LA LIBERTAD

by
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For my abuelas y abuelos:

Maria y Alicia, Carlos y Marcial
Contents

LANGUAGE LESSONS  1

CANADIAN CLUB  26

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG LATINA  50

VUELO, 1982  75
We have struggled against the walls of adobe,
But our heritage was a net made of holes.

—Icnocuícatl (Aztec elegy)
Language Lessons

Just after midnight on the first day of November, Luisa Anzaldua awoke to find winter had arrived in Winnipeg. It had slid through the bungalow’s thin insulation, past the old double-paned windows, and into her bedroom. Outside, the whipping snow made a hollow, lashing sound, but that wasn’t what stirred her from sleep. Nor was it the temperature inside, which had dropped so much, so quickly, that her breath formed faint swirls above her mouth. What woke her was her father’s voice.

“Neli, it’s just not possible,” he said in Spanish. Simplemente, no es posible. His baritone words marched in under Luisa’s bedroom door. They roused her from a dream about trick-or-treating with her cousin Neli, who had been wearing a zebra costume and asking neighbors not for candy, but for bones. “Huesos por favor!” she’d cried.

Now, Luisa couldn’t make out her cousin’s quiet response. All she picked up was the music of her voice, the intensity in her vowels. Neli’s Spanish was far richer than her own and even than that of Luisa’s parents’. After eleven years in this prairie city, they almost always spoke English.

“Maybe in a few years we’ll be in a better place to support you,” said Luisa’s father.

Her cousin spoke again and this time Luisa could hear clearly: “Please,” said Neli. “Let me stay.”

Those words were a weight in Luisa’s chest. The feeling came as a surprise. She’d always thought heartbreak was just an expression used on shows like Blossom, or in books about size-six twins from California. But there it was. In a previously unfelt spot
behind her ribs, something tore. Her parents couldn’t send Neli back there, to El Salvador, to that place where Luisa’s father said corpses were hung from telephone lines, where priests were shot dead during mass, where American soldiers had trained Salvadoran soldados how to be heartless by making them drink puppy blood, to that country from which her own parents had fled.

Luisa crawled quietly to the bottom of her bed, careful not to wake her little sister on the other side of the room. Miriam, who was five, had wrapped her arm, as always, around a blue stuffed Smurf. Her mouth was open enough to show her missing front teeth. Luisa lay on her stomach and folded her upper body over the edge of the bed, so she was partially upside down. Her head hung close to the door. Their room was very small. The sisters could lie in their beds, stretch their arms, and hook pinkies.

“If only things weren’t so difficult for us,” said her father. “Lo siento, Neli, but we told you before you came. That’s the way it works with a tourist visa."

“No, we can’t let you overstay,” said her mother.

Luisa sat up. The sweet smell of weeping seeped into the back of her nose and down her throat. Neli had told her many times that she’d never been happier than here in Canada. She said she couldn’t even imagine returning to El Salvador. It didn’t seem real. Luisa had been certain that Neli would live with them forever. She had made the family whole in a way Luisa had never experienced. They needed Neli.

Two months ago, when her mother told her that Neli was coming, Luisa had complained that there wasn’t enough room in their tiny house. What had actually worried
Luisa, though, was the prospect of a real Salvadoran coming to live with them. It was bad enough having parents from that small, strange land.

But everything changed when Neli arrived bearing gifts and greetings and gossip. The family rallied around her easy brightness. Instead of dining in front of the television, the family ate pupusas around the dinner table and reminisced. Luisa’s mom blushed with pleasure at stories about her own sisters, her own mother, and her grandmother, whom they called la Niña Paz though she was ninety years old. They laughed over nicknames of old friends from the barrio — La Peca, El Chucho, La Rana. They debated over which variety of chile would most quickly turn the nose into a faucet. They nodded in agreement about how feral dogs always knew when terrible things happened because they would howl long into the night. They sighed over the memory of her father’s father’s homemade coconut ice cream, and how Christmas was best spent at the beach in La Libertad. In those moments, Luisa felt an unfamiliar sense of abundance. Neli made El Salvador seem like a place that maybe, just maybe, had something good to offer. Without her, the country was a menacing shadow, a ghost hovering over their lives — never seen, never heard, only felt, like the coldest moment of a night.

Luisa crept out of her bed and opened the door as quietly as she could, lifting the doorknob to avoid that scratchy spot where the door scraped against its frame. Polite calls of goodnight and the shuffling of feet forced her to act quickly, without thinking. She stepped into the living room, opening her mouth wide in a fake yawn. For authenticity, she rubbed her eyes with her fists, and gave a small yelp. Her father was turning off the
lamps. Her mother was shaking out the large Jesus towel she used to protect the frayed leather couch.

“What were you guys talking about?” asked Luisa.

“What are you doing up?” her father replied.

“I was thirsty. Is something wrong?”

“Go get your water, quick,” said her mother. “And turn the light off when you finish.”

Luisa scurried into the kitchen where Neli was walking towards the stairs to her basement bedroom.

“Neli!” called Luisa, just as her cousin took the first step down. “¡Espérame! Quiero preguntarte algo.” Even then, in her panic, the Spanish words felt slimy and wrong on her tongue, like a glob of coughed up mucus. Speaking her first language always made her feel gross, absurd. Neli was the only person for whom she would endure it. “Que pasó? Are they sending you away?”

Neli stepped back onto the landing. A pained smile stuttered across her face. “No, my visa expires at the end of the month.” She looked tired, older than her eighteen years. Still, Luisa thought her beautiful. She loved Neli’s caramel eyes. They were so bright that Miriam once told Neli it looked like she had lights in her head. What Luisa loved most, though, was Neli’s hair. Thin ringlets like the springs inside retractable pens. Luisa often hoped that in seven years, when she was eighteen, she might have some of her cousin’s quiet beauty and good humor.

“It was only supposed to be a three-month visit,” said Neli. “You knew that.”
“But you said my parents were going to change their minds! You said they’d find
a way to keep you.” Luisa waited for Neli’s loud fluttering laugh, for the shift in
conversation. Neli had a gift for turning tension into silliness. Just the night before, Luisa
had requested pizza for dinner, Miriam screamed that she wanted tacos, and Neli jumped
in and said she wanted to hug a polar bear. Now Neli was silent. Luisa gripped the
counter, her fingertips flattening against the sink’s cold steel lip. “Neli, you said you were
going to stay here and study English. You said you were going to become a nurse or—”

“Buenas noches, Lulu.” Neli left for her room. The wooden stairs creaked under
her weight. Luisa counted each of her steps. At six, the halfway point, Neli stopped, and
called out, “Don’t forget, Luisa: animo!”

Luisa hurried over to the landing, stepping into a messy pile of the family’s shoes.
“What’s animo?” The word made her think of cartoons, of falling anvils and Babs Bunny.
Or maybe it was another word for animal. When Tabita came over she often said that
Spanish sounded to her like people simply added the letter o to English words. “What’s
animo?” repeated Luisa.

“We use it like a command,” said Neli raising her fist. “It means have spirit!
Energy! Animo!”

Luisa hesitated for a moment, then lifted her fist. She shivered in her flannel
pajamas, felt the odd twinge of her nipples hardening — a new sensation to accompany
her growing breasts. Hand above her head, she sensed the strength of the gesture, but
somehow it only left her feeling weak.
Neli let her arm flag as she turned into the even colder depths of the basement. Luisa was left alone on the landing, listening to the wind hurling snow, rattling the windows.

