
Senior Projects Spring 2018

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Spring 2018

Plantain Stain

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Recommended Citation

Mojica, Loreli, "Plantain Stain" (2018). *Senior Projects Spring 2018*. 239.
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Plantain Stain

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Loreli Mojica

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018

Part I:

“When this God resigns, I am applying for that position,” Luis Mojica said.

“As new God, I will change everything. You will come with all the money, strength, and knowledge. And you’re going to be pretty, with no disease. As long as you keep doing bad things, you get more and more ugly. If you see someone ugly living on the street, you can kick them because you know they did something bad. The pretty ones get to live forever. But I have to wait until this one dies. He doesn’t want to resign either. That’s my problem.”

My father’s name is Luis Mojica. He is fifty-four years old and about five foot eleven inches tall. I look just like him. We have the same heart-shaped face, brown eyes, freckles, and dark curly hair. When he smiles a fake smile, his face resets almost immediately. My father hates happy endings. He doesn’t like Mexican movies, Spielberg films, or musicals. If the hero wins, he crosses his arms and mutters. If the protagonist ends up broke, alone, abused, or dead, then “that’s how it is” and, to him, the film is good. My father has yellow-brown skin and perfect teeth. In his youth, he attracted a lot of attention for his appearance. He has worn a full beard since he was fourteen, when women in their twenties would invite him to their apartments. Recently, my father was on a trip to Mexico where he was working with a U.S. company to establish a set of U.S.-style common core standards in Mexican public schools. He stayed for two months. The Saturday after he returned, we stayed up until 5am talking. He told me, “The ladies from the program would say,” and here he put on a breathy, high pitched voice, ““Dr. Mojica, you’re so handsome!”” Then he smiled a movie-star smile that convinced me what he said was true.

My best friend in middle school used to say my dad was hot. I felt uncomfortable, but also proud, because I know I look like him. I've seen pictures of my dad from when he was a boy, and he looks like someone else. His skin is much darker from being outside in the scorching Ponce sun. He looks poor. There is one where he is standing against a wall with peeling paint wearing a faded grey shirt. His expression is serious, as if there was a grave matter on his mind.

A few minutes away from the center of Ponce, there are rows of multicolored huts that make up a neighborhood called Little River. The river appears more like a stream, a thin line of flowing water surrounded by rocks and mango trees. Branches hang low with the weight of ripe fruit in June. Along the river's edge, tiny lizards watch mosquitoes and dragonflies skim the dark surface of the water. There is a part of the river nestled between boulders on both sides. A path is worn into the rock closest to the huts, where children jump into the river to wash sweat and fruit juice from their faces.

A little girl and a little boy approach the river holding hands. She wears a faded cotton dress speckled with flowers, and he wears green shorts with no pockets. Neither have on shoes. The little girl whispers to the boy, "I have to pee."

He says, "I do too."

The little girl crouches until her bottom half is immersed in the water. She sighs contentedly. The little boy begins to pull down his shorts, when a piercing voice cuts through the sound of flowing water: "Luis Antonio!"

Luis does not move toward the voice. His hands remain at the waist of his shorts. A tall, plump woman emerges from the brush. Although she moves with vigor, the skin of her face looks like tree bark. Her face is set in a scowl as she marches toward the little boy, crushing twigs and ant cities with each step. The little girl sees the tall woman approaching and runs down the river to where other children are splashing each other with the water she just peed in.

The woman is named Juanita and she takes Luis's hand to lead him away from the river. Juanita's sandals are covered with dust from walking up and down the pounded dirt path that runs through Little River. Juanita walks with quick, deliberate steps. Her eyes fixed directly

ahead. A chicken strolls by. Juanita and Luis walk for five minutes before reaching their home. The house is a pale yellow concrete cube with three bedrooms. This is the only concrete house in the neighborhood of Little River. The walls and roofs of the surrounding homes are made of sheet metal, mostly tin. The tin houses are no less colorful, cascading down the block in bright greens, pinks, and oranges. Directly across the street from Luis' house is the Little River Elementary School, a two-story cement building painted light blue and white. The house is a place of bleak simplicity. The floors were linoleum, which had cracked in two places: beside the refrigerator and in front of the sofa. Both cracks happened when Luis' mother threw dishes at his father. A cramped kitchen, a foldable table, a hard, mustard-colored sofa, a small bookshelf, and an early model color TV. The sole window in the kitchen yielded a great quantity of weak light.

Luis shares a bottom bunk with his father. His older brother Rafa sleeps on the top bunk. Juanita sleeps in a separate room in the same bed as her youngest daughter, Aida. The four older girls share a small room in the rear of the house. On hot summer nights, the girls fight over who gets to sleep on the plastic-covered couch in the living room. The second oldest, Magda, usually wins these arguments so she can easily slip out the screened door to attend neighborhood dances in her homemade dresses. With one bathroom for nine people, there is no privacy for anyone. The sleeping arrangement eliminates the possibility of Luis' parents having sex. Juanita enjoys watching Mexican romance films during the day while she sews underwear and pantyhose for neighborhood women in the living room. Luis' father, Demetrio, works as a night security guard at Ponce Cement.

When Luis Mojica was six years old, his mother Juanita invited the local priest to have coffee and dessert in her living room. Luis' family had the only house in the neighborhood Juanita considered decent enough to host clergy.

One summer afternoon, when the air was thick with the sickly sweet smell of fallen mangoes caramelizing in the shadeless heat, six-year-old Luis was playing by the river nearby with his wife, Hermelinda Estel. Hermelinda was the same height as Luis, with long brown hair and yellow eyes. Hermelinda and Luis had played husband and wife since the beginning of first grade. He had seen a group of boys teasing Hermelinda about her eyes, saying she looks like a cat and laughing. Luis threw dirt at the boys until they ran away; He told her, "I like cats". The two of them were ensconced in three walls of mud they built in the bank beside the river the way some children build sandcastles on the beach. They sat against the back wall with their legs stretched out in front of them, watching the water and holding hands.

Then, Luis needed to poop. He stood up, declared he needed to go home, and ran five minutes to his house. When Luis burst through the door, Juanita, the priest, a couple of old ladies from the neighborhood, and his five older sisters: Tata, Lidin, Mimi, Mary, and Aida barely noticed. They were used to the comings and goings of children. Luis beelined to the bathroom where he slammed the door shut. The only bathroom in a house of nine people was spotless and pink. There was a doily for the soap and a glass bowl of potpourri behind the toilet. The toilet paper roll hung on a white stand beside a matching white trash can with no lid. As he reached for the toilet paper, Luis' eyes caught the color red. Curious and young enough not to feel disgust at rummaging through the bathroom trash, he slowly lifted out a sanitary napkin soaked with blood.

Luis had never seen so much blood in his life. The only time he'd ever seen blood before was a grave injury he caused.

When Luis was five, he was in front of the house playing Toro with a group of boys who would throw rocks at stray animals, tease other children, and squash anything they could. One of them would be the bull, and the others would pretend to hold up a red cloth, exclaiming, "Toro, Toro!"

Luis' sister Aida came outside to join the game. Aida was the youngest girl in the family, naturally soft-spoken and sweet. The boys looked to Luis to see what he would do, smirking in a way that said, "If you let her join us, you're a pansy". Luis thought he could play tough like the group of boys, so he threw a rock at Aida. The rock hit Aida on her head, and she started to bleed. At the sight of blood, the boys ran away. Aida was crying and screaming. Juanita came out of the house, put Aida in the car, and drove her to the hospital where she got stitches. Upon returning home, Juanita gave Luis the single beating of his life. But Luis didn't need to be beaten to understand that violence is horrible, and he would never hang out with those boys again.

Recalling the time he hurt his sister, Luis understood there to be an emergency connected to the blood. He took the pad, and ran out of the bathroom yelling, "Someone's hurt! Someone's bleeding!" Luis ran right into the middle of the living room where the priest and the old ladies gaped at Juanita's boy waving a bloody pad over his head like a flag. For a moment, Juanita trembled with embarrassment and anger. She muttered apologies to the priest as she snatched Luis' wrist and led him away. All the while, Luis was exclaiming, "This is serious! Someone is hurt! We need to get them help right away! Why aren't you listening to me?"

There are abandoned petroleum and sugarcane refineries in Ponce, Puerto Rico. At dawn, returning home from his night guard shift at the local cement factory, Luis' father Demetrio would pass an anorexic city of black pipes topped with blinking lights that looked as if they were painted against the sky with a thin ink brush.

Demetrio Mojica was a skinny man. Juanita was three times his size. Every time Luis saw his mother throwing things at his father, Demetrio walked away. Demetrio never raised his voice. Until he was eight years old, Luis thought Demetrio's name was *bribón*, meaning somebody that is no good. Useless. *Bribón*. That's what Juanita would call Demetrio all the time, in front of his kids. Demetrio would respond very softly, almost under his breath, "*no soy bribón*." "I am not useless."

Demetrio's father was a machetero, a sugarcane cutter, descended from a long line of laborers. He was familiar with the use of force, although Demetrio silently abstained from it. When the compact basement of the house was overrun with white bats, Juanita ordered him to shoot them. Demetrio had never been the decision-maker in his house. He hid his gun underneath the floorboard of his car, telling Juanita he couldn't find it. She called him *bribón*. Demetrio went to the basement at high noon, when the bats were reluctant to fly, and placed almost sixty bats into burlap sacks. Luis held the sacks shut as Demetrio drove thirty miles away to release them. When the white bats flew out of the sacks, they looked like fuzzy doves.

When I was in middle school, my father would pick me up from school every day. We would go to Hastings-on-Hudson, a more affluent neighborhood than where we lived, and walk around town. There was an ice cream shop we would visit every afternoon that sold ginger ice cream. My father loves ginger everything. I learned to love it too.

When I was ten, I would tell my dad about how the teachers at school picked favorites and never chose me, or the only other two colored girls, for roles in the play. I would ask him questions like, “What does it mean to be Puerto Rican?” He answered as best as he could:

“Puerto Rico is a colony. Do you know what a colony is?”

“No.”

“A colony is a place that belongs to another place, like a slave.”

“Puerto Rico is a slave?”

“Basically, only most Puerto Ricans don’t know that.”

“How can slaves not know they are slaves?”

“Because some Puerto Ricans do very well for themselves. It has to do with the role of the state and how it provides tax breaks for the private sector. There are groups in Puerto Rico that love the present colonial arrangement because money is not being captured by the government the way it is in the United States. But that leaves the poor without public services like homeless shelters, libraries, clinics, daycare, and nursing homes. So when some of us say, ‘We have to unite as Puerto Ricans!’, that’s a very difficult thing since not all of us have the same interests.”

