! You could take him to see that Pollock you love. That's sexy. Sharing things that inspire you."

"Hmm," Leila says. She imagines Simón in his green jersey and no-slip sneakers. She thinks about the white-washed walls, the Europeans and the abstracts and the twenty dollar entrance fee. "Maybe we could take the Staten Island ferry," she says, finally. "That sounds nice."

Chapter Ten:
Us Three Girls

"Hey," Leila says to her sister one night on the subway as the two of them make their way to Brooklyn to visit their mother. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah." Connie grabs the silver pole as the subway jerks ahead. "Sure."

"Why do all the guys in the kitchen call Edward 'Chino'?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they know he's not Chinese, right? He's Filipino."

Connie takes a breath and looks at her sister. "Leila."

Leila takes a breath of her own. "*Connie.*"

"Well, let me put it this way, does it seem like Edward minds?"

"No, but--"

"I just don't really think it's our business. They work together. That's how they, you know, relate. Do you want me to sit them all down by the stove with a map and explain where the Philippines are in relation to China?"

"No, I suppose not." Leila sighs and changes the subject.

*

There is something different about their mother these days. They both see it. A sort of quiet restlessness that has burrowed into her features and her way of speaking. The apartment seems different as well, although it's hard to pinpoint the few missing objects that have transformed the feeling of the place. The new aura is, in fact, thanks to Helen's two close friends--Magda and Teresa--who have finally

made Helen put away the loosened ties, the case notes and books on the War that Helen had kept around for a time, as if her husband was going to reappear at any moment, immediately in need of a good read and his favorite tie.

Helen has made eggplant parmesan for dinner--Leila's favorite dish since she was young. Before they sit down to eat, Leila gives her mother a hug. "I don't see you enough these days, Mom," she says, and Helen squeezes her tightly before turning to put her hand on Connie's cheek. "We should do this more often," Helen says, "us three girls."

As they sit down, Helen asks them about school and work. She serves them more than they could eat without feeling sick, but they try to eat it anyway, massaging their stomachs while Helen tells them a story about her professor friend, Linda, who is trying to seduce the department secretary. Connie smiles, but Leila, having met Linda in person, almost loses her orange juice. "Linda?" she asks, wide-eyed. "No way, that's too perfect."

During a pause in the conversation, Connie announces that she has gotten another tattoo. At their request, she takes off her cardigan and turns her back to them to show it off.

"I actually like this one," Helen says after a moment, examining Connie's back. "It looks like there are ghosts moving through those trees."

"You like it?" Connie asks. She puts her sweater on again and turns to face her mother.

"You know how I feel about you doing that to your body," Helen says, "but I do like this one. It's very pretty."

"Does Michael have as many tattoos as you do?" Leila asks, and Connie says he has a few. "Since turning forty, though, he feels a little strange about getting more," she says.

"I can't believe my daughter has a forty-year-old boyfriend," Helen says.

"Mom."

"I know, I know." Helen raises her hands. "I'm not one to judge."

It's eight o'clock when they finish eating dinner, but the sky is still light. Streaks of pink and orange are beginning to appear across it, but faintly. After Connie and Leila help their mother with the dishes, the three of them stand in front of the window in the dining room and watch the streaks become darker and then fade away completely. An airplane leaves its white train across the sky like trailing silk and Connie watches it, leaning her head, for a moment, on her mother's shoulder.

Once they've abandoned the window, Connie wanders into the kitchen to make tea while Leila and her mother settle on the big, yellow couch. "Hey Mom," Leila asks, remembering, "Do you still have that big book about nineteenth century New York? The one with all the maps and drawings?"

"Oh, I haven't seen that in ages."

"Do you think you could show me something in it?"

After searching a bit, Helen brings the book back to the couch. It's a big thing: brown and dusty, with those different-lengthed pages that make a book seem rough and library-bound. Connie sits on the armchair. She has brought back mugs

of tea for each of them--green for her mother, mandarin for Leila, earl grey for herself. Leila and Helen take their mugs and flip to the section on Corona, long ago known as West Flushing. They spread the maps in front of them and Helen shows Leila what Corona looked like in the 1850s, when only twelve families lived there--when you could climb to the top of the main hill and look out on New Jersey and Long Island Sound before you trudged to Flushing creek to fetch the wheat and corn you needed to grind your flour. Helen moves her hands across each page and flips to photographs of the railroad and a picture of the "valley of ashes," where the architect of the Williamsburgh Bridge once sought to fill that same creek with dust in order to build a port that never came to fruition.

"Why were you interested in this neighborhood, Leila?" Helen finally asks, once they have run their fingers over the roads and railways--across the development that grew with every page.

"Oh, I was just curious," Leila says, after a small hesitation. "I was reading about the neighborhood in this law review article. Some case study on immigration and crime."

*

After their mother goes to bed, Connie and Leila walk to the F train, Leila peering up at the elegant brownstones against the dark sky. Beyond the brownstones, the street is lined with closed-down vintage shops and tranquil cafes--their managers sweeping up while students and sturdy, professorial couples filter out from them and onto the street for a midnight walk.

"So you haven't told Mom about you and Simón?" Connie asks. Leila shakes her head and looks down at her fingernails.

It's clear that Connie has something else to say, but she chooses not to until the next evening, when Leila is leaned up on the back counter by Simón, watching the rock star couple as they list, for Jamila, their preferences and substitutions, all of which Jamila already knows.

"Leila," Connie says, coming up to her and Simón.

"Yeah?" Leila asks.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"Alright." Leila motions to Simón to go away and he kisses her forehead before he walks back into the kitchen, whistling.

"Here come with me to get some napkins downstairs," Connie says, and Leila follows her down the steep wooden steps to the basement, Connie ducking under the trap door, Leila not needing to. They walk past the cobwebs and the metal bins of straws and tea boxes that are nailed to the wall all the way down. Leila sees a cockroach dart across the basement floor and gasps, almost stumbling down the last stair, but Connie takes her hand and steers her toward the wall of paper bags.

"Look," Connie says, slowly,

"What? Are you okay? Is something wrong?"

"Leila. Jamila told me Jesús showed you some drugs he had?"

"Ok," Leila says, slowly.

"Is that true?'

Leila takes a deep breath. "Yeah. The other week."

"So that doesn't trouble you?"

"Of course it does, but it's not really my problem."

"Well are you sure Simón's not involved with that?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I asked him," Leila lies. "What's your point?"

"I'm worried about you."

"What are you trying to say?"

"That you can't just, I don't know. You can't just hunker down in this kitchen and dance with Miguel and have a great time and erase this other part of what's going on."

"I thought you were saying I shouldn't do drugs."

"I didn't mean *you*. I just don't want you to get wrapped up in something you're not prepared for."

"Connie. I *honestly* have no idea what you're talking about."

Connie takes a deep breath. "I just feel as if--" She stops. "Look. I'm not any sort of expert on this, but I've worked in this restaurant for a few years now, and maybe I haven't made, you know, the sort of connections that seem to come pretty easily to you, but I just worry about the fact that—how do I put this? Well, with the guys in the kitchen, I...I feel like I always run up against these moments, of, well, I like them, but I also know that there's this, I don't know, this sort of wall between us. Where I can never understand that experience, what that's *like*. And where they'll never really understand my experience, what *that's* like. And while that feels sad and sort of, I guess, debilitating, it feels important to me to acknowledge that."