The next morning, a Saturday, the tips of the still-green grass poked through a new layer of white. Luisa rose early, though she hadn’t fallen asleep till well after three in the morning. Her mind had been too frenetic, busy devising ways to keep Neli. Now, the sound of the floorboards from her parents’ room meant that they were awake. Luisa threw on warm clothes and then barged into their bedroom, slipping on the wood in her wool socks. “You guys can’t send Neli away!” she said.

Her father, still under the covers, stirred, and her mother raised her head from the clothes hamper through which she’d been rifling.

“Lu, we can do nothing.” Her mother lifted a thick orange sweater.

Luisa stepped further into the room, tiptoeing over and around her father’s collections, until she found a patch of visible floor beside an elbow-high stack of *National Geographic* magazines and a pile of yellowing newspapers. Her father’s collections were taking over the house. It had started with his map obsession. He collected maps from all places, from all centuries. Some were framed, some were rolled, some had holes in the corners where students had tacked them to the backs of their doors. The framed maps were piled in the basement among furniture that he claimed was antique, though he’d never had it appraised. Her parents used to get into huge screaming matches over the new additions. But since Neli arrived, her father bought less stuff. Even
when he did bring home a corroded Buddha, or a ship in a cracked bottle, Luisa’s mother barely blinked.

“We just can’t do it,” said her mother. She tugged the sweater over her long straight hair, which she wore loose at home, and braided when she cleaned houses. The mottled knit made her breasts look like overripe oranges. “We just barely managed with Neli for the last months. But food is too expensive, everything is too expensive. We don’t have the money.” She placed her hand on the blanketed bulk that was Luisa’s father and shook him. “Tell her, Tomás.”

He made a vague humming sound, which Luisa took as an invitation to debate the matter. “We could save up!” She tried to move closer to her father’s side of the bed, but a collection of empty picture frames leaning against the wall barred her path. “You can buy used clothes for me, and Miriam can wear my old stuff.”

Her mother laughed softly. “I thought you said Canadian kids don’t wear used things.”

Luisa often explained to her parents how things were done in Canada, and she may have made the argument that nice outfits were a requirement. The truth, which she couldn’t tell anyone, was that she hoped trendy clothes — jeans with embroidered flowers, leotard tops, Doc Martens — might help make up for her brown skin, her witch’s nose, her dark little eyes. “I’m willing to give up some things,” she said. “Why aren’t you guys?”

“This has nothing to do with you.” Her mother began making her side of the bed.

“But this does have to do with me.”
Her mother pulled at the quilt, revealing her father’s hairy foot. “Go clean your room, Luisa.” She waived her hand towards the door. “I told you last weekend.”

“No!”

“Go!”

“No. Neli has to stay.”

“Luisa, she has to go. Listen to me: It costs money to support a person, and we don’t have enough. That’s it.”

“But you give ten percent of your money to the church every month. Ten percent!” her voice cracked. “You could give that to Neli instead. And you, dad, you could stop spending so much on junk.”

Her father peeled the blanket back from over his face but kept his eyes closed. Blindly, he reached for the night table and almost knocked over a tumbler full of water. He found his glasses under a crinkled map of the Great Lakes. “Listen to your mother,” he said. His eyes were still puffy from sleep behind their glass shields. “We’re done talking now.”

“No. We’re not.” Luisa stumbled across the room and slammed the door.

Everything, it seemed to Luisa, was about money. It didn’t make sense. If you loved someone enough, worried about them enough, you could find money. Maybe her father could take on more cars, her mother, more rich ladies’ houses. Maybe they could hold a garage sale. Her parents didn’t take these suggestions well, and Luisa decided they needed a nudge. While her mother stood in line at the bank later that morning, Luisa withdrew her life savings — $312 dollars— from the ATM. She had another ninety or so
at home in a wooden jewelry box. Some of it was birthday money, but a lot of it was from babysitting. Since she’d turned eleven, she’d been looking after the kids of two other Burnaby Road families. Once a week, usually on Saturday night, she’d arrive around seven, eat pizza or popcorn with the kids, entertain them with movies or games, tuck them into bed, and then watch comedy shows until midnight when the parents returned, much happier than when they’d left. They paid her three dollars an hour, sometimes five. She’d been immensely proud to stuff the bills into a deposit envelope and feed them to the machine. She loved its cranky whir as it updated her deposit book. Now when the machine returned the book to her with the new balance of $2.00 printed in faded ink, she tried not to let it bother her.

At home, the kitchen smelled of fried onions and garlic. Her parents were just setting the meal out on the counter. Together they’d prepared the family’s favorite brunch: huevos picados, salsa, platanos fritos, crema fresca, and what the girls always called mashed beans. Luisa tossed the envelope, now containing her jewelry box money, into the center of the table beside the jug of orange of juice. “Here. Four hundred dollars,” she said. “Now we can afford to keep Neli.”

“Take it back, Luisa,” said her father.

“Where’s Neli going?” asked Miriam. She wiped away the juice tattoos at the sides of her mouth.

“Nowhere,” said Luisa.

“Luisa, this money will only help for a few months—“

The creak of the stairs ended the conversation.
“Buenos dias,” said Neli. She moved as though nothing was wrong, filling her plate and sitting down at the table just as she did every Saturday morning. No one spoke much as they ate and Luisa saw the future before her. They would fall into their own isolated worlds again. Her parents not quite here, always somehow elsewhere. Stuff would steal her father, the church her mother. Over the years, Luisa’s mother had grown more and more devout. She didn’t want the girls to watch television anymore, accusing all the sitcoms of being the devil’s work, just like the radio and cards, Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog. Luisa would have no choice but to take refuge down the block at Tabita’s house, or hole herself up in her room doing homework, thinking about Alistair’s freckled nose. Only Miriam would travel between the family members, a little messenger, jumping from cloud to cloud.

After everyone put their plates in the sink, Luisa’s father picked up the envelope and put it in Luisa’s hand. She argued with him, holding it out, but he refused to take it. “It’s your money, Lu.” And so she placed the envelope on top of the television in the living room. Whenever her father watched hockey, or her mother watched telenovelas (God made an exception for these), they would be forced to remember.

Luisa went down to Neli’s room and suggested they brainstorm a plan, but Neli said that it was in God’s hands.

“Ay Luisa, no te preocupes. Everything will work out as He wills it.”

Luisa often wondered if being from a country named after The Savior made people from El Salvador extra religious. She was about to protest, but Neli stood up from
her desk and gave her a hug. She was only a few inches taller than Luisa and smelled faintly of baby oil.

“How about we draw instead?” said Neli, letting her go.

Neli was a talented artist and she’d inspired Luisa to pick up the practice. At first, Luisa had been afraid. Neli told her to draw something from her imagination; Luisa drew a circle with some squiggles inside and then panicked. Even at school, art class scared her. There were infinite possibilities, and each could reveal too much. Perhaps her drawing would show a lack of imagination, inferior natural abilities, or worse, like an inkblot test, it might expose everything that was wrong with her. She’d refused, but Neli coached her. She encouraged Luisa to sketch a shoebox, then a paper plane, then her own hand. She showed her how to let lines convey meaning. Thick for the bottom of things, fine for far away. Luisa had never before considered that the world was made of lines, that everything other than air had its own singular set.