I repeated what he said word for word, understanding nothing.

I've gone through stages of emotions about where my parents were born. The Puerto Rican migrant story is mine secondhand, to be appreciated in books like *When I was Puerto Rican* and *The Latin Deli*, as well as stories told to me by my parents. I used to want to be very Puerto Rican. In seventh grade, I exaggerated an accent I made up while reading aloud in class to feel different from my peers, who would ask me how to pronounce "Dorito". My freshman year of high school, I hung a massive Puerto Rican flag in my room. I attended the Puerto Rican Day parade, even though my mother told me those people do not represent Puerto Rico and no decent girl ought to go. "Young girls would get raped at that parade," my mother said. "Those are not Puerto Ricans," she insisted. "Those drunk, violent people cast shame on hardworking Puerto Ricans like us trying hard to make a nice life for ourselves." I knew her use of the word "us" meant herself and my father. I went to the parade anyway because I wanted to feel a part of something; I was not raped there.

In 2009, I learned what Puerto Rican islanders think about people born from Puerto Rican parents in the mainland U.S., especially those who don't speak flawless Spanish. I was at my Aunt Mary's house in San Juan. We had finished eating breakfast, and I stood up to use the bathroom down a narrow hallway. On my way back to the table, in the hallway where I was hidden from view, I heard my Aunt Mary making fun of how I said "*Yo no sabe*" instead of "*Yo no sé*". I heard my aunt cackle as she said, "She speaks like Tarzan." My father spoke to her sharply, "Don't do that. If she hears you, she'll never learn." Today, I speak Spanish like Tarzan got a tutor but stopped going to tutoring because he'd rather be hanging out with the apes who don't make fun of him.

I learned the history of the world's oldest colony. A truly tragic history; as is the case with most of Latin America. The total domination of the United States over Puerto Rico made me realize that all Puerto Ricans are legally U.S. property, guaranteed none of the rights outlined in the Constitution. In 1917, Puerto Ricans obtained statutory citizenship, meaning citizenship was granted to promote recruitment for the war effort by an act of Congress, not by the Constitution. I have no feelings about being Puerto Rican anymore.

Granted, I have not lived there. Strangers in Puerto Rico come up to you in a restaurant and say, "*Buen provecho*" which means, "Enjoy your food". In Puerto Rico, if you're in an elevator with other people, they will always say hello. On the public bus, people enter and exit with a greeting to everyone who is there. When my mother arrived in New York City in the eighties, she said hello to everyone on the subway car until she realized that people don't do that here. "In Puerto Rico," my mother says, "even if they don't know you, people will recognize you." If you're walking on a sidewalk in Puerto Rico, and you're well-dressed, it is normal for people to stop their cars and offer you a ride, thinking you're stranded. Only homeless people walk in Puerto Rico. That is, when there isn't a shortage of gas. There were two hurricanes in the Fall of 2018 that destroyed most of the dilapidated infrastructure on the island. No power, no water, no gas. Old people live under blue tarps alone, abandoned by their children and grandchildren who hustle to live night-to-night in Orlando motel rooms.

My father, mother, sister, and I live in my mother's house: a pale peach cube in a suburb called Yonkers. Located just outside New York City, Yonkers is mostly populated by European immigrants from countries that start with 'I' who fled the Bronx in the seventies. Only lately is Yonkers becoming integrated. A large Mexican family took up residence across the street from us a year or two ago. My parents looked out the window the day the moving vans showed up. I could sense them wondering silently about the value of our property and whether this was how our neighbors felt when we moved in. Those 'I' country-descended neighbors who are still in Yonkers now have signs on their lawns that read: "We Support Yonkers Police".

My sister was born in the Bronx. For the first year of my life, my family lived in Riverdale, which is technically the Bronx, but rich. Riverdale is a place of tall hedges and manicured lawns surrounding museum-like mansions, standard single family houses, and exclusively Jewish apartment buildings on a street with an Italian name. My father's name prohibited us from moving into those apartment buildings on Cabrini, so my parents took out a mortgage to get one of the single family houses. I was a baby, but my father told me the story so many times, I know it by heart. Our first night in Riverdale, the tires of my father's car were slashed. The second day, kids threw eggs at our house while their parents stood by watching with tight-lipped approval. The third day, my parents returned from work to find the house spray painted in red: "Go Home Spics!" My mother began to wash off the paint when my dad stopped her and said, "Let them look at themselves. All they did was show us what is inside their hearts." On the fourth day, the windshield of my father's car was smashed. It was clear this place would not be safe for us. If it were up to my father, I think he would still be there, taunting them with a

finger and a smile that says, “You’ll never win, bitches!” But because of my sister and I, we moved ten minutes away to Yonkers, where there’s less money and no one speaks to us.

Sometimes we leave the front door to our house in Yonkers unlocked. It’s not that we have faith in our neighbors or anything. Rather, if there’s any house to rob on our block, it isn’t ours. That’s the nice part about living in a non-impressive place: you don’t have to be scared about people taking what’s yours. If your stuff isn’t that nice, you can walk around with it sticking out of your back pocket in public. Are there cheap things that are nice for a reason other than their resemblance to expensive things?

I have a small pillow my grandmother Juanita made. It’s the size of a dessert plate, knit with red, white, and green yarn, stuffed with a cotton shirt. She didn’t make it for me. I saw that she was knitting in the porch once when she still lived with us in Yonkers. I asked her if she could knit me something. She reached into a pile of yarn, and I can’t remember if there were other knitted things next to her, but she handed me this tiny pillow and said, “You can have this.” I walked away satisfied. It remains one of my earliest memories.

When my father and I went to Sweden, the airport had hardwood floors. The security attendants did not have guns on their holsters, nor did they stand there silently straight faced. At the front of a long line to customs, the airport security personnel wore wreaths of yellow and blue flowers in their hair. All of them were smiling. Most everyone I could see was blond. I felt I had reached a magical land of happy white people. My father was not so pleased. Where I saw smiles, my father saw deception. He humphed at the flower-wearing security guards, not believing their charade for a second. We inched along the line for non-EU citizens until we made it to the customs desk. My father declared we were in Sweden for a conference about music education. We stayed at a hostel in Stockholm for three days after which we took a ferry to Finland and finished the conference in Helsinki. We arrived at the Swedish airport on June 15th, 2015. We did not travel with any of the groups associated with the conference because my father is uncomfortable around white people. He's never had a white friend. I told him he chose the wrong country to visit. My father has told me repeatedly, for as long as I can remember, why I should not trust white people. "They don't see you the same," he would tell me. "From the first moment they lay eyes on you, here are the things they think: you are a cleaning lady, you have lots of children, you don't speak proper English, and you have sex with everyone." I know I can prove at least one of those things false. Still, it has done a number on my self-esteem to hear this all the time.

My father would never have visited a Nordic country in the winter. In New York during the winter, my father is likely to shove his hands in his pockets and say, "This is not weather for humans. Humans are not supposed to live here." I used to say summer was my favorite season, because my father convinced me that every normal person should think summer is the best. So

that's what I thought. He describes feeling melancholy at the end of the summer every year. I don't know if its the heat or the free time, since he has always been a teacher. At some point, I stopped agreeing with him. Summer is not the best. It's much too hot, and Autumn is much more beautiful.

Portugués is a river on the south side of Puerto Rico, the one that gave the neighborhood of Little River its name. The steep mountain slopes in the center of the island undulate into foothills where rainwater flows into the low coastal plains in the south, where Luis and his family lived.

While playing dominos, dice, or cards, Luis heard the men in his neighborhood talking in hushed voices about having sex with farm animals. At night, many men in Little River would get drunk and fuck their animals, if they owned any. If they didn't own any animals, there was a guy who charged to let others do it with his mares and female pigs. Luis was up late one night and saw a line outside a barn. The men who couldn't afford to pay that guy snuck around with neighborhood cows. But the men would say publicly that they didn't do it, and there wasn't much anyone could say.

“You fucked my cow.”

“No I didn't.”

“Yes, you did.”

And the conversation would keep going like that until somebody gave up.

There was a man in Little River they called Manuel the Bitch. Female dogs have a tendency to close up, like a sphincter. That's why, when you see two dogs that have finished doing their sexual encounter, the male dog can't leave. It ensures the female gets pregnant by preventing the sperm from dying upon contact with air. Manuel the Bitch had sex with a bitch and the dog closed up around him. Normally, men in Little River only had sex with animals late in the dark when none of the women and children would see. But Manuel the Bitch did it in the

daytime. Everyone was outside to see the dog on his waist as he took the public bus to the hospital. At school, Luis asked his friends about the dog, and they told him the bitch was killed to get Manuel out. For the rest of his life, he was Manuel the Bitch. It wasn't like all of the men in Little River were on public transportation with a dog on their penis, but everyone knew what happened happened.

Luis thinks of his family as serious. His mother Juanita's favorite pastime was going to funerals, or so it seemed to Luis and his siblings. Almost every week, it appeared someone their mother knew died. Juanita had several black dresses for attending funerals. She would take a long time to get ready, and depart as if she were leaving for a cruise. The children were not allowed to join her at these funerals, so they decided to take part in the only way they knew how. They caught tiny lizards, slippery and fast. After they succeeded in snatching one, which could take hours, they would kill it with a rock. Then they held a funeral for the lizard they just killed, burying it somewhere by the river. His sisters would go into their mother's room and take all the black clothes they could find. Juanita barely made ends meet fixing clothes for the neighborhood. Luis' sisters would come out in all the black clothes they could find: lingerie and fishnet stockings belonging to the local prostitutes. Luis and his older brother Rafa would dig a hole the size of a shoebox by the boulders surrounding the river. They all gathered around the hole. His sisters would display their most dramatic cries, falling gracefully to the ground, ragged handkerchief in hand. After the hole was filled, and all four of Luis' sisters had fainted at least once, they would search for more lizards.

Juanita prided herself on keeping a tidy home with decent, well-kempt girls. If Juanita's daughters did anything other than clean the house when they weren't working to help support the

family, if they didn't iron and mend their clothes, or if they dared not to straighten their kinky hair, Juanita called them pigs. "Pigs" Juanita would say, "don't belong in the house." Juanita would shove her offending daughters outside and lock them in the pen behind the house with the two potbellies at night. The males of the house, the father Demetrio, the middle sibling Rafa, and Luis, the youngest, were tasked only with peeing sitting down and staying out of Juanita's way, which they did without complaint.