"That's so cynical," Leila says.

"Is it?"

"Yes. You're saying that two people with different life experiences have nothing in common."

"That's *not* what I'm saying. I just think that you can't compare your relationship with Simón with, you know, your friend Eliza having a brother and you not having a brother but you understanding each other anyway. He lives on a completely different *planet* than us. You're concerned about school, and this romance, and I don't know what else, but for him, I mean, maybe I'm assuming, but it's pretty rough for them, it's very, like, survival. Simón's *life* is in that kitchen right now, so that he can support his family, and the whole hiding from immigration officials, and, I don't know, you have to admit that there's a pretty extreme difference between that and your experience."

"This is so predictable," Leila says. "I've got my shit together, I'm in school, I'm happy, *you're* the one who's unhappy. So why is it me who's apparently fucking everything up?"

"I'm not saying you're fucking everything up."

'Let me ask you a question, then. What about our Dad dying?"

"What about it?"

"I mean, based on what you're saying, we should only date men who've lost their fathers? So that we can be on the same page?"

"All I'm saying is that there's a barrier there, and you need to acknowledge it. So that you can look at things a little more clearly."

"Ok. I acknowledge there's a barrier. Can I go back upstairs now?"

"Sure, Leila," Connie says. "Fine by me."

Chapter Eleven:
Con Gusto

The following Saturday, while Leila prepares for her first day of class and Connie reads in the park (having given away her evening shift in a rare moment of self love), the kitchen makes its transition from brunch to dinner. The restaurant is in its usual state of mid-afternoon disarray, the metal counters sticky with maple syrup while paper containers of melted vegan butter droop by the cutting board. By the screen door, Simón and Edward chat over bowls of soup while Jesús and Victor flip through pages of pirated DVDs, brought over in thick vinyl cases by the delivery boys next door. Beyond the kitchen, the bulk of the brunch crowd has emptied out. This leaves a few scattered couples: content and pancake-full, staying put until their plates are cleared and the evening becomes inevitable.

Chloe, her hands sweet and milky from pouring cups of syrup and half and half into large plastic containers, is supposed to be training the new waitress, but instead uses her ten-minute break to strut around the kitchen like a poorly-outfitted opera singer, showing off her new dress to Miguel and Alberto, who whistle obligingly.

"Come here," Miguel says to her. He takes her hand and kisses it before looking her up and down. "So sexy."

"You're alright," Chloe says, "but I've got my eye on that one over there."

Jesús looks up. "Who, me, Mamí? Tu ojo para mí?"

She nods and kisses him on the cheek. Jesús pretends to faint and the boys from next door applaud.

Simón watches them from the stoop and wonders again if he dreamed up the night--years ago, before Miguel's wife moved here--when he came into the near-dark kitchen to find Chloe, shirt off, pressed against Miguel and crying. The radio was still playing maracas, but softly, and Miguel, in a rare, serious moment, had his eyes closed and his arms around her.

"Oh shit." Chloe peers through the oval window in the kitchen door. "I forgot they come in on Saturdays."

"Who's they?" The new waitress asks, shyly.

"This couple that thinks they're rock stars. He's okay, but she's deranged."

"De-WHAT Mamí?" Jesús yells.

Chloe ignores him and motions to the new girl. "Follow me," she says. She tightens her apron and pushes open the door.

A few minutes later, she's back with their order. "The kale is grilled, the carrots steamed, the salmon *well done*. But *please* don't burn it this time, Miguel. I don't feel like being yelled at."

Miguel nods. "Don't worry so much," he says, and winks.

And yet somehow, within the following twenty minutes the salmon has come back and gone out again, only to come back a final time, charred black, Chloe close to tears as she slams it on the counter. The new waitress holds back, unsure, as the manager, who has arrived only ten minutes before, pushes past her to reach Miguel.

Simón looks through the oval window to see the mujer loca smooth her peroxide hair and throw a dollar bill on the table, her bandana-ed boyfriend rising to place his hand comfortingly on the small of her back.

Axl Rose asshole, Chloe thinks, before Tom tells her and the new girl to go clear the table.

When they leave, Tom grabs Miguel by the elbow. He is almost shaking. "You just lost us a customer," he says, in a low hiss.

"She's crazy," Miguel says, calmly. "She sends it back for more when it's already close to burning. Who cares what she thinks?"

"Who cares?" Tom asks. "What do you mean who cares?"

"He's right," Simón says, quietly. "She is crazy."

"It doesn't matter!" Tom shouts. "They're steady customers! They come in four times a week! They leave good tips."

Simón is silent. Roberto turns off the faucet and begins to quietly stack the plastic cups.

"And YOU," Tom turns back to Miguel. "You're doing drugs in my kitchen? Burning my customer's food on purpose?"

Jesús winces at the word "drugs" and looks down at his feet. Roberto looks back and forth, unable to understand the words of the accusation but aware of the heat between Miguel and Tom, of its breadth and implications.

"She asks for it to be more well done," Miguel, looking straight ahead.

"I don't care if you have a baby on the way!" Tom explodes. He turns to Simón "And I don't care how hard you work! No more tequila, no more snorting in

the basement." He turns back to Miguel. "And no more snot-nosed attitude. *Comprende* ?"

"Al carajo," Miguel mutters, and walks out.

"Why you look at me when you say this?" Simón asks Tom, watching Miguel's back before it disappears.

"Oh, don't pretend you're not--" Tom taps his nose.

"I would never bring that here. Es ilegal."

Tom laughs. "You're illegal yourself."

"So why don't you get rid of all of us?" Simón shouts.

"Is that really a question?"

"You know, Miguel, he's right." Simón raises himself to look directly at Tom. "You have no plans to help me. You don't think anything of me. I don't know why I spend every hour of my life in this porquería."

"Get out of my restaurant."

"Con gusto." Simón bows, turns and pushes open the swinging doors.

Chapter Twelve:
One More Muggy, Queens Day

Tuesday is not traditionally Simón's day off. So when Leila comes back from the corner supermarket to find him still in the apartment, just emerging from the shower, he searches for an explanation. "The restaurant closes today," he lies. "A holiday."

"What holiday is that?" Leila comes towards him. She puts her arms around his bare, wet waist and kisses his cheek.

"I don't know these American holidays," he says, and smoothes an eyelash from the corner of Leila's eye. "There are too many. What's in your bag?"

She shows him the eggs, onions and spinach she has just bought. "Let me cook you some breakfast," she whispers, and kisses him again. "Get dressed."

The rest of the men from the apartment have already gone, so Simón and Leila are the only ones here. Simón sits at the plastic folding table while Leila carefully cuts apart the onion and removes the spinach stems, piling them neatly on the edge of the counter.

"Leila," Simón says, once she's struggled to light the stove and dropped the onions into the frying pan.

"What?" she asks, her back towards him.

"I quit last night. At the restaurant. I walked out."

She smirks. "Good one."

"No. En serio."

She turns, and when she looks at him, she sees that he is. Serious. "What are you talking about?"

"It was too much. The manager, he insulted me."

"But what are you going to do?"

"Don't worry, it's not a problem for me. Miguel, he has a baby soon. It's a problem for him. But it's not a problem for me."

"Miguel quit too?"

Simón nods.

"What about how Tom was going to help you go to business school? What about the English classes and the loans?"