“What do you think of this one?” Neli motioned towards a drawing on her desk. The living room upstairs: plants in every corner, a small square coffee table in the center, the couches protected by decorative towels from El Salvador. But Neli had added a layer of snow, like creamy cake icing, to all of it. “Does the nieve look more or less real here where I’ve added some blue?” She pointed to a drift of snow piled up against the entertainment unit.

Neli’s imagination so impressed Luisa that she decided to trust her for the moment. Maybe things would work out. She sat down at Neli’s desk and together they lost themselves in drawing. Luisa loved these moments. She was often too shy to come up with her own ideas and had to copy Neli’s, but this made her feel close to her cousin.
Like their minds were connected. Luisa especially enjoyed it when Neli would stop
drawing to ask her for an English translation. “¿Cómo se dice surrealista? ¿Congelado?
¿Inmóvil?”

Luisa wanted to confide in Tabita, ask for her help, but a sense of loyalty toward
her family made it difficult. They’d been best friends since Luisa’s family had moved to
Burnaby Road when she was five and Tabita six. Tabita knew almost everything about
Luisa except for a few little secrets, a few fool’s gold nuggets that she hadn’t yet shared.
Tabita never judged. Luisa had just now told her how yesterday Alistair asked if her
family ate sticky rice. “I have no idea what he meant,” said Luisa. “I told him that
sometimes the rice gets stuck to the bottom of the pot and he said, ‘Yummy!’ It was
really weird.” Luisa skipped the part about how that conversation made her feel like she
and her family had sprouted brightly colored feathers, ate worms for dinner.

“Doesn’t he always say your name wrong too?” Tabita asked.

They sat in Tabita’s room on her twin bed, their backs against the wall. Luisa’s
right leg rested on Tabita’s left, and both girls were staring into the dressing table mirror
beside the bed. The girls often spoke to the other’s mirror image. They’d recently become
aware of their decorative function in the world. Now it felt necessary to understand their
own expressions, the effect of themselves. Luisa nodded. “Yeah, he says it like lizard.”

“Or lesbian.”

Usually Luisa would correct people, stressing the soft s, the way her mom and dad
did. Luissssa. But she’d liked Alistair since the fourth grade when he’d come from
England, and so she let it slide.
“He’s a loser,” said Tabita. “You should’ve asked him if his balls get frostbite in the winter.” Tabita had started junior high that year and she’d become obsessed with boys and the concept of sex. Neither girl had seen a penis in real life, nor did they want to. What they had seen in pictures was enough to tell them that penises were hilarious, the unspoken joke of the world. Tabita furled and unfurled her index finger towards the mirror. Luisa couldn’t bring herself to laugh.

“My parents are sending Neli back,” she blurted out, “to their country.”

Tabita’s reflection blinked.

Luisa watched the surprise winch her friend’s face into an array of creases. Then Luisa looked at herself, noticed the sadness and shame darkening her cheeks.

Tabita broke the mirror’s hold first. “They can’t do that!” she said to Luisa’s real face. Tabita had also taken a deep liking to Neli, especially her animal imitations. She liked Neli so much that she had even started trying to speak Spanish so that she could join in when they drew, or played basketball in the back lane off the garage. Tabita hadn’t shown any talent for the language —It’s your turn-o! You’re so funny-o!” — but she tried. “Are they crazy?” she asked now. “I thought it was really dangerous there. Isn’t that why she came?”

Luisa took her leg back from over Tabita’s, and wrapped her arms around her knees. “I don’t know. My parents keep saying she only came for a visit. And they say we don’t have enough money to keep her, but I don’t think that’s true. And I’m confused why Neli always acted like she was staying.”

“She could move in with my family,” offered Tabita, who was an only child.
Luisa explained to her what little she knew about Neli’s visa. “I think the time ran out, and she can’t get a new one. My parents never explain anything to me.”

Tabita didn’t have any knowledge to add. Her mother was white, her father Métis, and her family had never travelled outside of Canada. “You could ask your teacher,” she suggested. “She probably knows what to do.”

All the students in the grade six class had to make a journal out of loose leaf and construction paper. They illustrated the front covers, and the pages were bound with plastic coils. Every week the journals bore witness to the children’s secrets. On Monday morning, in careful cursive, Luisa told Mrs. Buchanan how her beloved cousin had to leave because of a visa rule. “Mrs. Buchanan do you know how to change these rules? Is there something my family can do to let her stay?”

On Wednesday, Mrs. Buchanan wrote back that she was very sorry to hear about Neli. It was too bad. “But those are the country’s immigration laws, and they must be respected,” she wrote.

Luisa felt ashamed, as though she’d asked for help committing a crime. She tore the page out of her journal and shoved it to the back of her desk alongside a shriveled apple she’d forgotten about last month. At least Mrs. Buchanan offered a clue. Perhaps, she wrote, your parents might think to sponsor their niece.

The library was a ten-minute walk from the house, so her parents didn’t mind that Luisa often went alone. Normally, she’d collect a stack of books to check out, and then leaf through magazines at a table by the window. She’d flip through the pages till her
brain couldn’t absorb any more stories about embarrassing periods, not another picture of thin blonde girls with striped sweaters and big teeth. This time, she made straight for the counter. “I need to know how to sponsor someone who wants to live in Canada,” she told the librarian. Her school librarian hadn’t been very helpful on this matter, and neither had her father’s many volumes of encyclopedias. “It’s for my cousin,” said Luisa.

“I’m glad you came to me.” The librarian grinned when he spoke. His hairless head gleamed under the fluorescent lights and he very closely resembled Mr. Clean. “My wife’s family is from Poland. We sponsored her brother last year.” He told Luisa about the forms, the lawyer’s fees, and the fact that you had to prove you could support the person financially for several years. Luisa added several zeroes to her notes.

“Where is your cousin from?” he asked.

Luisa whispered, El Salvador. She was never sure if she should pronounce it the way her parents did, or the way people in Canada did.

“That was a nasty war there,” he said, with some sadness in his voice. “Good thing it’s over now.”

“It’s over?”

“Yes, of course. It ended last year. 1992”.

This seemed important. Why, she wondered, did her parents never tell her?

“Where can I learn more about the war?” she asked.

The librarian led her to a corner. Boxy white machines lined the wall like armored soldiers.
“These are microfiche readers. Let me pull you some film and you can read the news about your country. You can print out any articles you like too. It’s ten cents a copy.”

She told him that she didn’t bring any money, and he said the copies were on him. It took Luisa a while to figure out the machine. She felt so small in front of the screen—her feet didn’t even touch the carpet. The depressing headlines and frightful images didn’t help her understand the war, what the fight was about. They only made her feel trapped, feverish, like she needed to run outside without her parka.

Luisa printed out four pages: an article about El Salvador’s extreme murder rates, another about a young woman whose whole family had been disappeared, and one about gangs taking over the country. Her last printout was a photo of a jail. It was a shot of a cell not much bigger than one of bathroom stalls at school, but fourteen young men were crammed inside. They were packed so tightly their heads looked to be growing out of their neighbors’ shoulders. And there were even more men behind them — only their hands were visible, protruding from the darkness. The faces were wild looking, covered in tattoos. Words and patterns inked into their foreheads and across their noses. She could only look at the picture for a second at a time before she had to turn it over.