Playland is an amusement park in Rye, New York. There is a beach and a boardwalk. Rides make up most of the park. A Twirl-a-whirl, a ferris wheel, a merry-go-round, a ride with rat-shaped cars that goes really fast and makes sharp turns. A rollercoaster, a haunted house, a house of mirrors, and several sugary snack stands. I never went to any of these. My dad doesn't like rides or fried foods. He likes to go to the lake behind the park where they rent paddle boats. There are several tiny islands in the large lake behind Playland. I never learned the name of the lake. One time, my dad and I rented one of the paddle boats. My father kept rocking the boat. I convinced myself we would tip over, comforted by the life vests we wore. The islands in the middle looked readily accessible although we were not allowed to disembark the boats on any of the islands. I thought about the island in Puerto Rico called Cayo Santiago, the site of the oldest research center in the world for wild primates, primarily rhesus macaques. I can't help but visualize those monkeys swinging in the distance as I remember the islands behind Playland, although I never actually saw anything there but birds. The two of us were paddling in a bright purple boat with a sparkly stripe in the middle. Sticking out from the boardwalk, there was a jetty. I pointed to it and told my father that a narrow bridge reaching out into a body of water for mounting boats was called a jetty.

"A jetty?" My father asked, "Like the abominable snowman in the Himalayas?"

"Those are yetis," I said.

"Yeti and jetty. It sounds the same," he said.

"Jetty is with a 'j'," I corrected.

"You don't know anything," he said with a playful smirk, "you don't have a boat."

In November 2017, my mother was driving me to the new Whole Foods in Yonkers, when I saw two well-dressed white girls with expensive looking purses walking on the sidewalk along the road. This is no city sidewalk. The area is littered with trash right next to a turnpike, cars whooshing past at highway speeds. A few meters down there is a strip of cement with a supermarket, a McDonalds, and a Subway sandwich shop. Dotted with municipal bus stops, these sidewalks are for the poor: the people who take more than one bus to get to work, laborers who tout tools and cleaning supplies on their backs, people I could envision working for the two chattering girls walking along the sidewalk meant for people who must walk. Clearly, these girls chose to walk. The white girls were smiling and talking animatedly to one another, ruling out the possibility that their car had broken down or something else unpleasant was forcing them to expose the soles of their loafers to the uneven sidewalk cluttered with refuse thrown from car windows. I see black and brown people walking along this sidewalk all the time, in all kinds of weather. When it rains, I invariably spot an old woman with a shopping cart wearing a plastic bag on her head as a bonnet. The day I saw the girls, it was cold and dry. Perhaps the girls were on their way to the supermarket or the Subway sandwich shop, or perhaps they're just out to have some privacy to talk. Either way, what astounded me was they felt comfortable walking on these sidewalks, like they couldn't fathom any reason why they shouldn't. Meanwhile in their enclave, the part of town with big colonial houses surrounded by gothic metal gates, the old woman with the plastic bag on her head could never enter. What would it feel like to think there's nowhere you can't go? What freedom that must be.

In middle school, I would sit alone at lunch reading until one day I noticed there was another girl in the cafeteria doing the same thing. I moved to her table where we sat in silence reading. When the bell rang at the end of lunch, she looked up from her book, smiled at me, and left. The next day, the same thing happened. We didn't speak until the following week when she had a different book, one I had read. We talked about the book. I was raving about it; she thought it was okay. Then, out of the blue, I asked her if she was Jewish.

She smiled and said, "How did you know?"

I could have said a number of things that would have been better than what I did say. "You wear long skirts all the time" or "Your last name ends with '-man'".

Instead, I smiled back at her and said, "Your nose," pointing to my own nose, "it's a Jew nose."

The girl's smile disappeared. She stood up abruptly and left her lunch on the table.

Within minutes, a teacher escorted me to the principal's office where I was told I should never say such an awful slur. I tried to interrupt, to say I meant no offense, but the principal wouldn't hear it. He said, "Jewish people have faced centuries of discrimination. It doesn't matter what you meant or didn't mean. You apologize to her for your small-mindedness." I apologized, but she never smiled at me again.

In 1951, Lidin Mojica pretended to speak English, knowing only how to pronounce the breathy “h”, “sh”, and rounded “r” sounds. Lidin’s four younger siblings, including Luis, believed her and strutted around the house repeating: “harshar shar” in the fanciest voices they could muster. Lidin’s cousins heard the others speaking “English” and begged her to come to their house and teach them. Young Lidin stood in her Aunt Felicita’s living room chanting nonsense in an authoritative voice in front of her three girl cousins who sat cross legged on the carpet.

Aunt Felicita passed through the living room and said, “Wow, Lidin knows so much! Can I learn English too?”

Lidin replied, “You may.”

So her Aunt Felicita sat down on the carpet beside her daughters and heeded Lidin’s command, “Now, repeat after me: Harshar shar shar.”

In 1962, Lidin Mojica decided she was going to college. When Lidin swept into the kitchen one morning and announced this in front of her six siblings, her father Demetrio, and her mother Juanita. Everyone was silent. Juanita’s silence was furrow-browed, her face in a steep frown. Demetrio and the kids were silent in deference to Juanita’s silence. No one mentioned Lidin’s college again, although she did go.

The oldest sibling, Tata, immediately began working after she graduated high school, as did everyone her age in the neighborhood of Little River. Tata was sought after by many men for her reputation as shapely, light-skinned, and sweet. Luis would look forward to walking through the main plaza with Tata, because going out with her was like being famous. Everyone would

stare, the women sometimes harshly. When the men would try talking to her, she would very nicely let them know that her little brother needed her attention today.

Lidin had no desire to follow Tata's example, perhaps out of bitterness. Lidin was dark-skinned and heavy with a boy's body. She ate large meals and went to the bathroom to stick her finger down her throat. Once, Juanita barged into the bathroom while Lidin knelt before the toilet. Juanita beat Lidin with a flip flop for dirtying her immaculate bathroom. Lidin spent the better part of that week in the pen with the potbellies. For a while after that, Lidin didn't come home for anything other than her bed at night. She started spending time with a black social studies teacher who gave her books and told her, "An education is the only thing separating a professional from a peasant. Without knowledge, people can order you around, and you have to take it." After a year of close study with her teacher, Lidin learned English and started to read books from the mainland U.S. "To fight them in both languages," Lidin would say raising her fist. There is no word for "fist" in Spanish, so the gesture is described as "a punch above".

Part II:

Luis Mojica was kicked out of a movie theatre in White Plains, New York. When you say it out loud, the town sounds like a row of snowy airplanes. White planes. Arguably a better name, because how can a plain be white? Only if the grass is dry, and the plain is viewed from a distance, could it perhaps appear white. But even then, the plain isn't white. It's a washed out manila color like the folders without pockets. Either way, White Plains is gray. Buildings, sidewalks, streetlights, all are gray. Luis Mojica entered the gray movie theatre and bought a senior ticket, which is for people over 65. Luis is 55 years old.

The person who ripped the tickets, a droopy-eyed thirty-something brown man, looked at Luis, down at his senior ticket, and back at Luis. "You're not 65," he said.

"Yes I am," Luis replied.

The ticket guy squinted his eyes at Luis. He handed Luis the ripped ticket, saying nothing. More than once or twice before, Luis had seen this ticket guy who let him pass with a senior ticket without incident. Luis was seated in the theatre without popcorn or snacks as the previews were ending, when the ticket guy sidestepped down the aisle to where Luis was seated.

"May I see your ID please?" he asked.

"What's going on?" Luis protested, "the movie is about to start."

"I know you're not 65," the man asserted.

"Why are you doing this? You already let me in the theatre. If you were going to do something, you should have done it before I came into the theatre," Luis argued.

"Look, I can get in trouble if I let you keep doing this," the man said.

Luis could have said, “I won’t do it again” or “I’ll bring my senior ID next time”, and the ticket guy would have let him stay for the movie about Thurgood Marshall.

Instead, Luis raised his voice and said, “Do you have something against Latinos or something?”

The man laughed. “Are you kidding? I love Latinos!” he said.

Luis and the ticket guy began to talk over each other: “Well then, you must have a problem with me because it’s very disrespectful to let someone into the movie and then disturb them once the movie starts”/ “No one can come in here, regardless of what they are, and scam senior tickets. This has happened before, man.”

Luis stood up and stomped out of the theatre.

“I am finding your manager,” Luis said.

The manager, a sour-faced black woman, was already waiting for him outside the theatre.

Luis yelled at her, “I want my money back!”

The woman wordlessly led him to the ticket counter, where she swiped his card for a refund.

“I want a receipt,” Luis said, holding out his hand.

The woman printed him a receipt and said quietly, “Don’t come back here again.”

“Don’t worry!” Luis called out, “I will never come here again.”

Two weeks later, Luis returned to see a movie about the massacre of Native Americans. He paid full price for his ticket.

My dad and I are at Home Depot. It's Friday night, and we are making a drain to put the water that collects in the gutters of our home when it rains. We are in the plumbing aisle looking for a gutter pipe. My dad is kneeling on the concrete floor in front of me comparing two pipes of similar sizes. His name is Luis. He is fifty three years old and has dark curly hair. Luis has worn a full beard for as long as I can remember, although now it is mostly gray. His skin is reminiscent of oak wood, with deep purple shadows beneath his brown eyes. Luis is wearing an old leather jacket and jeans. His dry hands tremble as he attempts to fit the pipes from the shelf onto a broken-off piece of gutter he brought to the store. My hands are shaky too, especially when I am nervous, but not so visibly as his. I look at his papery skin, tired eyes, and unsteady hands. I wonder: who would hire this man? He looks exhausted and old. I watch Luis place his keys on the floor as he struggles to fit one of the pipes onto the gutter. The pipe snaps into place. Luis gets up slowly, "This is the one." He inspects the pipe to make sure it won't leak and begins to walk away.

"Your keys," I say pointing to the ground.

He pats his jacket pockets with wild eyes before he looks down and sees his keys.

"Thank you," he says, out of breath. On our way to checkout, we pass orange-aproned staff, power drills, and washing machines. The lighting aisle with glittering chandeliers and disco balls. On the line to pay, I notice birds on the cement rafters way above my head. I breathe the smell of wood shavings. I look up at my dad. I can tell he is deep in thought, brushing his beard against his upper lip.

The word remember looks like a caterpillar. Pitch goes up on "re" , and "member" sputters out like a rickety car exhaust. Rickety seems right. Like an old rollercoaster, the word

remember sounds like the last three clicks and pause before the plunge. Something that's over, but not done with. The word remember requires lips. When speaking an "em" sound, your lips meet. But if you wanted to really enunciate or exaggerate the "em", say, for an acting class warm up, your top lip would reach over your bottom lip slightly. When my father is deep in thought, he sets his mouth in an "em" position, lightly stroking his upper lip against his beard.