"That was never gonna happen."

"How do you know?"

"Leila," he says and rises to come stand by her and the stove.

Leila suddenly feels nervous. "I wish people would stop saying my name like that," she says. "What is it?"

"I was only thinking," he pauses. "You say you want to help me," he continues, "so now, I need your help. My rent, it's owed this month. So maybe, I was thinking..." he trails off.

"What?" she asks. She tries to sound gentle.

"I was thinking that maybe, maybe I could stay with you and your sister. Maybe you could help me out with," he looks down, "with money. Just for a short time."

She looks at him. "I'd have to think about it," she says, finally.

He nods. She takes a deep breath and turns to crack two large eggs in the pan.

"Look," she says, and faces him again. "I just don't understand what could have happened. I thought you were going to start your business classes soon. Your English is so good. And Tom was ready to help you. What were you waiting for?"

"Leila," Simón sighs. He walks back to his chair. "There's so much you don't understand."

She turns off the stove. "Please don't patronize me."

"Patronize?"

"Act like my father."

"What? Leila...I'm not your father. I don't want to be your father. But we are knowing each other, what? Three months? Four? This is not a long time. You know me, yes, in certain ways, but you don't know what is lo mejor for me."

"I don't pretend to know what's best for you. I just want...to help you. To help you not make a mistake."

"You say you want to help me, but this is only true in ways that are comfortable for you."

Leila puts down the spatula and comes to the table. "What on earth does that mean?"

"It means. I don't know. Let's not talk about this. Let's eat our breakfast. Pretend I didn't say nada."

"No," Leila says. She looks down and sees that his hands are trembling. "This is important. Tell me what you meant."

"Cómo explico," he mutters to himself. Then, "you see my world," he motions around the kitchen. "You are always here, always in the restaurant. But I see nothing of your world."

"That's because you're always working!" Leila shouts. "You don't have time to see my world."

"And what if I was not always working?"

"I don't understand why you're picking a fight," she says. "And if you're really that upset about me *pausing* to *think* about whether to let you stay with my sister who is a *mess* or whether to lend you money that I don't *have*, to let you *depend* on me like that, which I don't think would be particularly healthy, especially after you just went and quit your job yesterday, without a thought as to what that really means, what kind of effect that's going to have, if you're really so upset then maybe I'm not understanding something that's going on."

"You are missing the problem."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," Leila says.

"Sabes lo que estás?" he asks, raising his voice. "You are so, so terrified**,** yo no sé. That I'm going to use you? That your friends, they'll make me feel low to the ground, if I was meeting them? I don't know what it is. And it's not a problem that you don't want me to stay with you, that you won't give me this money. Pero no puedes imaginar that we understand each other. You can't make believe about this. That we are in the same situations. That this, what is between us, has no connection with the rest of the world. Because we are part of a reality, Leila. *I* am part of a reality, which I begin to see you don't like so much."

It's hard to understand what, exactly, happened next. One moment, you're both calm and everything's specific. You're Leila, wearing your tiger tee shirt and your favorite blue shorts and you have a scrape on your freckled knee and you're looking out at Roosevelt avenue, at the brick buildings filled with webs of white graffiti and the lit-up Indian bakery, at the huge mural of the tarot reader by the supermarket and the patchwork house--half pink, half stone--with the big, Colombian family sitting on it's concrete steps, maybe bickering, maybe content, taking in one more muggy, Queens day before the air gets cool. You're sitting there, on this nice day, talking to your boyfriend, Simón. He's in his cut off tee shirt that you would hate on anyone else, and you're looking at his bare shoulders and smooth hands and the black bristles on his chin that you like to tug at until he wrestles you to the bed to make you stop. And then, someone says something and everything changes and you're not Leila and Simón anymore, you're this white girl, worried about being used by her poor, Mexican boyfriend and you're not in the borough you're supposed to be in and everything's all fucked up and there's this moment, this suspended moment after you say something you regret and before he walks out of the apartment, leaving you there.

It's the kind of moment you know you can never narrate right--like when your sister throws water in your face when you're a teenager and you pretend to be upset and traumatized but aren't at all--kind of like that, but the opposite.

Instead, Leila's already given up the idea of recounting this feeling, which wouldn't have seemed as upsetting to anyone else, but which has set her knees vibrating and her heart pumping in accelerating, winding patterns the whole, long

subway ride to Grand Central. At Grand Central, she transfers and gets out at Union Square, where she wanders towards the bright, high department stores filled with shoes and summer dresses finally on sale.

Everything is a relief. The crowds and security, the English store names and white passersby. Even the quality of the light seems different here. She goes into a café, and when a young guy, handsome and confident in his tight jeans--a student, clearly--asks her about the book she's carrying, she smiles at him, and notices in herself a shameful sense of attraction and belonging.

That night Leila calls her mother, crying.

Chapter Thirteen:
Onion Soup

On Wednesday, Helen has lunch with her friend, Linda: a fiftyish bottled-blonde from the architecture department who wears smart pencil skirts and calls Helen for lunch when she has something to gripe about. Linda is currently designing a conjugal visiting room for a new women's prison that's going up in New Jersey, and is concerned about the commissioner's inevitable response to the design.

"They'll probably scrap it because the room's too nice. Ask for more concrete and cinderblock," Linda snorts, shaking her head in pre-emptive ruefulness over her onion soup. "None of those assholes actually want an inmate to have a nice moment with their husband."

I wonder if that would be worse than this, Helen thinks, although she knows the answer. She laughs too and shakes her head in time with Linda's, thinking about Leila's phone call and the way the world might someday drown her daughters.

Chapter Fourteen:
The Flood

That night, it rains so hard that the streets of Manhattan flow like a long-stationed set of dams have just been hacked apart. Sick of being pent up in the apartment alone, since Connie is away for a long weekend with Michael, still waiting for some sort of contact with Simón, Leila wanders down East Fourth street, jumping over and into puddles until her canvas shoes are soaked, making her way towards Washington Square Park.

The rain, the quality and drive of it, remind her of a road trip she once took with her father. The only road trip she has ever taken. She was seventeen and he wanted to show her Texas. To show her something other than the crowds and the city and the way of life she had always known. It rained like this all the way to Tennessee. Hank was alone at the wheel, since Leila was unable to help. Like now, she didn't have her license. A true city kid.

And where was Connie? Not with them. Maybe in Portland by that time. With her boyfriend, Leila remembers now. The bass player who she eventually married. Who Hank never liked. And was there a rift about that, for a time? Between her father and her sister? Leila can barely remember now.

Halfway across Knoxville, they exited the highway to barrel up a more scenic road in that old Toyota and promptly ran out of gas. Her father was always bad at calculating these things, at remembering that none of the lights would go on unless you pounded on the dashboard every few miles.

It was late and dark out. Hank wasn't in the habit of carrying a cell phone then, so there was no calling triple A. So many years later, Leila wonders why she

remembers the shape of the red plastic gas container Hank pulled from the trunk. The stolid, wet air. The lonely Ford Dealership they passed, as sprawling and empty as the surface of another planet. What they talked about on that walk, Leila isn't sure. But it was nice. They climbed down a hill and ducked under the metal bar at its foot to reach the road below, which eventually led them to the gas station. It was pouring by that time, and once they filled the small gas container, they decided to race back to the car. Leila can remember the feeling in her feet as they hit the concrete and slipped up the muddy hill, the feel of the red tub of gas as it bounced heavily against her thigh while her father ran behind her, out of breath, calling "how'd you get to be so fast, Leila?" but spry for nearly being an old man.