Her parents must have forgotten how bad El Salvador was. Even though her father had once told her a few things about bodies and puppies and priests, he’d never spoken about it again. Perhaps her parents had pushed their memories so far back in their minds that the memories had decomposed, like the apple Luisa had forgotten in her desk. Yesterday, when she’d pulled it out from behind her geometry set it was soft, and a fifth
its original size. Maybe her parents’ memories had shrunk. It would explain why they rarely called their relatives, not even their own parents.

Luisa delivered the pages to her parents the same way the tooth fairy pays out — under their pillows. She figured this would force them to read the articles. It might even scare them, give them nightmares. Her plan worked better than she’d hoped. Just as Luisa was about to step into the bathroom to brush her teeth, her mother caught her. She grabbed Luisa’s upper arm in a tight grip that burned with its rub. At first, Luisa was so startled she thought maybe there was a fire, but then her mother shook the pages at her. In a low, quiet voice, she said in Spanish: “Don’t you ever do this again. Do you understand? Don’t do this to your father.” Her mother took the pages and ripped them in half, shoved them under Luisa’s nose. “Get rid of these. Malcriada.” Luisa despised that word, its guttural sound coming from the same place in the mouth as a gag reflex. She didn’t know that in English it translated to: badly raised. To her it simply meant something like disgracefully rude, shamefully bad.

The next day Luisa got a 65 percent on a math test, her worst mark in an otherwise illustrious elementary school career. She went to the reading corner at the back of the classroom, curled up on the oversized pillow, and cried over the grade. Her anguish seemed to have no end. How could long division make her feel so bad?

Neli was scheduled to leave in only two weeks. Luisa tried to spend every minute she could with her, but these days her cousin spent more time in her bedroom with the door shut. Luisa suggested outings and activities, but Neli often declined. One Sunday,
Neli insisted that the girls go with her to the conservatory at the park for another drawing lesson. They sat on a bench beneath a towering banana plant and attempted to sketch the central fountain and its ring of falling water. Miriam didn’t have much patience for drawing. She squeezed herself between Neli and the bench’s backrest where she stood playing with Neli’s curls. Luisa pressed the edge of the charcoal stick against the grey colored paper, which was only slightly darker in shade than the clouds drifting above the glass roof.

“Try and capture the movement of the drops,” instructed Neli. “Sit down, you monkey,” she told Miriam.

An airplane roared overhead. Miriam followed it with her index finger. “I want to go on a plane,” she said.

“I can’t believe I’ve never been on a plane.” Luisa sighed. The humid air smelled of tropical earth and foreign flowers. “I was born on a plane. I should get free trips at least once a month. Even just once a year would be nice.”

“Well, I’ll be taking a plane in twelve days,” said Neli. “Back to San Salvador, back to my father’s house.” There was certainty in her voice, resignation too. It infuriated Luisa. Neli had barely tried to change her parents’ minds. Sometimes Luisa wondered if Neli even wanted to stay, if she was even sad about leaving her behind.

“But maybe it’s not too late,” Luisa said. “Maybe you could—”

“Sometimes,” cut in Neli, “we have to accept our fate.”

Miriام pushed a 6B pencil through the barrel of one of Neli’s ringlets.

“No! You should fight,” said Luisa. “Maybe if you fight they’ll listen.”
“Luisa always fights,” said Miriam, poking her sister’s shoulder with the pencil.

“Watch out, or I’ll start a fight with you.” Luisa swiped her charcoal against Miriam’s wrist, leaving a long black streak.

“I might be back sooner than you think,” said Neli. “I think I might have a way to get a job in the US. I could save money there and then move here. I will do that. You know what my mom used to say to me?” Neli’s eyes darkened as she spoke. Luisa recognized it as the look she got whenever she mentioned her mother, who’d been killed in an airstrike several years back. “She said a woman’s most important trait is her valentía. She said if she’d been more valiente she would have left El Salvador after your parents went.”

Miriam interrupted to ask what that word meant and Luisa felt grateful.

“It means doing difficult things, things that scare you. It’s like courage.”

“So,” said Luisa. “If your mom had been more… valiente, you would have grown up with us here in Winnipeg?”

“Maybe, maybe, maybe.” Neli ducked her head and gazed down at the sketchbook on her lap. She drew a wayward drop on the corner of the page. “Promise me, chicas, that you’ll keep speaking Spanish.”

Now it was Luisa’s turn to stare at her work.

“It’s very important,” Neli continued.

Miriam sat down, and Neli slid over until her corduroyed thigh pressed warmly against Luisa’s leg.

Luisa turned to Neli. “I hate Spanish. It’s annoying. I’ll only promise if you promise me you’ll try harder to stay. You know you could bring it up more. Or maybe
you could try and get a loan or something. Maybe you could ask your father back in El Salvador if he—”

“¡Cállate!” snapped Neli, her voice rising. “It’s done. I have a ticket. That’s enough. I’m getting tired of you always nagging me.”

As Miriam watched with wide, solemn eyes, Luisa swiveled away so that the bench armrest dug into her side and her leg lost contact with Neli’s. She felt frozen in place, like a thick uncaring layer of ice on a road. No one spoke. The water fountain splattered and rapped into the pond below. Luisa snapped the stick of charcoal into three pieces. She flicked them as hard as she could into the soil across from the bench, hoping a piece would fly out sideways and hit Neli in the face.

Miriam began to whine and Neli jumped to her feet. “Did I ever tell you girls about the boy in my tenth grade class who couldn’t stop farting?”

Miriam laughed as Neli proceeded to tell a crude tale of flatulence. Flatulence in church. Flatulence during exams. Flatulence at the market. Luisa watched stone-faced as her sister doubled over. When Miriam sat up, her face glowed red under its brown surface, like a nail in a fire.

The days passed quietly, quickly. The envelope of money atop the television collected a layer dust. Luisa spoke to Neli less and less. In the evenings, Luisa would do her homework in her room, instead of at the kitchen table, and when she didn’t have any, she’d run down the street five houses to Tabita’s. The more Luisa pretended her cousin was already gone, the less it hurt. No one seemed to notice, anyway. No one said anything about the change in their relationship, dramatic though it was. By the time
Neli’s last night arrived, Luisa had barely said a word to her for days. Her mother made lasagna and Caesar salad, Neli’s favorite meal. Luisa invited Tabita over and they spent the night playing board games in her room, only coming out long enough to eat dinner.

The next morning, Luisa sat on her bed, under the blankets. The tops of her toes pressed uncomfortably against the quilt. Miriam’s sheets were crumpled. Her Smurf lay on the floor, on the rug under which Luisa had once found a tangle of millipedes and almost thrown up. Outside the window, snowflakes floated gently down to frozen earth.

She could hear her family, behind the closed door, chatting and shuffling around. She could not bring herself to join them — the distance seemed too great, too treacherous. Instead, she waited.

Finally there came a knock. “We’re going to the airport now, Luisa,” said her father through the door. “Come say goodbye to your cousin.”

Luisa jumped out of bed and leaned her weight against the door.

“Come out Lu. Don’t be rude. Neli’s waiting to say goodbye to you.”

Luisa wanted to ask why her cousin didn’t come to her. She was the adult after all.

“Open the door, Luisa,” he said.