I think about my Aunt Aida, my father's sister. She works at a Home Depot in Puerto Rico. Her apartment is small and always leaking. My father has told me Aida was an impressive artist when she was young. She went to art school. In college, she met an eccentric man my grandmother did not approve of. Aida thought herself rebellious and married the man anyway. Aida had two sons and discovered her husband is bipolar. The oldest son, Ernesto, is born with a severe mental handicap that has caused him to attack his mother on several occasions. The younger son, Emilio, never speaks or smiles. Aida abandoned all hope of becoming an artist, divorced her husband, and got a job at Home Depot to pay for her son's medical bills. I wonder if she ever thinks of running away as she is putting on that orange apron every morning, helping people pick out kitchens, or answering questions about patios.

Our cashier is a man of medium height with a name tag that reads: Edgardo. Luis greets him in Spanish, and the transaction happens normally, as if we were at a Home Depot in Panama. In reality, we are at a Home Depot in the Bronx. We get our receipt signed by an old woman in an orange vest on our way out. The Bronx Terminal Market is the name of the shopping complex where Home Depot is. The storefronts are illuminated in an array of colors, although the main entrance is lit by a tall fluorescent floodlight with NYPD on the side. A group of uniformed officers gather around eating Dominican pastries sold by a woman with a stolen

shopping cart. The air in the Bronx smells like car exhaust, garbage, and pee. I hear cars speeding past on the Major Deegan Expressway. The doppler effect in my ears. I can't tell the difference between police and ambulance sirens. Drivers honk when the traffic light is red. People argue on the street.

My dad and I walk along an avenue lined with garbage trucks parked back-to-back until the bridge connecting the Grand Concourse to East Harlem. We pass a gray and glass structure that looks like an office building, but with no sign revealing what is inside. All the entrance says is 151 East 151st Street. On the sidewalk in front of the building, I see grown men and women carrying cartoon backpacks so stuffed the zipper won't close. Teenagers with wrapped hair stand behind strollers full of blankets and clothes. Kids sit on the building's front steps, each carrying a bag or holding a younger child by the hand. They all seem to be waiting. The building appears to have enough space to house a waiting room. Yet, on a crisp night in late November, the crowd in front of the building is the same size as during the summer and the rest of the year.

My father walks with his hands stuffed into the ripped pockets of his jacket. I catch my dad staring at a child wearing a black puffy jacket, a girl about twelve years old who seems to be alone. The girl is leaning forward against a metal railing by the entrance of the building. Her chin is resting on her forearm. Her eyes are open, but she isn't looking at anything, just seeing.

We turn the corner onto Walton Avenue. On one side of the street, there is a row of twenty-five brownstone row houses. The squat rectangles have a continuous roof and foundation the length of a city block. A single wall divides each narrow building from the one next to it, although some have a double wall with inches-wide air space in between. Shrubby trees erupt from the sidewalk every few feet. There is a long, graffiti-adorned cement wall on the opposite

side of the street where I sometimes see clusters of people smoking. Twenty-five buildings make up the block of 150th Street and Walton Avenue. The first one on the corner has a stuffed lion lying across the mantle of the entrance. A green reflective street sign by the stoop of the next building reads, “Yankee Stadium”. My father hates sports. The Bronx house is three blocks away from Yankee Stadium. We hate the Yankees because their fans take our parking and cause traffic.

When my father and I arrived with the gutter pipe from Home Depot, we went into the basement. The basement floor is newly laid marble, covered in a film of dust with work boot footprints leading into the hallway. The front room used to have a shit-colored carpet that was full of mold from the many times the basement flooded. That’s why we’re putting in a do-it-yourself drainage system my dad learned about from a youtube video, so the basement doesn’t flood like it has at least twice a year. After we finished the water drain at the Bronx house, my father took me to Whole Foods. We originally set out for an expensive vegan restaurant that we would usually spring for, but not today. During the drive there, he reminded me we are almost destitute. I say almost because our family is held afloat by several fragile threads: the Bronx house rent income, rents from the smaller house he owns in Ponce— even though the electricity in Puerto Rico is so expensive, he makes zero profit on a regular basis—and the number of teaching jobs my father has had over the years, although his latest job search has not been successful.

When my father bought the Bronx house, I was barely aware of its existence. I was attending private school in Scarsdale at the time. My parents never told me how much that school cost, or how they were able to afford it, but I remember seeing only Land Rovers and

BMW's in the parking lot. At that time, my dad drove a dented white minivan with sliding doors, the back window covered with cardboard since it was smashed after parking on a dark street down the block from the Bronx house.

The first friend from school I invited to visit my house was named Allie. I met her at Grand Central, and we took the subway to the Bronx house to wait until my parents picked us up to go to Yonkers. It was two in the afternoon and sunny. I didn't have keys to the Bronx house, so Allie and I waited on the stoop. Allie kept looking around and politely declined to sit down next to me on the steps. She looked at me with a wide-eyed expression, and asked me in a small voice, "Is it safe?"

"Is what safe?" I asked.

Her eyes scanned the area, and I realized what she meant.

I said with certainty, "Yes, it's the middle of the day. Of course it's safe."

Allie sat down on the far edge of the step next to me. Her legs trembled from holding most of her weight. When my parents finally arrived, I saw her jump up and sprint to the car. If Allie had ever invited me to her house, which she hasn't, I would balk before the long driveway behind electric gates, asking her, "Is it safe?"

601 Walton Avenue was built in 1901 as a single-family residence. The brownstone building is now a four-apartment residence owned by Luis Mojica. The building is five floors including the basement level. Luis bought the building from Aubrey Jones, a Bronx native and resident of Walton Avenue since 1975. Aubrey Jones owned two other lots on the same block as well. Aubrey purchased all three of these properties in the late 1990's from the estate of a wealthy Dutch family who owned most of the Bronx since New York was New Amsterdam. The South Bronx went from being two-thirds white in 1950 to two-thirds African American and Hispanic by 1960. The owners of the townhouses on our block are now all Caribbean, South American, or African American. Aubrey describes how, after staying in Bronx during the decades between 1960-1990, he felt nothing could make him leave:

“By the 70's, no one was living in an entire building anymore. The owners who bought the properties after white flight were looking to make money and converted the houses into single room occupancies. In the 70's and the 80's, the neighborhood went downhill because we had so many sketchy people occupying these rooms. I stayed, along with others on the block who are still around, through a period when there was a lot of weapons, prostitution, crime, and even a couple of crack houses on the block. There were several fires because people thought it was more profitable to collect insurance money than maintain the neighborhood the way it was. We weathered the storm.”

However, many families did leave the South Bronx after the 1950's. White flight into suburban areas like Yonkers brought property values down, especially in the South Bronx. Apartment house ownership disappeared. African American and Puerto Rican families repopulated the newly vacant, rent-controlled apartments middle class white families left behind.

Gang violence increased during these decades and local warfare made the South Bronx a dangerous place. A large contributor to the danger in the Bronx was the way landlords partitioned their newly acquired properties to house short-term tenants, which were often drug addicts, prostitutes, or arms dealers.

Since Luis acquired the property in 2006, many of the buildings on Walton Avenue have been remodeled into full apartments. He excavated and remodeled the basement level for it to be a usable space for his non-profit organization, the Multicultural Music Group, which offers free instrumental music instruction to public school students in the Bronx and Upper Manhattan. The tenants living in our building are all from affordable housing programs. The renovations to 601 Walton Avenue and the new ways it's been used reflects the social reconstruction of space simultaneously occurring in the Bronx. The most recent repair on 601 Walton Avenue is to the first floor two bedroom apartment, which my father wants to transform into an AirBnB. Since the construction of the new Market Shopping Center and the new Yankee Stadium, the South Bronx has been a site for developers looking to extend into neighborhoods within range of Manhattan.

Still, South Bronx brownstones will never reach the same value as those in Manhattan because of city planning. The Major Deegan highway project of mega-developer Robert Moses, along with the homeless shelter built on the corner of 151st Street and the garbage disposal plant on Gerard Avenue, have sabotaged the chance of South Bronx real estate ever becoming as desirable as Manhattan. In 2005, Luis was approved for loans of over \$750,000 to buy the multi-family home on 601 Walton Avenue. The property was not worth anywhere near that amount, but were it not for banks selling mortgages irresponsibly in the early 2000's, he may

never have the opportunity to purchase and own property. There were others like him who took advantage of the financial opportunity posed by the housing bubble and purchased the other properties for sale on Walton Avenue between 150th and 151st street in 2005. Aubrey sold lot 48 to my father, lot 46 to Desmar Guevara, another Puerto Rican migrant, and lot 38 to Angelica Ayala, a female musician from Argentina. After the 2008 recession, Bank of America and JPMorgan Chase were asking for over half a million dollars for the property. The property was underwater, meaning it owes more than its market value. These mortgages were given to people who can not afford it.

“When you buy a property, you have to start paying in two months. I tried to fix the place in less than three months, I had two months of grace and two months to pay. There were two mortgages. One mortgage was about three hundred eighty thousand. The other one was a hundred and fifty thousand. Those two banks own my building, and the day I stop making payments, I stop being a landlord. The term landlord doesn't mean what it used to. A landlord once owned lots of land. We have just a little piece of land. When it's yours, truly yours, you only have to pay taxes. When the banks began collecting payments on the mortgage, I didn't know if I could make it. If he could make something to survive. At that time, it was crazy. What was left out of the mortgage, the profit, was less than a thousand. It was a very small amount of money. It's not profitable when you get into such a large debt. Nevertheless, I got into the landowning class. I was never qualified. What the bank did was illegal. I would never have a property in the states if it weren't for the illegal lending of these banks. Although the property was not too profitable at that time, I knew that having a property sooner or later would turn out to be a good deal. When the housing bubble popped in 2008, I got involved with two class action

lawsuits against the banks and I was able to eliminate one of the mortgages. I was able to reduce the payments of the other one with a modification. I was spared over half of the total cost of those loans. That's more money than I'd ever dealt with in my life."

The reason he has to battle banks is because he took out loans he knew he couldn't afford. The reason he has to battle city inspectors at the Bronx house is because he had a friend install a faulty meter that siphons off more electricity and gas than he pays for. He justifies this by saying, "A person has to cut corners to survive. This life is so expensive. They all just want to suffocate you, squeeze as much as they can, even though they already have so much."