They were just outside Tennessee before the car broke down altogether.

Remembering how the car clattered to a stop on that long, Southern stretch of highway, Leila finds herself on the outskirts of the park, which is now undergoing construction--a large, inactive truck is stuck in the middle while sections of the park remain cut off by a series of chain-link fences. No one is by the benches or by the part of the fountain that is not closed off. The only figures she can make out in this desolate, urban swamp are huddled under the light of the stone arch. As she walks closer, down one of the dirt paths, the water runs down her face and weighs on her eyelashes, making it hard to tell what they are doing. Then, she sees that one of the figures is playing a bongo drum. The second strums a guitar while the third man holds a stack of battered newspapers over the guitarist's head, although she soon realizes that the breadth of the arch is keeping them all dry. She approaches the men

slowly. As she walks forward, the three men appear, at closer glance, to be cheery and homeless.

"Good evening," one of them calls to her. The one holding the newspapers. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

She takes another step. "Yeah," she says. "I love the rain." She can now see that this man is wrapped in a blue shawl and missing some teeth.

"What are you looking for?" he asks.

"Just taking a walk," she replies.

"Stay with us," the drummer says. His face reminds her of a less sanitary version of her father's old detective partner. Hal. "Tell us a story."

"It's dry under here," says the guitar player, who is much younger than the other two. "Join in our song."

And she almost does. She is almost, perversely, tempted to stay and to kiss the younger one with the guitar who looks almost as if he could not be homeless, but instead some sort of charming, rain-soaked beatnik. And then she feels a chill run through her body and she thinks, what am I doing, and soon she's telling them no thanks, no thank you, and turning to run--jogging and then sprinting in the rain, as fast and hard as she did from that Knoxville gas station all those years ago. Her hair flying behind her, her canvas shoes soggy and heavy on her feet, she runs towards the nearest subway station.

As Leila rides the subway to Queens (thankful that she had two dollars in her pocket for the metro fare, but wishing that she had worn something with a hood, something warmer, her wet hair sticking to her shoulders, the old, Chinese woman

across from her clutching her purse and looking quizzically at Leila's drenched clothes), she plans on whispering all kinds of things to him; she practices them in her head until they sound perfect. But when she finally gets off at Corona Plaza, where the station is almost empty and the water falls down the steep, metal stairs in small rivulets, these things seem too ridiculous. And after she reaches Simón's apartment, where he's there, of course, waiting, after she apologizes for overreacting, for being silly and mean, after he hugs her and kisses her and leads her to the bedroom, it's lovely for a while, truly lovely, until he takes her from behind and is a little rough with her, which she usually likes, but not then, not in that moment.

Afterwards, when she wants him to lie there, his head nestled on her collarbone, he stumbles away. He explains that his body is sore from a soccer game he played earlier in the week. I'm so tired, he groans, and limps toward the bathroom. Leila almost apologizes for wearing him out but catches herself.

As she listens to the sounds of Simón wash his face and brush his teeth, Leila remembers something Eliza said at coffee the other day. Something she hadn't been listening to overly closely at the time. "That's the thing about sex," Eliza remarked, seeming somehow not herself that day, somehow more weary. "It always seems as if it's about to make you close, closer, but then you find yourself there on your back, he's grabbing your hand, you know, touching your face, and you can already look ahead to a few minutes later when he'll be out of bed, throwing the condom in the trash can, putting his clothes back on. And you know that even when they're on top of you, looking at you, looking at you, they're already gone."

Leila closes her eyes and listens to the rumble of the train and the rain on the roof. She pretends to be asleep when Simón comes back, the bed suddenly transformed into a battleground, which Simón confirms when he remains on his side, his warm feet too many inches away from Leila's shivering knees.

Chapter Fifteen:
Yes, Yes, Yes I am

In the following days, Leila learns to fear and anticipate the night, when she and Simón will lie together, propped up by the milk cartons under the mattress while the radiator warms their feet. Once he's fallen asleep she lies there, and all she wants to do is touch him. Usually she holds herself back. She rolls to the other side of the bed. She pulls the quilt over her shoulders and brings her knees to her chest, hoping that the distance between them will wake him up, will make him want to pull her to him.

Sometimes she can't help herself. Sometimes, when his back is to her she can see his shoulders rise and fall and the back of his hair and she moves towards him. She shapes herself around his body and traces the freckles on his shoulder and breathes onto his warm skin. He's always warm. She doesn't know why her own body isn't warm like that. She kisses his back and his neck and his shoulder blades until she's worried that she'll put him off. Or he groans and moves to the other side of the bed. When he does that, it's the loneliest feeling, even though he says, half sleep-talking, "it's just that I have to wake up early, Leila. To look for work. It's just that."

Tonight, when they're in bed, far away from each other, Leila feels the empty space around her again and starts to cry about Hank. She isn't even really thinking about him when she does this. She just doesn't know what else to do. Sometimes it feels to her as if her father's death, as if what happened to her family, is all she has that entitles her to anything. So she starts up in bed. And Simón starts up too.

"Whats wrong?" he asks. Leila's face is dry but he can't see that in the dark. She makes her breath shaky. She wipes at her eyes.

Simón brings her to him. "I can't even imagine what it's like for you," he whispers. He wraps his strong arms around her and holds her tight. He touches her back and it's the most amazing thing and she wants to hear what else he has to say. She wants to be quiet and small and to be with him, but then she starts talking. Her voice is raspy and low and she sounds like someone she wouldn't recognize. She talks about her father, and she tries to strike a balance between resilience and vulnerability and it's all wrong and she's terrified that where earlier he could have fallen in love with her in this moment, he now thinks of her as selfish and self-pitying and damaged.

Still sniffing in the darkness, Leila realizes that for days she has not asked Simón about his job search or about his brother, who is trying to make his way to California. She thinks: I hope he's all right; she thinks: his body is so warm; she thinks: maybe we are from different planets after all.

When Leila becomes quiet, Simón strokes her back and her arms and pushes her hair from her face; he looks into her eyes and asks if she's okay and she smiles and says yes, yes, yes, I am, and she rolls away from him and they sleep for hours.

Early in the morning, Leila opens her eyes to the sun rising. Simón is not awake yet. In his sleep, he has moved toward her. His hand is near her hair and his stomach lightly touches her hip each time he breathes out before breathing in again.

Sometime the night before, Leila had promised to rouse him when she woke up. Simón is scheduled to meet with the boss of his roommate at a construction site

in the financial district; last night, he was worried about missing the meeting since lately he has been sleeping more deeply than ever.

Leila turns and watches his eyelids flicker through a dream and his bare chest rise and fall. She puts her hand through his hair before she moves his palm from her cheek and places his arm softly at his side. He twitches in his sleep when she does this, and her body tenses before he relaxes and settles into the mattress again. For a moment, she considers nudging him awake. Maybe after his meeting they could have lunch near city hall and wander down by the waterfront, she thinks.

Instead, she leaves the bed, gets dressed in the half-light of the morning and asks Jung-Su, who she finds in the kitchen reading a magazine, if he has time before work to wake Simón up in half an hour. She motions toward the clock and Simón's bedroom door and holds up nine fingers and when Jun-Su nods, she tries to smile but her whole body feels heavy. "That would be great," she says, and is careful not to let the door close too loudly behind her.