Luisa listened to her own shallow breathing and then to the scuff of her father’s slippers growing fainter with ever step. The next thing she heard was the screen door, which always closed with a slam. She waited for more slams, but after a minute there was only silence. Then it struck her with a force not unlike the time Miriam had jumped off the seesaw at the park and Luisa had crashed against the ground. Luisa yanked the door open so hard it bounced violently against the stopper. At the back door she stuffed her
feet into her big white Sorels, didn’t even put on a jacket. She tore outside and over the fresh footprints. But when she got to the driveway the family’s old, rusty two-door Honda was already gone.

Luisa didn’t hear from Neli for a very long while. In that time, she finished sixth grade, stained her underwear with blood, started junior high. She stopped speaking Spanish. It was no longer necessary and only made her think of things she wanted to forget. During those months, in the style typical of the Anzaldua family, there was very little communication. Other than a quick mention that Neli had made it safely back to El Salvador, Luisa knew nothing about her cousin’s new life. And she refused to ask after her either. Months later, Luisa finally heard from her cousin.

It was October, nearly a year since Neli had left. Luisa and Tabita were walking home from school, debating which was the better-sounding instrument: the saxophone or the flute. When they got to her house, Luisa opened the mailbox to find a letter with a California postmark addressed to her. She knew immediately from the beautiful slant of the penmanship that it was from Neli. Luisa didn’t want to share the letter with Tabita yet, so she stuffed it into the waistband of her jeans.

At home, Luisa sat down in her bedroom closet amidst dangling clothes. She left the sliding door open just enough to let her read her cousin’s words. It was a short letter. Neli said things had been worse than she’d expected at home, so she’d taken a chance and made her way to the US. Now she was working at a farm. She was still trying to get used to the heat. Her job was to cut lettuce, which grew short and full in long, neat rows. They didn’t get many breaks so she was considering wearing adult diapers! She missed
Luisa and she missed Miriam. She missed Canada. The US was not at all like Canada. Every night and every morning, she prayed that one day she’d return. She signed the letter in English: Hugs, Neli. Luisa held the letter to her chest, and wept into the hanging skirts and pant legs.

The letter Luisa wrote back was four foolscap pages long. Both sides. Her Spanish writing was that of a five-year-old’s, but she didn’t care. She mailed the letter on the weekend when her mother went to pay some bills at the post office. For days afterwards she checked the mailbox before and after school, and, sometimes, while she was supposed to be asleep. Meanwhile, she boycotted lettuce and all other field greens. Several weeks passed. Luisa decided that her letter must have gotten lost, and so she wrote another. Once again, she didn’t receive a response.

By March, Luisa only thought of Neli from time to time. There was a lot to distract her. At school, she was learning about Mesopotamia and algebra. She was memorizing the periodic table’s elements and the contents of cells — mitochondria, nuclei, ribosomes. At home, she was deeply uncomfortable in her skin, aware now of its desires. Around her pious mother she felt anxious. Her father had retreated to his collections and wasn’t there for her to feel anxious around.

The day Neli died, between rows of iceberg lettuce, Luisa had spent the afternoon happily learning about the maybe real, maybe mythical, Hanging Gardens of Babylon. For no reason at all, she’d imagined her cousin there, lounging against a marble column, eating peaches beside a shimmering pond. When Luisa came home from school, she dropped her backpack on the floor beside her boots. She walked into the living room and
found her mother curled up in a corner of the couch, holding a tissue to red, watery eyes. “What is it?” whispered Luisa. Perhaps her father had lost his job, or maybe there’d been a sad plot twist in a telenovela.

Her mother only nodded.

“Mami?”

Their eyes met for a brief moment before her mother fixed her gaze on the ceiling. She said that Neli’s father had called. An old Mexican man had found Neli lying in the field. He tried to give her water, but it was too late. Apparently, the same old man had already seen two other people die from the heat just this year.

“Don’t understand.” Luisa squinted at her mother. “What happened?”

“Falleció Neli.”

“What does that mean?”

“Se murió, mija.”

Murió. That word — its ugly vowels, its disgusting sound, its unthinkable meaning — made Luisa dizzy. She reached for the television. A warm aura of static electricity radiated from the screen into her hand. She lowered herself to sit. Then she began to shake. A strange cold crept under her skin. She lay down on her stomach, listening to her mother’s tears. Luisa stared at the unfinished floor, at the dirt trapped between the planks. Neli could be in those cracks — if not a stray hair, then maybe the cells of her skin. Luisa pressed her face to the cool floor and dug her index finger into a groove in the wood. When she lifted it, a thin gritty coat of dust clung to her flesh. She put it in her mouth.
That spring the icicles were bigger than ever. They formed along the eaves of the house, a row of clear wet daggers dripping into the piles of snow below. The biggest icicle — the length of a sword, the width of a head of lettuce — grew at the back corner of the house over the twiggy branches of the rose bush. Luisa lost her family, or they lost her, the way that icicle melted — in slow stinging drips. Soon there was a glacial lake in the middle of the living room. Her mother and Miriam on one side, her father on his own little island, and Luisa on the far shore.

After a while, Luisa couldn’t even remember how she got there. Perhaps she was dragged to the other side by forces greater than her family, or maybe she herself had plunged in willingly and swam away with shuddering muscles and contracted lungs. Now she sat alone, trembling. Would her parents not follow? Would they not at least call her name?

Luissssssa! Regresa.
Luissssssa! Nos ases falta.
Luissssssa! Te amamos.

Mudez.
Canadian Club

Luisa drew a large pale turd and gave it Beau’s sweet face. She did this out of love. Beside it she drew a smaller, browner turd with her features, her black hair. She gave both turds a set of skinny arms, and made them hold hands. She drew silly little hearts all around and inscribed the bottom of the drawing with the words, For Evs. In an uncharacteristic moment of emotional boldness, she added a diamond ring to her turd’s left hand. Beau sat beside her, furiously taking notes, as did everyone else in the room.

The presenter at the front was talking about drying beds for fecal sludge. He said he was very hopeful that human feces could soon be efficiently processed to produce energy; soon the millions living in Bangladesh’s slums could use excrement as a sustainable source of power. Luisa wasn’t really listening — she was only here to be near Beau.

She quietly ripped the page out of her sketchpad, folded it into an approximation of a heart, and poked his shoulder with its tip. He looked a little annoyed, but took it from her anyway, unfolded it. She couldn’t read his reaction because he only scanned the drawing for a second before grinning blankly, handing it back, and returning his attention to the presenter, who kept repeating the word excrement with renewed vigor. Excrement! Excrement!

Luisa and Beau were sitting in the last of row of tables at the back of the room, and no one could see her messing around. She put her lips to Beau’s ear and nudged him twice with her elbow. “This guy is the shit!” she whispered.

Beau moved his head in something like agreement, or as though he was shooing away a fly. His vague gesture left Luisa feeling stung. Of course he was just dismissing
her lame joke, but she couldn’t help feel that he was dismissing her. She crumpled up the
drawing and pushed it to the corner of their table.

There wasn’t much she wouldn’t do for Beau. They were in their fifth panel
session of a daylong conference about sanitation. His internship at an urban poverty
NGO required that he attend, but she’d only come along because it was their four-year
anniversary. She didn’t want to spend it alone in their sweltering, dank, barely furnished
apartment. She should’ve brought along some homework for her online class, but as
usual, she’d only remembered to bring her art supplies. So far today, before turning to
turds, Luisa had filled twenty pages of her sketchbook with ideas for paintings. The
common motif among them: women tied up tightly with scarves; elongated men with
airy, billowing limbs; and dark backgrounds offset with bright neon focal points. Her
ideas were inspired by her pervasive sense of instability, a feeling that had intensified
here in Dhaka.