In 1987, Luis Mojica became a teacher because he had no income. Luis graduated from City College and needed a job. Luis lived across the street from a middle school on Convent Avenue. The location couldn't be more convenient, but it was a hellish situation in there. Luis went room to room with a guido and maracas in a plastic bag. The kids left the room, or else ignored his presence completely. It was clear they didn't want music. Luis said to himself, 'I didn't study music education for this shit.' Luis worked only one day in that school. After the day was over, Luis told the principal, "I don't want to come here tomorrow," and he never went back.

After that horrible day, Luis called his friend Carmen. Carmen was a friend of his who used to study with him at City College, but she was a teacher already. She had about a year teaching. Luis told her, "Listen, I can't teach. This is horrible."

She told him, "That depends on the principal's perception of your subject."

Luis said, "Okay, that one has no respect for my subject. It's proven. What do I do?"

Carmen said, "I have a friend, and she told me there's a position at my school. You need the power of a homeroom teacher."

Luis said, "Fine, I'll do whatever."

Carmen told Luis about a school in a very rough neighborhood with drugs and violence. While he was there, Luis saw two students get killed in drive-by shootings over the summer. Today, the neighborhood is still that bad.

Still, Luis called Carmen's friend who said, "I will tell my principal to expect you tomorrow." Luis showed up at the school the next day. Luis had passed all the tests to be a certified teacher the year before and held the necessary license to teach in New York City public

schools. After a brief interview, the principal told him, “The first thing we are going to talk about is a metal box called the Roll Book. The Roll Book contains detailed personal information about each student written by previous teachers over the span of at least three years.” The principal held the box before Luis and warned him, “Fire, earthquake, whatever happens: this box comes out with you.” There was no computer at that time. She handed Luis the box and said, “This is the lives of these kids. No one else keeps these records. You are responsible.” Luis understood why the homeroom teacher has so much power. He asked the principal if he could be a homeroom teacher if he taught music.

The principal said, “You need a discipline besides music to be a homeroom teacher. What else can you teach?”

Luis said, “Social Studies. I can do that.”

She said, “You have all the Social Studies classes in the bilingual department, and you will be the music teacher. There is another music teacher for the English classes, but you will deal with just the bilingual students.”

Luis got all the instruments the English music teacher didn’t want to use, strings mostly. Luis was thrilled. He got stringed instruments out of the school’s basement and made a charanga band. Luis and his students started playing Latin music every day. When he took the job, he hoped to write music during the day, but he had no time for that. Luis started seeing the need of these kids. Many of them have no one. Being around such intense need swallowed him.

“A human being that has sensitivity can not just look to the other side,” he told Carmen over the phone. “That’s impossible. It’s really hard.”

In his first sixth grade class, Luis taught a girl who had bruises. He mentioned that to the school guidance counselor, who she told him, “You have to report that.”

He did. Luis thought the girl was falling down or playing rough at recess, but as soon as he reported it, a social worker took over. The girl’s father was raping her. She was burned with steam from the radiator. Soon after Luis told someone, the girl was taken out of there. Luis never thought he would get so close to a situation like that. He could see the expressions on the girl’s face; it wasn’t normal. Her eyes looked utterly lost. But Luis didn’t know what the look was. He’d never seen it before. None of the other kids looked that way. Only that one.

The school where Luis taught once had a special education program where a boy named Luisito and his sister Samia were enrolled. In 1990, the city mandated a mainstreaming program to acclimate the special-ed kids to regular classes. They were placed in bilingual sixth grade with Luis, growing his class to thirty-five kids. In Luis’ class that year, Luisito and Samia were the center of attention. Luisito wore a lopsided grin on his round face, unable to sit still. He made fart noises, and told jokes about farts that made the class laugh. Samia was fair-skinned with freckles, green eyes, and blonde hair she tossed over her shoulder confidently. She was stared at by the boys in the class, drawing their attention away from Luis’ lesson. Samia was also the focus of a particular group of black girls who sat at the back of the classroom, named Crystal, Destiny, Shayna, and Diamond. Luis had seen this group of girls beat up other girls who walked around with the proud look Samia had on her face. The first time Luis saw them beat up another girl, he called them after class and told them he had seen what they did.

They sucked their teeth, slumped in their chairs, and avoided eye contact, except Diamond who locked eyes with Luis and said, “Go ahead. Report us. We’ll get suspended again and beat up all these kids a block away. It’ll be all your fault. Is that what you want?”

Luis looked up Diamond’s file in the Roll Book and discovered she was a ward of the state. She was moved from a homeless shelter to a group home two blocks away. The school had no resources to pay a detention monitor, and Luis knew the principal could only suspend or expel them if he said anything. Luis figured they would be less trouble in school than on the street.

Luis was cleaning up his classroom floor, littered with paper balls Luisito had thrown at his classmates’ heads, when he saw Samia exiting the playground outside the barred window. Luis recognized her long blonde hair as she was surrounded by Diamond and her friends. One of the girls shoved Samia and another tried to pull her hair, when Samia punched Diamond hard in the face. Despite being outnumbered, Luis watched Samia beat two of the four girls to a pulp while the others ran away. Luis reported nothing. Although Samia wasn’t as disruptive in class as her brother, neither could focus on Luis’ lesson for more than a minute. Samia and Luisito began to miss class after class. Their absence was palpable to everyone. Luis looked them up in the Roll Book and found out their family, named Ruíz, lived only a block away. With three other children in the house and no reported income, the Ruíz family lived exclusively on public assistance.

The guidance counselor told Luis that if a child does not show up to school consistently, the family will not receive welfare. Luis decided to stop by the block where the Ruíz family lived on his way out of school. Luis saw Luisito sitting on a stoop with other boys and called to him, “Luisito!”

The dark-skinned boy with circles under his eyes came towards Luis in a black puffy jacket.

The boy said, “Sup Mr. Mojica?”

Luis handed him a folded paper said, “Put this letter in your backpack.”

Luisito took the paper and was about to walk away when Luis said, “Please, do it here.”

The boy looked annoyed, and unzipped his backpack. The bag was empty inside. No notebook, no folders, no pencils. Luis realized he only carried a backpack to look like the other kids. He placed the paper inside and left. The letter said that Luis needs to talk to the Ruíz family to prevent them from losing their welfare stipend.

The next day, a tall thin man with a lopsided grin and green eyes met Luis at the school. He introduced himself as “Guichi” and said in Spanish, “Look man, any other teacher would have just called the feds on us, but you had the decency to let us know. That’s real solid of you. I won’t forget what you did. I have a garage down the block. Whatever you need, I have a body shop here.”

Luis thought about the tin can of a car he had and made a mental note to pass by.

“Thanks man,” Luis said. “I’ll take you up on that. But Luisito and Samia have to come to school.”

“You got it,” Guichi said, “They’ll be here.”

Luisito and Samia didn’t miss a day of school for the rest of the year.

A week after Guichi came to his school, Luis parked his car outside Guichi’s building.

Upon walking into the garage, Guichi told Luis, “Mister, please wait a second.”

There was a large black man in the garage, three times Guichi’s size. Guichi and the man were arguing. Guichi pushed the black guy to the ground and punched him hard in the face, blood was

gushing out. The man lay on the oil slicked cement twitching. Guichi stepped over him like dog shit and said to Luis, “Come back at four. I’ll have your car ready for you at four. Is that okay?” Luis backed away slowly as he called back, “Yeah! Four is more than great! Take your time! No rush!”

Luis almost pissed himself. He never thought he’d see Guichi again, but Luis’ car broke down in front of the school on an evening soon after that. Luis called the Ruíz home number listed in the Roll Book, and Guichi came right away. Guichi got two big guys to push Luis’ car to the garage. When Luis got there, Guichi put his arm around him and asked, “How come you didn’t come back at four the other day?”

Luis involuntarily braced himself for violence. Guichi laughed.

“You don’t need to worry!” Guichi said with a warm smile that drew Luis closer. “You’re a good man,” Guichi said as he put an arm around Luis’ shoulders, “Come inside!”

Luis and Guichi were in his apartment all night drinking beers and talking. After that, Luis kept coming back to see Guichi, without his car. Luis and Guichi hung out daily for many years while Luis taught at that school. One night, Guichi asked Luis if he had a passion.

Luis said, “I used to feel passionate about music, but lately I’ve been fascinated with being a great teacher. I’ve tried lessons that didn’t work, then I tried others that did work. I thought to myself, ‘I should get classes in education so I won’t waste my time trying things out blindly.’”

Guichi looked seriously at Luis and told him he ought to go to graduate school. Guichi said, “I think you can do it. I would be offended if you didn’t try.”

During the time Luis saw Guichi every day, he noticed that all his students respected him a lot. Guichi had an illegal bar in the basement of his apartment building, and would sell drugs all over the city. When Samia was in her first year of high school, she got pregnant. Guichi asked Luis to be his “compadre”. In other words, to baptize the child of his daughter. Directly translated as "co-parent", the word “compadre” is used in many cultures across Latin America in reference to two men who share a close friendship and become family through the Catholic Church, akin to marriage, but in the role of godparent. The day of the baptism, Luis and Guichi were drunk all day. From then on, Luis was his compadre, and they called each other “Compy”.

Samia was a beauty who started chain smoking and eating trash. She has green eyes and honey blonde hair down to her waist. By the time I came to know Samia, her natural golden hues had dulled to a sickly smoker's yellow. Her body is bloated, which she makes no effort to hide in a tight spaghetti-strap shirt with her breasts spilling out of the top. Her jeans are also tight, creating the silhouette of a double scoop ice cream cone. Samia has dark bags under her eyes that I doubt were there when she was young, although they might have been. A cigarette hangs from in between her lips as she yanks an extension cord coming from the first floor of her family's apartment building. Samia and her mother, Marina, are sitting on foldable beach chairs on the sidewalk in the Southwest section of the Bronx. Marina is so obese, she does not walk. I don't know whether she can walk or not. I've never seen her standing. It's a Sunday in June. Beside Marina is a cooler full of ice and beer. I ask for water; they don't have any. A boombox at Samia's feet plays Dominican music, and she mumbles along to the melody as she sways her mammoth hips back and forth. A beach umbrella is fastened to the sidewalk with cardboard and duct tape. Samia pulls out another foldable beach chair, this one child-sized with Disney princesses on it. Samia motions for me to sit. I do. She takes a handful of my thick curly hair and begins to part it into sections with clips that have replaced the cigarette in her mouth. Along the opposite side of the street, other people also have boomboxes and chairs outside. Some are smoking from hookahs. All are drinking alcohol in public. Samia plugs a hairdryer into the extension cord sticking out from a window and begins to straighten my hair on the street. The section she's holding is pulled taut. I'm wincing silently. The last time I cried out in pain, she put

down the blower and said, “Do you want to stay half nappy, or do you want me to finish?”