As she walks from 104th street to Corona Plaza for the last time, Leila wonders what she wants Simón to do. To accept it gracefully? To disappear into thin air? To chase after her once he realizes she has no intention of coming back?

Through the window of the train, she watches the progression of neighborhoods and buildings and the webs of telephone wires tangled like fishing nets across the wide expanse of Queens. A boy asks her to buy a candy bar to support his baseball team and she gives him a dollar. When the train goes underground, Leila looks around her, at the three men talking quietly in paint-splattered coats and at a girl with long red nails and a denim jacket who has fallen

asleep on her boyfriend's shoulder, her head held in a funny position, her mouth slightly open.

After she steps onto the Astor Place platform, walks toward the exit and through the black, revolving gate, Leila waits in a long line of people who trudge and race up the stairs toward apartments and offices and other obligations. Standing there, it strikes her that something has been lost. For a moment, she worries she will start crying on the steps and make a scene, but then she is distracted by the bright colors above her: red and white umbrellas opening as people emerge onto the street. It didn't look as if it was going to rain, she thinks. She pulls up the hood of her sweatshirt. She digs into the pocket of her pants for the dollar bill she can use to buy a piece of fruit from the deli on her way home. Then, she remembers that Connie is coming back from her long weekend today and a wave of relief flows through her. She is glad she will not be in the apartment alone tonight. She thinks about Simón's apartment, about the plastic folding table and Hector watching telenovelas on the orange couch and she wonders if Simón is asleep and if so, what he is dreaming about. Finally, the two old women in front of her make it past the top step. Leila steps onto the street and, feeling the light rain on her nose and forearm, holds her face up to the sky.

On Boundaries, Purity and the Nature of this Project

In my Junior year at Wesleyan, I enrolled in a colloquium for the American Studies major entitled "Paternalism and Social Power." At the time, I had little idea what I was in for. "This course will consider the construction of caring and helping in the structuring of social relations," the description read. What we eventually came to consider in this class were the innumerable boundaries between people, along with the ways in which these boundaries complicate seemingly simple acts of "friendship," of "love," of "helping," and of "caring."

In this class, I came to distrust and question the motivations behind education, motherhood, abolition, the civil rights movement, integration, Teach for America, anti-sweatshop activism, development work, interracial coalition and studying abroad. Boundaries which before seemed simpler, which once bore more recognizable tags of "Self" and "Other," and came with more recognizable solutions (to "help each other" and "see each other as real people") seemed increasingly fraught and impassable.

As I witnessed the fault lines in the actions and motivations of young (and old) idealists attempting to lead social movements, to create multicultural and interracial coalitions and to help those with less privilege than themselves, humanitarianism became increasingly linked, in my mind, to narcissism, and idealism to naiveté. And yet, a part of me knew this wasn't the entire picture--knew that even if there was a rotten underbelly to these motivations, there was just as often a set of noble roots that somehow became subverted along the way.

As the course went on, larger questions began to emerge, and to become increasingly pressing: in what way, if at all, are we able to cross the boundaries between ourselves and other people? What motivates these boundary-crossing impulses in reality, and what, more ideally, should drive them?

While during this class I mostly encountered these questions on a broader scale in which the players were entire communities (Blacks and Jews, European development workers and native Tanzanians, inner-city teachers and their students), I became increasingly curious about the nature of these boundaries and dynamics when examined on a more interpersonal scale. What would happen when the players were not two communities, but two people? As the semester wore on, I became more resolved to examine such a relationship. But how would I set about this examination? Which two people? And where would I find them?

It was then that the creative nature of this project began to dawn on me--the fact that, for my at-that-point-hypothetical thesis, these individuals didn't need to be found, but imagined. And so, I imagined Leila: a young, recent college graduate from New York City who has just lost her father a year before the story begins. And then, Leila needed to meet her counterpart, who became Simón: an illegal immigrant from Mexico working in the kitchen of the restaurant in which Leila's older sister Connie is a waitress.

What would happen when these two people met? What would draw them to each other? What would they understand about each other and what would they be unable to comprehend? As you might guess, this relationship, as in so many narratives of the "contact zone," quickly became romantic. And as this romance

unfolded, I wondered what would happen when Leila decided to help Simón ameliorate his situation. How would this offer change things between them? And how would their relationship change when Simón lost his job and needed help--reaching beyond support and advice and into the ever-uncomfortable realm of money and resources? In what ways would the divisions of race, class, nation and citizenship seem insignificant at times and intractable at others?

As I began to write this story, the scenes of Leila and Simón's first encounter and subsequent romance unfolding one after the other, my thesis advisor kept pushing me to discover what, more specifically, I wanted to say *about* this particular romance--this particular attempt at boundary-crossing. "You see," she said one afternoon, "to make this story more interesting, more *real*, you need to lift it out of the purely personal. You need to have an opinion on what it *means*." And that's when it dawned on me: that I was having the same problem as Leila, my protagonist. At that moment, I was incapable of lifting the relationship between her and Simón out of the realm of the purely personal and anecdotal, and so was she. It was her attempt to make her relationship pure, to transcend the boundary and imbalance between her and Simón instead of fully considering those barriers--her attempt at keeping the world from flooding in--that so closely echoed all of the narratives of failed or problematic boundary-crossing attempts which I had encountered before.

I realized that many boundary-crossing relationships, whether between a young American woman and an undocumented Mexican man or between European development workers and the impoverished Tanzanians they are trying to aid, are attempted on the part of the more privileged person in the name of purity, with an aversion to taking into account political, material and economic inequities. Politics,

money, social divisions and acknowledgments of inequality are seen as sullying and as antitheses of love, humanity and connection. Therefore, the only way positive contact seems imaginable is through some sort of pure, equitable and transcendent exchange.

To illustrate the ways in which such contact and exchange are imagined and idealized, I have chosen two case studies from my coursework in that same class on paternalism and social power. The first case is taken from Maria Baaz's book The Paternalism of Partnership, in which she examines the relationship between the "European, helper self" and the "African Other" in the context of development aid work in Tanzania. The second case is taken from the thesis of 2007 Wesleyan graduate Talya Zemach-Bersin, who sought to analyze the relationship between third world families and the American study abroad students whom they take into their homes through SIT (The School for International Training).

In both of these cases, parallel ideologies are employed--the "development model" on the one hand, "study abroad discourse" on the other--in order to understand boundary-crossing relationships, as well as to construct a narrative for ideal positive contact. In many ways, the defining characteristic for what is imagined to be positive contact (contact which transcends the boundary between two groups or people), involves the separation of two spheres. In order for contact to be pure and transcendent, the relationship must be imagined within the sphere of the personal and the meaningful: a sphere that is constructed in diametric opposition to the sphere of the political, material and economic.

As one might suspect, on the ground, these ideologies prove to be quite fragile, and individuals attempting to cross these very real boundaries find themselves struggling to keep the realm of the personal separate from the realm of the material and political--a struggle which often comes to include a reluctance to recognize inequality, a profound discomfort with questions of money, a determination to view the relationship as unmediated and intimate, a minimization of conflicts of interest and a blindness to or misreading of resistance.