She lifted her blue silk scarf up to her eyes and tried to tune out the presenter,
push away thoughts of human waste. Sometimes she regretted putting off her last
semester of college just to keep Beau company for the two months of his internship. She
regretted it most when she was bored at home, trying to teach herself how to cook, failing
at her efforts to demonstrate wifely potential. Her regret never lasted long. She could not
have let him go alone. What if they’d grown apart? What if he found somebody else,
some blonde Swedish intern whom he preferred? Luisa needed a guarantee that he would
love her forever. Then she could stop worrying.
The session finally ended. They made their way into the hallway and Luisa suggested they step outside for a quick walk.

“Oh, I don’t know.” He consulted the schedule he held in his hand. “We only have five minutes before the next session — The Future of Squat Toilets.”

She would’ve gone out by herself, but she was in an unfamiliar neighborhood, in an unpredictable city. Women who walked the city streets alone were in the minority. The sidewalks and streets here overflowed with men who often leered, sometimes even touched.

“Beau,” she said tightly, losing patience. “I can’t go alone.”

His face registered understanding. “Oh, right,” he said. “Sorry, I just get so wrapped up.”

They headed down the hall, which was full of conference attendees, mostly Bangladeshis but a few foreigners too. Luisa noticed how the locals watched Beau. He stuck out with his corn-syrup colored hair, his radiantly pink skin. He might as well have been wearing a sign that read — treat me differently, treat me better — because most people did. They moved out of his way deferentially and she followed behind in his regal wake, conscious of her inability as a brown woman to command respect in this world.

They were about to step outside, when a tall, dark-skinned, young man noticed Beau, and crossed right into their path. “Hello! I’m Tajmuddin.” He extended his hand towards Beau. “But you can call me Taj.”

Beau introduced himself and Luisa too.

Tired of being an appendage, she stuck out her hand forcefully. Taj seemed to notice her for the first time. He smiled, a nice smile that revealed dimples and a very
square chin, then took her hand. Actually, he took only the tips of her fingers. How she hated that power move — being forced into a dainty, less than full shake. But she couldn’t be picky. Many of the men here, the very strict Muslims, refused to shake her hand at all. By now, she’d grown used to the embarrassment of having her hand left in midair, rejected, as if she were contagious.

“Very good to meet you, Luisa” Taj said. He had a Bangladeshi accent, but there was something familiar about him that she couldn’t place. Perhaps it was his western clothing, his jeans and t-shirt.

Taj began talking about himself. He said he was a graphic designer for a microfinance NGO that did really good work, you know. He spoke in quick sentences as though he were afraid of being cut off. His words flowed like bubbles streaming out of a wand. “So what brings you guys here?” he asked. “Which NGO are you with? Do you work in development? Where are you from?” He didn’t pause long enough for them to answer. Abruptly, he turned to Luisa. “You I can guess: You’re Nepali. Sri Lankan? No. Indian!”

Back home in Winnipeg, the question was tricky enough. People there didn’t use hyphens to explain their identities, and even if they did, Luisa wouldn’t know what to say. She didn’t really know where she was from. El Salvador felt wrong, inaccurate. Could you really be from a place you’d never set foot in, even seen? She’d been a Canadian citizen since she was five, but that’s not what people wanted to hear. Though it was an innocent enough question, she always felt a little hurt. Why did she have to explain herself to strangers? No one cared that Beau’s father was French and his mother Ukrainian. Every time someone asked her to explain why she looked the way she did, it
seemed they were implying that she couldn’t be Canadian — like the default Canadian had to be white.

“I'm Ca — I’m Salvadoran — I was born on a plane over Mexi—” she sighed. “I’m Canadian.”

Just as she declared her official nationality, Beau said, “We're from Canada.” His voice was weary, as though he’d been asked to explain this every week of his life.

Taj’s eyes stretched wide. “I'm Canadian too!” He thumped his chest. “I've been dying to meet some fellow Canadians,” he continued. “Life is just better with Canadians around, isn’t it?”

Luisa couldn’t read his earnestness. Was he extremely naïve or just not that bright? Either way, it was endearing and made her laugh. “I guess, so,” she said. “I don’t really know any different.”

“So what city are you guys from?” he asked.

Beau squeezed Luisa’s arm— his signal that something was wrong. “We should get back,” he said. “The next panel is about to start.”

“Right,” said Luisa. “Good to meet you Taj.” She turned with Beau and immediately felt guilty for their rudeness, for bailing in mid-conversation. She looked back and gave Taj a wave and a smile. Their eyes met and he brightened.

“Hey!” he called out. “You guys should come to my place tomorrow for a Saturday night dinner. We’ll have turkey. What do you say?”

This time, Luisa grabbed Beau’s arm. “Come on, babe,” she coaxed.

Taj caught up with them. “How’s six o’clock?”

“We should check our—” said Beau.
“Sure,” said Luisa. “We don’t have anything planned for tomorrow night. We’d love to.”

“Great!” Taj pulled out a small flip phone from his pocket. “What are your numbers? I’ll text you my address. I live in Gulshan-1, not far from here. You know where that is, right? The nice area?”

They knew exactly where that was. They were going to that very neighborhood after the conference to celebrate their anniversary at an Indian restaurant called Sanjas. Luisa hoped it would be a memorable night. Perhaps, if she were lucky, Beau would propose. Of course, she’d say yes. She imagined that the Bangladeshi couples dining at nearby tables would applaud. The women in their elegant saris would admire her for landing a man with blonde curls. They’d envy her desirability, wonder what irresistible qualities she harbored beneath her skin. But first, Luisa had to endure one last session. She was dying to hear Beau’s thoughts on Taj, who was sitting in the front row, but Beau was even more rapt during this panel than the last. When it was over, she still didn’t get a chance to ask him either; he practically ran out of the conference room. She caught up with him outside in the sultry evening air.

“Sorry,” Beau said. “I just didn’t want to see that guy again.”

“Oh,” said Luisa.

The streets were, as usual, loud and frantic. A thick swarm of bicycle rickshaws, honking cars, and three-wheeled buggies zoomed around recklessly. Fruit stands and garbage and pedestrians and beggars filled the sidewalks, thwarting Luisa’s attempt to walk beside Beau. The crowds often forced them to walk single file. Luisa followed
closely behind him, making sure not to let anyone come between them. They’d barely rounded the corner of the block when a man in a suit and sunglasses walked by and casually jabbed his elbow into the side of Luisa’s left breast. She cried out sharply, but no one noticed, not even Beau.

This was the thing she hated most about Dhaka. The first few times it happened, she believed it was accidental. By now, she knew better. She rearranged her silk scarf protectively over her chest, like a shield, and scurried to keep up with Beau. She wished she could hold his hand. Maybe the men would respect her more if she were on the arm of a man, a white man at that. But Beau always said he didn’t want to push their western ways. As a general rule, couples in Dhaka didn’t touch each other in public. Why show affection for a loved one when you could touch a stranger’s breast instead?