Silence. “That’s what I thought.”

The sun is beating down on my face because Samia and Marina have taken up all the space under the umbrella. Marina isn’t reading, talking, or looking at anything. To all appearances, Marina is content to be sitting. Marina does not speak a word of English. I wonder how it is mother and daughter communicate at all since Samia doesn’t seem to speak Spanish. I’m not that great at Spanish either. I doubt, even if Samia does speak Spanish, that she would speak it to me. Behind Marina and the umbrella is a closed garage door. Spray painted on the rippled steel door is a mural that reads: “R.I.P Luis Ruíz ‘Guichi’ 1948-2011”.

Luis Mojica was sitting in a heavily graffitied subway car, when a woman with brown hair lighter than her skin sat down next to him. Luis was struck with the smell of marzipan and chamomile. He kept his eyes fixed directly ahead of him. The woman had her hands neatly folded on her lap. Her nails were unpainted and short. She was wearing a pale yellow dress that fell below her knees. Her pocketbook cover was cut from the same cloth as her dress. Her scuffed brown shoes looked comfortable to walk in. Luis breathed deeply the scent he would not be able to name until years later.

Luis turned his face towards her. In the way that is instinctual when someone faces you with the intention to speak, and to whom you wish to respond, she turned to him. Luis is silent for a moment as he notices she isn't wearing makeup, yet her lips seem unusually pink. Luis says, "Hello" in the most unaccented English he can muster. She smiles a warm, open smile and replies in Spanish, "Hello." She extends her hand for Luis to shake. Luis takes her small, rough hand in his and shakes it lightly.

"You are a seamstress," he says confidently.

"It's my dress isn't it?" she replies, smoothing the pleats of her skirt, "I know most women don't make their own clothes anymore, but I didn't think it was so obvious."

"It isn't" Luis says, "Your dress is lovely. My mother is a seamstress and her dresses look very much like yours."

The woman smiled again, this time looking down.

"From the fifties, right?" she said

"I didn't want to say that-" he replied

“No, it's okay. I kind of like not fitting in with the style nowadays. Everything neon, polyester, sports clothes all the time. Look at that lady” The woman gestured slightly with her head.

Luis turned to look at a woman on the other side of the subway car. A tall platinum blonde with her hair tied in a high ponytail stood holding a pole. The blonde wore a bright orange jumpsuit with transparent mesh on her stomach and legs. Her big scrunchie, stud earrings, and sneakers were the same shade of orange as her jumpsuit. She had headphones on and was bobbing her head slightly.

The woman sitting next to Luis said confidentially, “On a hot day like this, that woman is definitely getting a yeast infection.”

If Luis had been drinking water, it would have come out of his nose. He had never heard a woman refer to that condition he only knew from growing up in a house with five sisters. She saw the surprise on his face, and still continued:

“The tight synthetic fabric pressed up against her you-know-what can only mean one thing in humid weather like today.”

“How can you be so sure?” was the only thing Luis could think to say

The woman said, “How much do you want to bet that, in the next minute, she is going to scratch down there?”

Luis took a long look at the blonde. She seemed rich, adorned in the latest fashion, headed downtown. It seemed more likely that a disco ball would come down from the train car ceiling than an upper class woman like that scratching her crotch in public.

“Five dollars,” Luis said confident he would win.

“Okay,” The woman replied with a smug smile.

For a while, they both watched the blonde closely. After what felt like more than a minute, the woman's face seemed to be pricked by something. So discreetly that Luis would never have noticed if he had not been purposefully watching, she picked at the cloth bunching up around her pubis.

"Ha!" The woman exclaimed with glee. "I told you!"

"That was not a scratch," Luis said "she was just adjusting"

"That's what she wants you to think, but as a woman, I know 100% that was a scratch."

Seeing no way to argue with that, Luis pulled out his wallet and handed the woman a five dollar bill. "You won." he said.

She took the bill with a grin.

Luis asked, "Where are you from?"

The woman replied, "Panama. And you?"

"Puerto Rico," he said.

"Were you born there?" she asked

"Yes. I still don't know English very well," he said

"I noticed," the woman smiled, and not in the mean way Luis was used to when people commented on his English. But a soft chamomile smile he'd never seen on anyone before.

"If I were to drop any of these gringos in Panama, they wouldn't know how to get around at all," Luis said.

"They would be fine." she said with a malice Luis knew was not intended for him. She gestured with the five dollar bill Luis had just given her, "Pull out American dollars anywhere in Panama

and everyone will prostrate themselves in front of you. It's disgusting. My country may be independent in name, but in reality we are just as owned by the United States as you are."

Luis nodded solemnly.

"Where are you going?", Luis asked before quickly adding, "if you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all," the woman said warmly, "I'm headed downtown to meet someone."

The vagueness of the word "someone" led Luis to think she was meeting a man. Yet, the vagueness also implied that whoever it was wasn't her husband or boyfriend. She could likely be meeting a friend.

"And you?" she asked.

"I was going to my compadre's house." Luis replied.

"Was? Aren't you still going there?" She cocked her head inquisitively, a gesture that struck Luis as incredibly cute.

"Actually," he paused, "I was wondering if maybe I could have lunch with you instead" he added quickly, "if that's okay."

She lowered her eyes, unable to suppress the smile on her lips. She opened her mouth to speak a couple of times, smiling all the while. Before she said anything, she looked at Luis directly in the eyes, searching for something. Whatever she was looking for, she seemed to find it. She replied, "Okay, but I get to choose the place."

They got off on the next stop, 125th Street in Harlem. They walked two blocks to a diner with soul food on the menu. Luis would have pulled out her chair if they hadn't been seated in a booth. He gazed at her. She looked back, undaunted by eye contact.

"So," Luis began, "do you often go out on dates with men you meet on the subway?"

She laughed a deep belly laugh.

“No, although I see why you might think so,” she said.

After an awkward pause, Luis asked, “Have you ever seen ‘*The Sound of Music*’?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“The song, ‘Favorite Things’, you know it?” he asked.

“Of course,” she said.

“Tell me your favorite things” he said.

After a pause, she said, “I like to see happy pets. Well fed, loved, and played with pets of all kinds. I’ll need a minute to think of more.”

A server stopped by their table with cups of water and menus.

“Do you have pets?” Luis asked.

“No, I never have” she said. “I love animals though, and I like very much to see them happy. Do you live with any animals?” she asked, taking a sip of water.

“Not here. In Puerto Rico, I had a pet rooster named Toto,” Luis replied.

The woman almost choked on her water.

“Why would you name an animal such a dirty thing?”

“I was a little boy. I didn’t know,” he said laughing. “Toto was a simple, two-syllable name that I thought was cute. No one thought to tell me “toto” referred to a woman’s nether parts. My Toto was blue. I bought him as a chick on the side of the road from a street vendor who dyed the chicks’ feathers a bunch of colors. For years, he slept in my bed with me at night and scampered around the neighborhood during the day. In the evenings, I would call his name loudly until I

found him. My mother would put her face in her hands and ask me, ‘Can’t you name that rooster something else?’ The neighborhood ladies would ask my mother, “has Luis found his toto yet?”

The woman laughed.

Luis continued, “Toto grew up to be an adult rooster. I still slept with him like a stuffed animal, until one day I returned home to find the kitchen floor covered with blue feathers.”

The woman gasped. “No, your mother wouldn’t.”

“She did,” he said. “My mother wasn’t a very compassionate person when I was young. She must have been tired of me embarrassing her, or else she just wanted to cook chicken for dinner and didn’t feel like going to the store to buy some. She never told me why she killed Toto. Either way, I was forced to sit at the table while I watched my family eat my pet.”

They sat with that for a minute until a young waiter, a boy no older than fourteen, came to take their order. She ordered a soup. Luis ordered grilled chicken. The woman stared at Luis with wide eyes.

“Why the face? It tastes good,” he said.

Her laugh sounded like the tinkling of a tiny bell.

The boy left to place their orders, which he hadn’t written down. For a moment, he stood still in the floor space between their table and the order window.

“He forgot what we ordered,” the woman whispered to Luis.

“How do you know?” Luis asked, unaware of anything besides the woman sitting in front of him.

“I’m working at this restaurant on the West Side”, she said. “It’s a fast-paced environment with lots of pressure on those who can’t keep up. The manager never has to fire them. They always

quit, some before the end of their first shift. That boy wouldn't last a minute there. But that's why I chose this place. It feels so different from work."

"Should we call him over?" Luis asked

"Nah," she said softly. "Let's see what he brings us instead. I like surprises." She smiled.

Luis smiled back. "Is your job always stressful?" he asked her.

"A lot of the time," she said. "But when the whole team synchronizes, there's this unmistakable energy that flows throughout the place. It's not just us servers that feel it, the customers feel it too. Like when I'm clearing a table and one of the other members of the team moves past me and takes the plates from my hand so quickly that the customers don't even see him coming and the people at the table are like, 'Woah! How do you do that?' In those moments, people become so much more willing to hand over their money. Like last week, I made over five hundred dollars on a Wednesday night!"

"No," Luis said.

"It's true," she said. "Weekends I've been known to make almost a thousand. Customers leave the restaurant hugging me and giving me high fives as I'm thinking, 'Why are you thanking me? You just gave me so much of your money!' But then I realize it's not a lot to them, and I remember the horrible inequality of things. It's hard for me to feel happy, even when I'm doing well."

"I've never made that much money in my life," Luis confessed.

"I give most of what I make to my mother" she said, "to send back to my family in Panama.

When I think about what my cousins must be going through over there, I feel like a traitor living here."

“I know what you mean,” Luis said. “Coming here like every other Puerto Rican, abandoning my homeland to work for these people who treat me like shit. I wonder whether I should just go back.”

“That’s up to you,” she said. She sipped her water, then continued in a soft voice, “But it’s important to remember that you don’t lose where you’re from by coming here. People back home may treat you differently when you return, but that land doesn’t belong to them. No place belongs to anybody, regardless of Americans thinking they can own everything. Places may change and people may die. But that doesn’t have to change you: you make the choice to change yourself.”

The waiter returned with a salad and a chicken soup.

As the waiter walked away, Luis said, “At least he got the soup right.”

The woman smiled. She said, “It was my idea not to correct the order. Have my soup.”

Luis said, “No it’s fine. I want you to get what you wanted.”

The woman replied, “What I want is for you to stop frowning at your salad and take the damn soup.”