In her analysis of study abroad discourse and its effects on study abroad students in the third world, Talya Zemach-Bersin emphasizes the importance of the homestay. Within study abroad discourse in general and the ideology of the School for International Training in particular, the host's home is constructed not only as a place to sleep and eat, but as the spiritual and emotional centerpiece of the study abroad student's experience. Students both choose and are encouraged to refer to their hosts as "mom," "dad," "sister," and "brother," while learning to imagine themselves and their experiences as transcendent of tourism, commodification and materialism. "Study abroad programs position tourists in negative opposition to the ideal of the culturally immersed student," Zemach-Bersin writes. This opposition implies the separation of two worlds: the materialistic and superficial world of the tourist, which is bypassed by the "culturally immersed student," who finds him- or herself as a member of a new family, absorbed into a more authentic, meaningful and personal sphere.[1]

As Zemach-Bersin demonstrates, students' efforts to construct their relationships within the homestay as intimate and pure quickly become coupled with

[1] Talya Zemach-Bersin, "The World Awaits: The Politics of Study Abroad and Global Citizenship." (B.A. Thesis, Wesleyan University, 2007) 61.

a resistance towards anything that threatens to compromise this purity. The fact that "students living in a homestay are not positioned or articulated as foreign guests, or even visiting students, but instead as members of a family," serves to mask the inequalities which *do* so often exist between traveler and host country.[2] By "getting in with the natives," and positioning themselves as fully-immersed members of the family and host culture, these students depoliticize a set of relationships rife with political implications.

While stripping these relationships of political implications, students similarly attempt to rid their experiences of economic significance. "Whenever the issues of money and financial transactions arise in the family, students become uncomfortable, confused and resistant."[3] A host sister who brings up money or financial concerns is viewed as "a good business woman, not family."[4] And when students are asked to personally deliver their host family's compensation check, they often balk at the responsibility and suggestions of this transaction. One student, Carl, explains that for him, "the monetary relationship is really weird and sort of contradictory. The fact that we refer to them as families, and otherwise we wouldn't conceive of them as families. And there's that payment. It's weird."[5]

As assiduously as students attempt to dismiss the economic aspects of their situation in order to preserve the "purity" of their experience and contact with their host family, they attempt to minimize conflicts of interest that they might have with that same family. Like economic realities, these conflicts, if fully presented, threaten to dissolve the precarious notion of ideal contact. In order to minimize these

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[2] Zemach-Bersin, 60.
[3] Zemach-Bersin, 83.
[4] Zemach-Bersin, 82.
[5] Ibid.

conflicts of interest, students tend to ignore their host's interests altogether. "Despite the fact that 'family' often connotes responsibility and mutual support," Zemach-Bersin writes, "the ideal host family, it appears, is expected to allow the student to have a meaningful experience by refraining from viewing their relationship with the student as something from which they too might benefit."[6] And when "family" members resist this model in any way, or seek to pursue their own well-being by way of their guests, students tend to instantly express discomfort and alienation.

The insistence on intimacy and purity, on the separation of the personal and the material, and on the total immersion of the student, are further illuminated by the marginal space in which the study abroad semester unfolds within the student's larger experience. Such an immersion is, I assume, only psychologically comfortable because of the student's constant, if subconscious awareness that they are not obligated to remain in the living conditions of the host family for any extended period of time. As Jarvis Cocker sang in Pulp's "Common People," if you're a sculpture student at "Saint Martin's College," you can

> rent a flat above a shop/cut your hair and get a job/smoke some fags and play some pool/pretend you never went to school/but still you'll never get right/'cause when you're laid in bed at night/watching roaches climb the wall/if you call your Dad he could stop it all.[7]

As this lyric indicates, it is the marginal natures of these experiences and the fact that students are able to maintain their privilege while undergoing it--that they

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[6] Zemach-Bersin, 84.
[7] Pulp, "Common People," *Different Class*, Island Records 1995.

could "call [their] Dad and he could stop it all"--that allow many students to ignore political and economic realities in the first place.

In the context of Maria Baaz's research, which focuses on development work in Tanzania, one finds that the "development model" does not construct a family, as study abroad discourse does, but instead a community, and more specifically, a set of partnerships between local Tanzanians and European development workers. Therefore, while less emphasis is placed on intimacy and emotion within the development context, a similar terminology has emerged in order to describe the ideals of positive contact according to the development model.

Like Zemach-Bersin, Baaz explores the way in which this model and its purifying terminology "underplay the power inequalities inherent in the aid relationship and give no hint of the chasm between the partner policy and day-to-day practices."[8] Just as the homestay and ideal of family become central to study abroad students' conceptions of themselves as travelers and "global citizens," visions of solidarity and community come to represent the foundation on which development discourse rests. As Baaz writes, "according to notions of solidarity, a volunteer or development worker should live with local people in terms of standard of living. Throughout their modest way of living, development workers become a part of the local community."[9]

And yet, as Baaz explains, "the shift in terminology from 'donors' and 'receivers' to 'partners,'" along with the emphases on immersion and relating to colleagues "on their level," "does not, of course, imply a reversal of the economic

[8] Maria Eriksson Baaz, The Paternalism of Partnership: A Postcolonial Reading of Identity in Development Aid. (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2005) 8.
[9] Baaz, 82.

conditions characterizing the aid relationship."[10] Consequently, the vocabularies and ideals of immersion and solidarity tend to strip the relationships between Europeans and Tanzanians of their political and economic implications and significance just as the vocabularies of immersion and family do for the relationships between study abroad students and their hosts.

This effort to strip aid and "partner" relationships of their economic significance appeared most overtly when development workers strove to define their obligations to Tanzanians as existing outside of the economic sphere. "As detailed earlier," Baaz writes, "the organizations studied in Tanzania focus on cultural or knowledge exchange or capacity building."[11] This emphasis prompts development workers to respond to economic requests in a particular fashion. One worker stated: "I find that some of them find that they need the transport maybe and some funds and then they are somehow maybe focused on that so that they don't make proper use of the development workers, who often are very qualified persons. So they could probably be used much more." [12] While such statements are couched in disavowals of dependence aid and efforts to develop communities strongly and efficiently, they are often also rooted in strong beliefs about the separation of personal and material spheres--the former representing positive productivity, the latter a threat to connection and meaning.

As proved true for study abroad discourse, the development model tends to diminish conflicts of interest as much as it does economic inequalities. "The mainstream model dominant in many development institutions conceptualizes

[10] Baaz, 75.
[11] Baaz, 78.
[12] Baaz, 79.

development intervention as an uncomplicated and harmonious process based on mutual goals and interests," Baaz writes.[13] Yet, "while donors tend to present themselves not only as open and willing to accommodate the partners' needs, ideas and objectives," the fact remains that "in order to be accepted as a partner in the first place, the criteria set up by the donor must be met."[14] What at first glance (and by the development model's account), appear to be collaborations between equals, have, in fact, been constructed in order to diminish hidden currents of conflict and resistance.