They neared Gulshan-1. Glass buildings replaced dismal concrete apartments. There were banks and boutiques here, the odd café. Luisa relaxed a little, let her arms move freely at her sides. She thought about Taj, how forward he was, how strangely charming. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a man leaning in, and before she could react, it happened again. This time he was elderly; a long white beard flowed over his linen kurta. He was so sly, so quick, and yet Luisa saw it all as though in slow motion. He bent his arm into a clunky arrow then shot it straight into her chest. It was one jab too many. “Fucker!” she yelled. She pivoted around and punched whatever piece of him she could reach. She managed to clip the bottom left corner of his back. His kidney, she hoped. The man didn’t even flinch — he walked on, as though he and she hadn’t just hurt each other.

Beau turned to Luisa. “What happened?”
She stood anxiously in place, her forearm against her sore breast. She’d broken the rules. What if the man came back to stone her? What if he rallied a mob of men against her?

“I can’t believe these perverts.” Her voice shook. “That’s the second time it happened. On this walk.”

Beau looked around, but the culprit was lost in the constant stream of people coursing around them. He shrugged helplessly. “Why don’t you try keeping your elbows out?”

“I punched him.”

His pale eyebrows rose. “You hit him?”

At first Luisa thought he was impressed, but then she saw his disapproval. Beau didn’t believe in causing scenes.

“I didn’t mean to. It was a reflex,” she explained. “What else was I supposed to do? Let him get away with it?”

He gazed at her.

Luisa could not tell what he was thinking. “Well maybe you could try to help me?”

She was careful to modulate her voice so that she didn’t sound demanding.

“Sure,” he said. “Stay beside me. We’re almost there.”

The restaurant, a recommendation from Beau’s boss, was forgettable. Fluorescent lights, mostly empty tables, yellow velvet wallpaper, blaring televisions. Luisa and Beau couldn’t come up with any other way to celebrate their anniversary here in Dhaka. Everything was inexpensive, but they had so little to spend. They got by because food
was cheap, the NGO paid their rent, and Beau’s father had given him a thousand dollars for incidentals. They were both frugal and blessed with a knack for saving.

“He’s obnoxious,” said Beau. He bit into a two-foot-long dosa. Crumbs stuck to his lips.

“Who? The waiter?” Luisa sipped her yogurt soup, happy to eat someone else’s cooking for once. She’d not yet mastered that art. Her meals weren’t bad, but they weren’t tasty either.

“Obviously, Taj.” Beau swallowed his mouthful of food. “It would’ve been nice to talk about it before you committed us to going.”

Luisa sighed. She considered diffusing the tension with an apology, but Beau never wanted to do anything anymore. He didn’t used to be like this. At home he rarely got angry, was more likely to blush when upset than raise his voice. He’d always been game whether for skinny dipping at the lake, or dancing at a bar till four in the morning. Here, the city’s chaos made him irritable, the poverty exhausted him. He said being a foreigner was emotionally draining. He even insisted that they carry their passports whenever they went out. He would never admit it, but Luisa was certain he was preparing for the hopeful possibility that some storm or crisis would force them to leave the country in a hurry.

She too felt out of sorts, but in a totally different way. Not used to being surrounded by brown people, she found herself thinking more about her own skin color. She was surprised by a novel sense of camaraderie. She also thought more about El Salvador. She wondered if the majority of people there were as poor as here in Dhaka, if whole families with infants and toddlers slept on the bare sidewalks. And she thought much more about what it means to be a woman, about limits and expectations that she’d not noticed before.
“Well, no matter what,” said Luisa, “at least it’ll be an interesting night. Better than another BBC World Service marathon, or more shittily dubbed action movies.”

Beau took a drink from his water glass then made a rude face. “I wish they sold alcohol in this country.”

The prohibition bothered him much more than it did her, but she agreed anyway, trying to take a sympathetic tone. “Yeah. It would be fun to go out.”

If she could’ve made a wish right then, it would not have been for booze. She’d wish for a candle-lit restaurant where they could hold hands, intertwine their legs under the table, tease each other into the right mood. This didn’t feel like an anniversary. It didn’t feel like they were going to promise each other their futures.

That night, after they’d made love, after they’d exchanged small gifts (a fancy monogrammed pen for him, a beautiful purple leather drawing pad for her), after they’d wished each other one more happy anniversary, and Beau closed his eyes, Luisa lay awake. They didn’t have a real bed, just a mattress on the floor. She traced her fingers over cool tiles. The clatter of the streets below drifted in through the window along with the white light from the lampposts. Artificial moonlight. She could easily make out the electric fan that sat across from them on a wooden chair, blowing a tepid breeze over their uncovered bodies. It was too hot for a sheet.

“Beau?” she said. He was, as usual, curled loosely around her body. He didn’t say anything, but he cupped her right breast tighter in his hand. Beau often said that if her breasts hadn’t been here in Dhaka with him, he’d never get any sleep.
“Qu’est-que c’est?” he whispered in French, as he often did.

“Do you? Do you think….” She wanted to ask him if he thought they’d still be together in five years, if they’d ever get married. Or even, if he was sure about her. But she couldn’t. A stubborn part of her believed that the man should be the one to initiate any talk of long-term commitment. Or maybe, she was just afraid of what he might say.

“Never mind,” she said. “I forgot what I was going to ask.”

After a moment of silence, Beau spoke up. “What do you think Taj meant by Canadian? He sounded so local. He even looked local.”

Luisa wiggled out of Beau’s arms, a little surprised. She smiled at him. “That’s racist!”

Beau chuckled, rolled his eyes. His face was colorless in the dark.

“It is!” she cried. She climbed on top of him and stuck her tongue in his ear.

He grabbed her wrists. “Now you’re gonna get it!”

They wrestled, like puppies. Not enough to hurt, but enough for both to grunt and bark and sweat. She tested the strength of her arms and legs against his. He won every time. They were laughing, their bare torsos warm and slick. Her muscles burned; she was running out of fight. She tried to take a break and prop herself up on his chest, but her hand slipped across his damp skin, and her elbow jabbed his temple. He yelled in pain and clutched his head.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” said Luisa, still breathless, giggling. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he said rubbing his forehead. “That really fucking hurt.”

She tried to make it up to him, brought him ice, kissed the tender spot, apologized a few more times, but he wouldn’t accept any of it. She waited for him to calm down. She
ordered herself not to cry.

Finally, he said he was okay, that it was no big deal. “It’s still a little sore, but I’ll be fine.”

She moved to cuddle with him, but he said it was too hot.

In the sleepless hours of that night, Luisa thought about little turds holding hands, wearing diamond rings, pleading for love, afraid of ending up alone.

There was no water the next night. They were getting ready to go to Taj’s place, and they were about to take a shower together — one of the many joys they’d discovered of moving out of their parents’ homes and in with each other. Another was morning sex. Luisa preferred making love in the morning because they were quieter. They listened better to the subtleties of each other’s bodies. That morning, it had been like that. The elbow incident had been mostly forgotten. They’d spent the afternoon at Dhanmondi Park, ate a late lunch around the algae-covered lake. They sat on a bench and held hands covertly, as a woman in a pink sari collected plastic bottles from the café garbage can beside them. She carried a bulging bag, and had a baby strapped to her back. Luisa squeezed Beau’s hand tighter when a café employee ran out shouting, ripped the bag from the woman, and dumped her bottles into the lake. Luisa closed her eyes, pulled her scarf up over her face. The silk smelled of Dhaka’s grime and her own sweat. Beau wrapped his arm around her then, even though they were in public. “It’s okay, babe,” he said. “It’s okay.”