Luis chuckled at himself. They swapped plates and ate in silence. When the waiter came back to collect their plates, the woman motioned for the check. Luis felt a heavy emptiness in his chest.

“So,” Luis hesitated before asking, “may I see you again?”

The woman smiled. There was a salad leaf stuck in between her front teeth. The sight filled Luis with an inexplicable joy. She looked so silly. So real. He hoped she would never remove it.

She took a napkin from the dispenser on the table and opened her pocketbook. Luis stared at her as she rummaged until she took out a fuschia marker pen. She scribbled her phone number on the napkin and slid it across the table.

The waiter returned with the check. The woman pulled a twenty dollar bill from her pocketbook and placed it on top the bill.

The boy started to walk away with the check, but she held his gaze. She motioned with her finger for him to come closer.

She asked the boy, “How old are you?”

The boy said, “eighteen”.

The woman raised an eyebrow at him. “How old are you?” she asked again softly.

“Thirteen, but please don’t tell anyone. I could get in trouble” he said in a whisper.

“Do you have a place to sleep tonight?” she asked.

The boy said nothing.

She removed fifty dollar bill from her purse, folded it, and placed it in the boy’s palm.

“This is for you. Hide it. Don’t let anyone take it from you. Find a safe place to sleep,” she said.

The boy looked overwhelmed. He mouthed, “Thank you” and hurried away.

The woman returned her attention to Luis.

She whispered, “This place used to be owned by an old black couple, very nice southern people.

When they died, a bad man bought the place. He fired all the waiters and brings in homeless kids who work for pennies. Whenever I can, I try to help them out.”

Luis said, “I was a kid exactly like that. I never got to be a waiter, though. They kept me in the back washing dishes because I couldn’t speak any English”.

Luis saw pain in the woman's face. He continued, "I came to New York when I was fourteen. I stayed with distant relatives who had strict rules, and I could tell they didn't want me there. So I slept on the streets. I started out on park benches, until some guy tried to stab me with a needle. I don't know what would have happened to me if I didn't wake up right away and run. After that, I spent most of my nights in movie theatres. I had to plug my ears with tissue paper to drown out the porn they play in the Times Square theatres late at night."

"Then what happened?" she asked, leaning forward.

"I knew I couldn't keep living like that, so I begged my family for money to go back to Puerto Rico" he said.

"When did you come back?" she asked

"Six years ago," he said. "I went to City College, got my licence to teach, and now I'm teaching bilingual sixth grade in the Bronx."

"That's amazing," she said. "I've always wanted to go to college."

"You can," he said.

She shook her head. "You don't know me," she said.

Luis paused before saying, "You're right, I don't know you. But I'd like to."

The woman smiled, the salad leaf still stuck in her teeth.

"I have to go," she said, "I really enjoyed having lunch with you."

"Me too," Luis said. He took the napkin with her phone number from the table.

They slid out of the booth and stood up to leave.

He was about to hold open the door for her, when she said, "If you don't mind, I'd like it if you waited inside for a few minutes before leaving after me."

“Why?” he asked

“I did just meet you on the subway,” she said.

“That’s fair,” he replied.

“If I see you walking behind me,” she said sternly, “I will be very upset.”

“You have my word,” Luis said.

The woman pulled out a mini umbrella from her pocketbook, said “Goodbye,” and left.

Although they had been seated by a window, Luis had no idea when it started to rain.

He waited for three minutes when he realized, she didn’t tell him her name. He wanted badly to stick his head out the door and call out to her, to ask what her name is. But he had given his word not to follow her. He told himself, “I’ll ask when I call.” With that, he sat patiently at the booth until ten minutes had passed.

The sun was up while it was raining. Clustered just beneath the sun, flat, dark clouds sprinkled water that sparkled in the light as it fell to the ground. It wasn’t drizzling. Each plump, round drop descended into the sunshine and, for a moment, everything glittered. Luis exited the diner clutching the napkin. Remembering his propensity for losing things, he stuffed it into the back pocket of his jeans. He imagined what her name could be. A looping, tongue-filled name common somewhere else. She made him feel like it was her pleasure to be sitting there with him, like watching someone listen to a song they love and you made that song. A genuine, patient kindness that felt like she had held his head to her breasts and stroked his hair, although he had only briefly touched her small, rough hand. Her fearless eye contact. She displayed a real interest, not just in him, but in the world around her. Her presence felt light, as if she would disappear upon nightfall or fade into a mist; the opposite of both darkness and density. Luis had

nothing to cover him from the falling water outside, yet the rain seemed to propel him forward. Luis felt resplendent as he walked the thirty-five blocks to his tiny studio apartment. He pulled out the napkin from his pocket, ceremoniously unfolded it, and laid it down on his bed. The rain bled and feathered the phone number beyond comprehension. Luis felt a rock in his abdomen. He turned on the single lamp in the room and held the napkin close to the light, but the number was illegible. Luis grabbed an umbrella he found on the subway with three broken spokes and jogged down the block to the public library. On the first floor, he saw a sign labeling a device with a backlit surface and a large magnifying glass for visually impaired people to read. His hands trembled as he slid the napkin onto the surface. Through the glass, Luis could see the napkin's ink-soaked fibers clearly as the pores on his face, but he could only make out two numbers: a three and a nine.

The phone rang. Luis had to stretch across the floor to get to the black landline on the other end of the room. There were no tables or chairs in his room, just a mattress with sheets on the floor. He picked up quickly, hoping the impossible that somehow she would have found his number and called. When he picked up, the voice of a large man barked, “Is this Luis?”

Luis hissed back, “Who is this?”

He said, “This is the public library. You still have the audiobook on tape you borrowed?”

Luis saw the redundancy of saying “audiobook” and “on tape”, also the cassette case with the *100 Years of Solitude* audiobook in the corner of the room. “Yes, I have it.”

“You bring that back now, you hear? Don’t care if you’re not done with it. It’s other people’s turn to use it.”

“Okay, goodbye”

“Okay, you’re going to bring it back?”

“Yes, okay, fine.”

“You bring back that tape.”

“Goodbye.”

Luis hung up the phone. What an oddly pushy librarian. That man is in the wrong profession, he thought. He ought to be a debt collector. Libraries are for learning, and then Luis understood that he was being inconsiderate for keeping the audiobook that he had already listened to twice. He would bring the tape back at once, not because the pushy librarian told him to, but because it’s the right thing to do.

Part III:

I was waiting on the platform of a train station the other day, when a teenage boy of about sixteen walked past the shelter where I was standing. He smiled and waved at me as I vacantly stared at the crowd of people exiting the train. He was about sixteen, tall, with a mop of brown hair sticking out from under a hoodie emblazoned with a skateboard logo. He approached me in a rush, asking to use my cell phone because he was meeting his mother and his phone died. I looked around and saw I was the only person in sight without headphones on. I reluctantly agreed, on the condition that I hold the phone. My hand was unsteady as he dialed a number quickly. When it began to ring, he grabbed for the phone, but I gripped it tightly. His hands dropped to his sides. A woman's voice answered, but after the boy said, "Hello" into the phone, another boy his age appeared. They greeted each other and ran off. The number the boy dialed called back, and I answered. I told the woman on the other line that a boy came up to me at the train station and asked to use my phone.

She seemed to chuckle as she asked, "Is he tall? Too much hair?"

I said, "Yeah"

The woman said in a sweet voice, "That's my son. I'm so sorry he troubled you. Thank you very much for helping him."

I found myself much less annoyed. In fact, I felt happy. I was happy because I wasn't lied to. I was in his position recently, but I didn't dare ask a stranger. Most sane people would say no. I asked a police officer, who regarded me with the same suspicion that I had for that boy. I wonder what led that boy to have such confidence to grab for my phone after I told him not to? It didn't offend me that the officer had held the phone while the call was on speaker. I knew it was

a smart thing to do. He doesn't know me. What matters was he didn't say no. I was able to call my sister and get a ride. The boy was able to call his mom.

In movies with happy endings, the protagonist always comes to a point where they lose hope. Yet, at the last possible moment, they discover there's still a chance if they try really hard. The sprint at the end of a race. Seeing the last bus home, and just barely, right before the bus drives away, you make it. You get home. But in real life, sometimes you don't make it home. You have to sit in a McDonald's all night because the next bus isn't until morning and you're in the middle of nowhere alone.

There's no way for Luis to have known if that woman was the love of his life, if such a thing even exists, but she could have been. It was a strong possibility. The hardest part about getting older is watching possibilities disintegrate before you and not replenish themselves. Becoming an international policymaker, exploring the bottom of the sea, being emotionally intimate with someone in a way that feels true and natural. Luis Mojica doesn't consider these possibilities anymore.

I saw my dad in me when I read Joan Didion my first year of college. I was the only person of color in the class, something that had not happened to me until that point. Even if there was only one other Asian or Black kid, there was at least one. You had to apply to get into the class, and everyone seemed sure they had made the cut for a reason. There was no chatter before class. Students sat down at the round table and began to review notes or read until the professor wrote a single word on the board that would encompass our lesson for the day. Each class felt expensive. One Wednesday, we were discussing Joan Didion's "The White Album". In an essay titled "Women", Didion writes:

"The minorities seemed to promise more, but finally disappointed... they failed to perceive their common cause with other minorities, continued to exhibit a self-interest disconcerting in the extreme to organizers steeped in the rhetoric of 'brotherhood'".

The first thought that came to my mind was, "You have no right to say that". What I wouldn't allow myself to think at the time was, "she's absolutely right." But I hated it coming from her. I felt all of me clench. I quaked as I spoke in class. I thought about how my father refers to all black and Latino men as "brother". I thought about how, when I tell my father a story about anyone, the first question he asks is, "What are they?" If the answer is Latino, Black, or Native American, his interest will increase. If not, it's as if I hadn't spoken. There were several female students in the class who defended Didion, but I don't remember what they said because I was so focused on what I had to say. That's something my dad does all the time. He gets so worked up about his own participation in conversations that he only catches snippets of what other people say and responds to those segments that strike him.

I am in the car with my parents. There is jazz playing on the radio, and my mother is driving. My mother's name is Delca Ortiz. She is a stout woman in her late fifties with straight hair dyed blonde. Her eyes are hazel. She is the color of parchment paper, pale enough to show blue veins through her skin. She wears frosty eyeshadow and mascara. Delca sits on the edge of the seat with her chest pressed up against the steering wheel. Her nails are painted lilac. Delca gets her nails done every week at the Korean salon down the block. She knows there are much cheaper salons not far away, but Delca doesn't mind paying extra. She says it's because she likes the convenience of going down the block, but I think she pays extra because she enjoys talking to the people who work there. At the Korean nail salon, Delca has a favorite manicurist who is around the same age. My mother asks about her children, already grown with babies of their own. The woman asks my mother how her back is feeling. My mother can talk for days about illnesses, aches, and pains. Her unceasing interest in such conversations makes her seem very old. Besides her own health complaints, my mother talks about sick family the most.