Resistance on the part of Tanzanians, which certainly exists, is rarely acknowledged or given weight by European development workers. "As a consequence of...conflicting interests and goals," Baaz writes, "partner and donor perceptions of 'success' and 'failure' are often quite different. Partners' efforts to attain and satisfy their goals and expectations are often presented as a failure by the donor. The blame for this failure is, it seems, often placed on the partner, and presented as an expression of lack of knowledge and capacity, unreliability, indifference and passivity."[15]

Finally, it is important to recognize the same consciousness among development workers that exists among study abroad students: that they are not as firmly bound to their current living conditions and situations as their Tanzanian "partners." This produced in some workers a self-conscious shame: "Just think of how easy it is for us to take the car, the plane or the bus and just leave for a couple of days, to see wild animals, to visit friends or just go shopping," one development

[13] Baaz, 73.
[14] Baaz, 74.
[15] Baaz, 75.

worker mused.[16] In others, it seemed to create a kind of unconscious flippancy about the conditions of the Tanzanians with whom these workers were supposed to collaborate. "You know, there is also always this thing about the money," one development worker stated. "That in a way they just look upon us as money...'How can we get something here,' you know. Also, every time the teacher came, she had a new project that I should finance and in this sense it becomes very boring."[17]

This statement does not reflect a sort of moral superiority, a point of view which prizes personal connection and friendship over economic concerns, but rather the privilege which enables someone to find these things "boring." It reflects the larger context of the development worker's life, in which economic concerns do not represent the same struggle for survival as they might for the "boring" teacher who peskily continues to request financial support for her projects.

Throughout these case studies, it often becomes clear that efforts on the part of development workers and study abroad students are steeped in a fear that they will not be seen as individuals--an anxiety that if they acknowledge inequality, money and conflicts of interest, if they mix the realms of the personal and the material, that they will cease to relate to their Tanzanian neighbors or to their homestay families on a purely *human* level, and will instead become simplified representatives of their race, class, privilege and nationality. For this reason, moments that highlight inequality and that force these individuals to rediscover their wealth and privilege are often experienced as upsetting and troubling.

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[16] Baaz, 86.
[17] Baaz, 88.

Among the study abroad students whom Zemach-Bersin interviewed, these anxieties were often palpable. Students who positioned themselves in opposition to tourism appeared to do so out of a fear of being seen as nondescript, easily duped Westerners. Similar anxieties presented themselves when students articulated their views on their families' previous hosting experiences. "Study abroaders often judge the meaningfulness of their experience according to whether or not their host family has hosted students before, and if so, how many," Zemach-Bersin writes.

Anxieties about being unimportant and replaceable presented themselves most overtly when students were compelled to confront the nature of their own privilege. "It is not only the larger payment for hospitality that makes students flinch," Zemach-Bersin writes, "but also the smaller, everyday moments in which host families, identifying students as sources of wealth and privilege, request more from the students."[18] When students are made to pay their families directly or when a family requests assistance in acquiring a visa, the student's experience can quickly become cheapened. This seemed to be true for Naomi, a student studying in Morocco, whose "host sister" asked her to help Naomi's "host brother" in acquiring a U.S. visa. Having interviewed Naomi on her feelings about this experience, Zemach-Bersin writes, "Naomi implied that the reality of her homestay family requesting something of her, perhaps hoping to use her for something, threatened her sense of having had a good, valuable and meaningful experience."[19] I suspect that for Naomi and the other study abroad students interviewed for Zemach-Bersin's thesis, such a threat not only represents a kind of inconvenience, but a menace to the "pure,"

[18] Zemach-Bersin, 83.
[19] Zemach-Bersin, 84.

human connection between recognizably idiosyncratic individuals which students seem to crave so desperately.

Just as study abroad students tended to position themselves in opposition to the superficial and materialistic tourist, the development workers in Baaz's study tended to position themselves against the apparently less modest 'development experts.' As Baaz explains it,

> The positioning of the development worker Self has often been characterized in the differentiation between "us," who at least have quite modest living conditions and live closer to the local communities, and "them", the development experts whose standard of living is outrageous and who spend their lives in the Sheraton cocktail bar or in the yacht club. [20]

The disavowal of this particular Western and material self--articulated by the development worker quoted above, along with many others--reflects the degree to which many workers wish to escape from being pigeonholed by their nationality, wealth and privilege.

Yet again, feelings of alienation and estrangement, along with what Baaz terms a "fracturing of the Self," are most often experienced when development workers' wealth and privilege are made most apparent. "I feel estrangement here in Tanzania, for example, when I whistle by in my nice new car and all my other colleagues walk on foot because they can't even afford to buy a ticket for the dala-dala," one development worker says, while another states: "now that I have been seeing [this Tanzanian man] I have...been ashamed, I have been ashamed to go and

[20] Baaz, 82.

buy things when I know how hard up they are...He knows exactly the price everywhere...[when it is] nothing for me." [21]

It makes sense, then, that such sensations of estrangement and guilt would prompt development workers to disassociate themselves from their own wealth and privilege and attempt their relationships with Tanzanians on a more "personal" and individual basis. "The prevalence of 'they just want money and my car and not my knowledge' feelings...fractures images of the Self as the much-needed professional helper."[22] "One expression of this fracture," Baaz goes on to explain, "is the recurrent dichotomy between 'the good Tanzanian who wants my knowledge and the 'bad Tanzanian who only wants money."[23] While mingled with a brand of neo-liberalism and a fear of Tanzanians' dependence, I suspect that the development model's emphasis on "knowledge exchange" and "capacity building" over economic assistance takes root in the development worker's desire for the same human connection between recognizably idiosyncratic individuals that study abroad students so urgently seek.

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The relationship between Leila and Simón--between a young woman and a young man who are romantically involved--is clearly different, in myriad ways, from the relationships between the individuals in these two case studies. However, I feel as if I have gained much inspiration and illumination from these case studies--inspiration which has not provoked me to replicate the responses and ideologies of

[21] Baaz, 86.
[22] Baaz, 80.
[23] Baaz, 81.

development workers and study abroad students in Leila, but to explore how similar impulses, fears and visions of positive contact function for my protagonist.

As I wrote, I found that these fears, visions and impulses manifested themselves for Leila in ways that echoed these case studies. Throughout this story, Leila demonstrates a reluctance to acknowledge the inequality between her and Simón. She makes an effort to "get in with the natives," of the kitchen in which Simón works and the neighborhood he lives in, to learn Spanish and dance merengue, while shying away from introducing Simón to Eliza or leading him to the wall with her favorite Pollock painting. In many ways, these situations represent a threat: Leila fears that if she brings Simón into her world, the inequality and difference between them will be emphasized.

Leila also tends to diminish conflicts of interest and to assume a blindness to and misreading of Simón's resistance--a blindness to the fact that his leaving his job, while disrupting her vision of his ideal trajectory, might not have been an irresponsible, unconscious mistake, but a resistant, conscious choice.

Resonating with the two case studies mentioned above, Leila's particular reluctance to acknowledge and propensity to misread and diminish seem to be rooted in fears of what she might become or not become if her individuality melted away in lieu of an identity defined by her privilege, nationality and citizenship. Such fears lead her to downplay situations and facts that might trigger a "rediscovery of wealth and privilege"--a rediscovery that threatens to reveal some sort of chasm between her and Simón. In large part, I believe it is the specter of this chasm that causes Leila to react so strongly to Connie's admonishments and Simón's request for economic assistance.

It is important to note that all of these impulses--all of these fears and hopes and tendencies towards purity and transcendence--are, of course, amplified when the nature of the relationship becomes romantic.

In her examination of late eighteenth-century sentimental literature, which often featured "sentimental dramatizations of the contact zone," colonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt notes that "sex and slavery are great themes of this literature. Or a single great theme, perhaps, for the two invariably appear together in allegorical narratives that invoke conjugal love as an alternative to enslavement and colonial domination, or as newly legitimate versions of them."[24] In these narratives, the specters of subjugation and imperialism are rarely acknowledged, and instead "reciprocity and exchange are central axes of an overwhelmingly human drama," an "erotic drama which is represented as simple and good-humored on all sides."[25]

This beautiful simplicity does not, however, reflect the reality of these romances as much as the ideal projected onto their narration. "What makes the ideal an ideal is, once again, the mystique of reciprocity," Pratt writes. "As an ideology, romantic love, like capitalist commerce, understands itself as reciprocal. Reciprocity, love requited between individuals worthy of each other, is its ideal state. The failure of reciprocity, or of equivalence between parties, is its central tragedy and scandal."[26]

This ideal--as is true for the ideals represented in study abroad discourse and the development model--therefore presents itself as fragile and in need of protection. In order to protect the "mystique of reciprocity" in a situation as rife with inequality

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[24] Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. (New York: Routledge, 1992) 86.
[25] Pratt, 89.
[26] Pratt, 97.

and complexity as that of a romance between the colonized and the colonizer, these same inequalities and complexities must be, in large part, ignored. This accounts for the marginal spaces in which abolitionist, transracial romances generally unfolded. Because they are often set on an island or at the site of a shipwreck, "transracial love stories typically neutralize concrete dimensions of slavery. The love relationships unfold in some marginal or privileged space, where relationships of labor and property are suspended."[27] In this way, at least as long as "cultural harmony through romance" persists undeterred, "the allegory of romantic love mystifies exploitation out of the picture."[28]

As Pratt, notes, in the denouements of these stories "cultural harmony through romance" always breaks down. Whether love turns out to be requited or not, whether the colonized love is female or male, outcomes seem to be roughly the same: the lovers are separated, the European is reabsorbed by Europe, and the non-European dies an early death."[29] If I were to model my story after the bulk of these narratives, Simón would eventually be tragically and ironically run over by a delivery truck, leaving Leila the epilogue to selflessly mourn the simple beauty and goodness of her bygone, exotic lover before she was reabsorbed by her New York life as she had always known in it--back in the borough in which she belongs. In such an ending, imbalance is never confronted or resolved; it is simply pushed aside by the cruel hand of fate.

My attempt is not necessarily to resolve the imbalance between these two people, to state that such a union is possible or impossible; nor is it to disavow

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[27] Pratt, 100.
[28] Pratt, 97.
[29] Ibid.

entirely the impulses and longings which propel Leila to act as she does. As I also find to be true for the development workers and study abroad students discussed above, the desire to connect, the desire to belong, the search for meaning, and the need to be special and valued, are all fundamental and should not be belittled. However, in any relationship that aspires to be successful and enriching for both parties, such desires must coexist with an acknowledgment of inequalities and complexities which are not bothersome and to be ignored, but real and to be taken seriously. Therefore, while I seek to be respectful of the desires, needs and integrity of Leila and the other characters in this story, I also hope to examine the fault lines in Leila's idealism and in her attempts to maintain a "mystique of reciprocity" between her and Simón--to analyze the limits of her effort to transcend imbalance through passion, love and her beliefs in the power of shared humanity--beliefs that have gone unthreatened in great part due to her privileged background.

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Having written this story, it would feel dishonest to examine the fault lines in the actions and motivations of my characters and not to consider my own. Something that struck me throughout the process of writing this, and which I still find difficult to articulate, is the level of uncertainty among the young female characters about what they have to offer, what is expected of them, and in what realms they have no place at all.

Considering the writing process, I am aware that, like many of the young women in the story, I have a lot of difficulty understanding where I fit into the

larger world, what my obligations and responsibilities are and how far I should or am able to go in attempting to understand worlds that differ substantially from my own. Similar to study abroad students, to development workers and to the characters in this story, I often experienced anxiety and discomfort approaching the boundaries inherent to this project. When, I have wondered, has Leila's naiveté simply been a distraction from my own? What right do I have to use a language that I do not, beyond rudimentary purposes, speak or understand? To what extent does this story add a few more problematic pages to a genre filled with stereotypes and simplifications? Basically, what *right* do I have, and do I have anything to contribute at all?

Although these are perhaps inherently human dilemmas, or at least dilemmas inherent to the privileged segment of America to which I belong, I would venture to say that I have seen them reflected especially in the young women I know. Whether this phenomenon is bound up in questions of sexuality, in women's shifting place in the world or in our particular generation, I am not sure. What I do know is that, similar to Helen, Eliza, Connie and Leila, I often find my female friends and myself engaged in a struggle to understand what we represent and what is expected of us. In retrospect, I think that the moment when Eliza encounters the Eastern European father in the hallway encapsulates much of this confusion. For her, this man is a cosmopolitan, alluring figure; and he seems similarly intrigued by Eliza--and yet, in what way? Is his response to her sexual or paternal? Is he attracted to her body, her youth, the fact that she is writing down her ideas or to some combination of these things? In more general terms, is it our minds or our bodies that are desired? Our politics or our capacity for feeling that grant us a place in the world? Or, to echo a

parallel that I discovered midway through this process--a parallel between the sisters I have written about here and Jane Austen's Marianne and Elinor Dashwood (one lively, passionate and impetuous, the other more reserved, conscious and cautious)--is it our sense or our sensibility that should guide us?

On behalf of myself and these female characters, I find it difficult to determine the answers to these questions, to declare whether boundaries have been overstepped or to discern whether any of us are learning to successfully walk the line between cynicism and sentimentality. However, through the process of writing this thesis I have come back to one fundamental belief that I began with: that through some combination of sense and sensibility, of intellect and emotion, we must try to understand both ourselves and the people different from us; that "even if it's almost impossible to succeed...the answer must be in the attempt."[30]

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Before I conclude, I find it important to note that while this thesis is, in many ways, an exploration of the echoing attempts of individuals and communities to cross boundaries and transcend difference, and while there are many large themes and questions which I attempt to confront in these pages, I hesitate to constrain a reading of these characters to a theory on the dangers of misguided idealism. This is, in the end, a small, personal story about the experiences of a few people, and about the boundaries and openings between them. It's a story about characters who are not only defined by their skin colors, their nationalities, their privilege and

[30] Richard Linklater and Kim Krazian, Before Sunrise. (New York: Vintage Books, 2005) 97.

citizenship statuses, but by their particular experiences and backgrounds, their flightiness and neediness and independence, by their personal tastes and losses and tendencies to be as passionate or as callous as any young person is capable of being.

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There's an anecdote about Alfred Hitchcock that I always enjoy. Apparently, having gotten in the habit of sleeping with a notebook by his bed in case inspiration struck while dreaming, Hitchcock woke in the middle of the night to jot down what seemed at that late hour a revelatory idea. He then fell back asleep until morning. When he woke up, he looked over to his notepad, filled with a sense of promise. Perhaps the premise for his next great movie lay there, waiting. But when he looked over, there was only one sentence on the paper: "boy meets girl."

I like this because, while I'm sure Hitchcock disappointedly dispensed with that piece of notebook paper, I don't think his sense of excitement and innovation was completely unfounded. With such a potent premise as a romance between two people there exists, if not the promise, the possibility of something new and revelatory each time.

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