My mother was speaking to my father in a soft voice, "Somebody had to take her to doctors' appointments. Somebody had to pay attention to whether she ate. Somebody had to pay her debts. Paying an additional mortgage to your mortgage so someone who can't remember your name won't get their house taken away by the bank is a difficult task. At least you had some help from your other sisters and nephews."

My father was silent for a while. Then he said, "When somebody gets sick, that's when the real people in your life come out and everyone else disappears. When Magda was receiving chemotherapy, she got really weak. It was like she was unconscious when she came out of there.

It's not easy to see that twice a week. Sometimes family wants to help, but they don't have the resources, like Aida."

I asked my father, "How did you find out your sister's mind was fading?"

He replied, "I knew when I saw her residence messy. Magda had been a meticulously clean person. That is the behavior of people who are sick. You may take that as being unclean. It's not that; she was mentally ill already."

I opened my mouth to speak, but my father kept talking. He said, "Many of the homeless people are mentally ill. It's not that they want to be homeless because they can't find a job, it's that they are not suitable for working, so nobody will give them a job. The main problem with society is that we have not found a way to synchronize our cognitive, affective, and physical faculties. That connection is broken and we still don't give value to it. People are not trained to care." I wanted to ask him what this had to do with his sister, but he wouldn't let me get a word in. I saw his brows furrow in the rearview mirror, and I realized he was talking about feeling powerless.

"Most governments don't give information for you to understand things for a particular reason. It's a way of controlling," my father said. He asked me, "Do you know the value of a dollar?" and didn't wait for me to respond. "The dollar used to be a representation of gold. In Fort Knox there used to be gold, which is empty now. What represents the dollar now?"

He answered his own question again. "Petrol dollars. You know what is a petrodollar? Petroleum. The dollar came to have this value in the seventies when there was an oil crisis. The world stopped because OPEC raised the price of oil and people didn't have the money to pay."

My mother looked bored. Economics is not on the short list of her interests, but she knew not to interrupt my father when he began talking in waves that didn't end until he was out of breath.

“When countries didn't have the money to pay for it,” my father continued, “the United States said,” and here he put on a gruff, formal voice, “The currency to trade oil will be the dollar.” In my head, I questioned whether the United States could just state something and have it become true right then and there.

“When that changed,” my father said, “The United Nations changed not only the dollar to be represented from gold to oil, they changed everything. English became the official language of the world. French stopped being the main language. The United States had control over the entire world, and that's when things started falling apart for the Soviet Union. The rest is history. Have you learned this in your history classes by any chance?”

He was waiting for me to respond. I said, “No.”

“Exactly,” my father said. “Now,” he went on, “China wants to start investing, but they don't want to use the dollar. It happens that they use the “yang” I believe it is?”, he asks me.

“Yuan,” I said.

“Yang, right?”

“Yuan.”

“So if they have the “yang” as the currency for the exchange of petroleum,” he said, “the dollar will collapse. There are so many forecasts about that because the bitcoin is making a big issue also. The problem is not only that, it's the control of the banks. Everything depends on the whole shit of the economy that they don't teach people. I brought it up because when you don't know

about this issue of mental health, when you don't know about dealing with economy, you don't know about investments, you live in total ignorance. Living in total ignorance means that you are out there at the mercy of whoever has the information. So, obviously, we are just the puppets of these people. The little bit we do learn, we use it to make other people rich. The only thing we learn in school is how to do a particular task for someone else to profit from. But we don't learn how to become rich. We live in a capitalist system, but the majority of people will never learn how to become capitalist entrepreneurs. We are not taught to do that. People like us are expected to be employees, on the line, factory workers. We are just trained to do that and, for the most part, people like us are more than pleased to have a job at all. When I ask people who have a salary and they are practically slaves of their jobs, they say, 'I can't do anything about that because that's my job, you want me to lose my job? If I lose my job I will have no income, if I have no income, I will live on the street. You want me to be homeless, is that what you want? Because I could listen to you, and what can I do with that?' I have to shut up as soon as I have that answer because that's the only thing they know. We are just a piece of the puzzle. And by being a piece of the puzzle, we don't have eyes to look at anything else. These people are just surviving, that's all they're doing. You take what they have; they will starve. And that is when you lose your mind."

I had a dream last night about my aunt Magda. The second oldest of my father's four sisters, everyone called her Mimi. When I knew her, she was a tall blonde hairdresser who wore red lipstick and owned her own salon. She was very proud of her achievements. With the economic downturn of 2008, her salon began to struggle, and so did she. Her mind began to falter. She developed severe vertigo. When she was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 2012, Mimi refused to shave her head. To her, being bald was a disgrace.

In my dream, Mimi was still alive, but she was not well. We were in the supermarket and I was excited to tell her that I was writing a story about her, but she was distracted by gathering an inordinate amount of food in her arms. I didn't question why she hadn't obtained a cart or a basket to hold the groceries. Mimi lost her balance, dropped the food, and hit her head on the linoleum floor. My parents rushed over when I yelled for help. I was crying, convinced I had caused her death. When, in the middle of the dream, I realized Mimi had already died. I didn't go to her funeral. It was in Puerto Rico; I was in school. There wasn't a discussion about me going, although I wanted to.

When I was six-years-old, I sang L.O.V.E by Nat King Cole with a children's chorus on Valentine's Day. Directly in front of the stage, I remember seeing my aunt Mimi in a red dress holding a flash camera. Mimi didn't speak a word of English. That night, Mimi stayed at our house in Yonkers. She told my parents she would get me ready for bed and pulled out two pink shower caps. She put one on her head and the other on mine. In the shower, the two of us sang the one verse of the song she could remember, complete with choreography we made up on the spot:

"L is for the way you look at me," we cupped our hands over our eyes like binoculars.

“O”, we arched our arms over our heads, “is for the only one I see”.

“V “is very, very,” we spun around and pointed finger guns at each other on “extraordinary!”

“E”, we put our arms out to the side, “is even more than”

Mimi could never remember the last four words, “anyone that you adore”, so she scatted the end,

“da da da da da da da! And Love!” and we ended there.

Love is all that I can give to you. Love is more than just a game for two. Two in love can make it. Take my heart, but please, don't break it. Love, it's made for me and you.

Every New Year's Eve, my family goes out to a restaurant to write down our resolutions. We store all of the resolutions in an old cigar box. The wood has warped from age and water, making it difficult to slide the wooden cover off. Inside we have resolutions dating to 2004, when I was nine and my sister was eleven. My sister resolved to tolerate me. I resolved to have a better relationship with my sister. Neither came true that year.

Christmas 2016. My mother, father, sister, and I went out to see a play at Lincoln Center. The play was excellent, but we arrived just time to see the show. Only my mother had eaten breakfast. The show ran long and we had just enough time to grab a snack before heading to midnight mass. I decided to stay in the car. My mother was grumbling the front passenger seat: "Why do we always have to be late to everything?" Her face pruned into a scowl. The least contagious smile I have ever seen. My sister and my father came back from the corner store in a rush. My father was in high spirits and was confident we could make it to mass on time. But it was downtown on Christmas eve and traffic was horrible.

He turned to my mother with a grin and said, "No need to frown, we'll make it." My father almost got into an accident turning one street corner with tires squealing. When the digital clock on the dash struck midnight, we were officially late.

My mother turned to my father and spat, "You couldn't do it."

My father had enough. "Does it feel good to say that?" he yelled, "Fuck this!"

He turned around and drove home. Christmas has been depressing ever since.

On a Saturday night in January 2018, my parents and I were walking in front of Madison Square Garden. A tall, thin black man in jeans and sneakers was crossing the street in a flood of pedestrians. In the middle of the street, the man stops walking and falls to the ground. His eyes are shut. Most people step over or around the man, looking back with concerned faces, as if their expressions alone were helpful, or not looking back at all. A man in a sports jersey stops to call the police. He is describing the location when a middle aged white woman kneels to feel the fallen man's pulse. Upon being touched, the man on the ground suddenly flails on the ground, kicking and screaming. The woman backs away with a look on her face that says, "Well, I tried." The light has changed and cars are beeping furiously for the man to get out of the street. This whole time, my family and I are standing still watching. Three police arrive, two men and a woman. All of them in uniform. I glance at their belts, heavy with holsters holding things. My mother turns away and says, "He's getting help. We can go now." My dad replies, "No, now is when we should be watching the most closely." He takes a step closer, although still at a safe distance from the police. The man on the ground has stopped screaming and flailing. The two policemen try to talk to the man with no response. They take hold of the man in an aggressive manner that makes my dad start, although he does not finish taking that step. The man opens his mouth in what looks like a silent scream, until he releases not sound but vomit. My parents and I walk away.

Let's say I have a cord. The cord is not connected to anything; it's just a long, limp line. I jerk the cord up. The cord dips down and then back up, repeating the undulating pattern called a wave, until the kinetic energy from my arm passes through the cord. When the cord ends, the energy from my arm does not disappear. A sound is produced. A sharp "ffpp" emanates from the end of the cord into the air. The slightly lower pitched "ff" is closely followed by the piercing "pp"; the sound of the cord's final, tiny dip down and then back up. The sound from the flick travels in waves through the air, to be picked up by hair cells that vibrate in my ears for me to hear it. The number of times something moves up and down to transfer energy is called frequency. Frequencies can be high or low; more waves means higher frequency and the other way around. Between 40,000 and 400 trillion vibrations per second, there are sound-waves that no human ear can hear. To us, it's soundless space. An imperceptible storm of waves surrounds us constantly. The surface of a lake in the rain

When you cut a plantain or banana plant, the severed stem bleeds a white sap. Once the sap dries, it turns black. If it gets on your clothes, nothing can get it out. You either discard the stained item or withstand looking like a calligrapher with shaky hands.

“You don’t come out of a slum walking tall the way they show in the movies,” my father told me. “You slink out. You’re furtive because you’re dreaming of getting out of that slum. The shame is powerful and takes years to get over. You can feed people, but that doesn’t heal them. Eating might give them some energy, but beware of giving energy to desperate people because they are going to use it.”

To have the plantain stain is to have the mark of people who are poor, people who come from poverty, or people were raised by people who came from poverty. A sunburned kind of poor that leaves dark moles like trampled gum on a city sidewalk.