Now, Beau looked ready to rip the tap off the wall. “I’d better get the best job in Winnipeg after this shit.”
It happened a few times a week at random. They would turn on the faucet to find only a trickle, which slowed to a series of drops and swiftly vanished. The water usually came back later in the day, once the city sorted it out, but they had to be at Taj’s in just over an hour. Beau went to the kitchen to fetch the gallon of drinking water from the fridge, muttering to himself, “Three more weeks, three more weeks.” If they could survive Bangladesh, Luisa thought, they could survive anything.

They helped each other wash, cupping the cold water in their hands and pouring it over the other’s back, so as not to waste a precious drop. In the middle of their hand bath, he turned to kiss her, said he loved her. “I wouldn’t make it here without you.”

This is what confused Luisa the most — how they were so often like new lovers, even after four years, still struck with excitement for each other. Why had they stayed together this long unless it was right? There seemed to her nothing better than that admiring, almost bewildered, look in his eyes before he kissed her. Was there anything more? Could anyone else possibly love her like this?

A guard rolled a set of gates open and invited Beau and Luisa to come right in. The front doors of Taj’s house were circle-shaped, wooden, and at least ten feet tall. “Damn!” Beau said. “Tajmuddin is loaded.”

“You mean his dad is.” Luisa rang the doorbell. “Remember, he said he lived with him?”

“Whatever, same thing.”

Taj greeted them with hugs, old friends already. He handed each a thin glass full to the brim with red wine. “I hope you guys drink!” He winked at Luisa, actually winked.
“My father works for the government. You name it, we can get it.”

The house was stately and old-fashioned, like a tropical colonial palace. The floors were stone. Tall palms lined the walls. Ornately carved wooden furniture gleamed in the warm light of antique lamps. Luisa felt as though she’d been cut and pasted into an entirely different time and world.

They surely had central air conditioning. The house was freezing. Luisa was glad for the light cardigan and silk scarf she’d felt forced to wear — for the sake of modesty — over her tank top. Her shoulders had always seemed to her the most innocuous of joints, but in Dhaka they screamed scandal. Taj was wearing western clothes too — jeans and a white button-up shirt — so Luisa allowed herself to stop regretting that she hadn’t worn a kurta, as Beau had suggested.

Taj led them to leather chairs in the living room and told them the food would be right out. “We can just eat here on our laps. It’ll be laid-back casual, you know.”

A small woman, darker than Luisa and Taj, came out with a series of plates, which she laid out across the mahogany coffee table. Turkey, mashed sweet potatoes, stuffing, salad, scallops, calamari, and no Bengali dishes at all.

“It’s a Thanksgiving feast!” said Taj.

Luisa didn’t know what to make of his sincerity. “Everything looks amazing,” she said. “How did you pull it all together so quickly?”

“I slaved all day.” Taj forked a generous cut of white meat and draped it over a pile of calamari rings. He looked up and winked at Luisa again. Perhaps it was a twitch. “The girl does the cooking,” he continued in a serious tone. “In many ways life is a lot better here than it is in Toronto.” He pronounced it Toron-toe, unlike native Torontonians who
said Toro-no.

Luisa savored the calamari, which tasted extremely fresh. She’d had better turkey though. Beau’s mother was a master with meats, in fact.

They settled in, made their way through several helpings. Taj asked what they did at home, and Luisa explained between bites that she was one semester away from finishing her degree in marketing. “I don’t know why I’m doing it, though,” she said. “I hate it! I kind of just want to be an artist.” She laughed too loudly, a weak cover for her accidental honesty.

Beau told Taj about his plan to work in national government as a policy analyst. “I want to specialize in resource management,” he said.

“Oh, it's so good to be with Canadians!” announced Taj. “I can’t tell you how I've missed my people.”

“So you were born in Canada, Taj?” asked Beau.

Taj shook his head. “I moved there.”

“As a kid?”

“Yeah, I moved to Toronto with my mom when I was seventeen. I just came back to Bangladesh three months ago — I want to get dirty, you know?”

“Not really.” Luisa speared the last of the potatoes on her plate.

“How old are you guys?”

Mouths full of food, Luisa and Beau both said they were twenty-two.

Taj said that when he turned twenty-five last December, he was struck with a feeling that he needed to help the world. “It happens as you get older,” he said. “And as you know, the people here are so poor. I decided I wanted to be part of the change.”
Luisa couldn’t fault him for the sentiment. She had not at all gotten used to the poverty around her. It was overwhelming. It made her feel ashamed, as though it was her fault, as though her good fortune came at the expense of all the thin and hungry people. Back home in Winnipeg, she had a similar feeling whenever she saw Indigenous Canadians, heard the nasty things people said about them.

“But you know what drives me crazy?” said Taj. “The prejudice in this country. I have a degree from Canada, I have a fucking Canadian passport, but no one will hire me as a Canadian. They’ll only pay me a Bangladeshi salary. Where’s my big apartment, my living expenses? It’s basically racism, right?”

Though he was slightly out of tune, out of touch, out of something, Luisa noticed that he was also painfully vulnerable.

“Like, you know that party at the Canadian Club tonight?” Taj continued. “Every expat in town got invited except me.”

“Well, we weren’t invited either,” Beau pointed out.

Some pleasing thought crossed Taj’s face then, and in that moment Luisa saw a different version of herself in him. A failed version. She recalled the friends who’d told her they thought of her as white. “But I’m not white,” she would protest. “Not at all!” They always responded with a comment about how she seemed like she was, or she might as well have been. Luisa would be stuck pondering why she felt insulted and complimented at the same time.

“Guys,” continued Taj. “We should go to this party together tonight.” His voice was low and tense, barely containing his thrill. “We can just show up! I’m sure we can use our Canadian ways to get in.”
There was a long pause. The yellow light from the claw-footed lamp behind Taj revealed a reddish hue in his purposefully mussed up hair. The curved wood of the chair framed him: he looked like a boy king. “Do you guys happen to have your passports with you?” he asked.

“Actually, we do,” said Luisa. She smiled at Beau, ignoring his stunned, hesitant face.

“Awesome!” said Taj. “Get ready for an awesome night!”

“Ha,” said Beau. “Yeah, rejection is always a riot.”

Taj roared with laughter. “No worries, right?”

The street outside the Canadian Club was dark except for two large amber lights that shone down from the security booth. They stepped out of Taj’s father’s car and thanked the driver. Taj announced that he’d thought it through: the best course of action was to simply explain to the guard that they were all Canadian. He didn’t seem deterred by Beau’s skeptical look, or Luisa’s explicit doubt.

“We can do this,” he said. “Let’s go Team Canada!”

There was no line. The three of them walked straight up to the booth. The Bangladeshi security guard greeted them with a scowl.

“Assalam alaikum,” he said, nodding his large face.

The trio responded together in kind. “Wa alaikum salaam.”

The guard asked them for their names, his finger poised over the list on his clipboard.

Taj explained in English that they were not on the guest list. “But,” he added. “We
are Canadian.”

“You? Canadian?” There was a note of obvious, perhaps exaggerated, disbelief in the guard’s voice.

Taj frowned and said something in Bengali.

The guard’s eyes half closed, as if to keep out the same story he’d heard countless times.

“Fine,” said Taj, switching back to English. “I can show you my passport.” He stepped to the side and reached into his pocket, just as the guard pointed his finger at Luisa.

“You Canadian too?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” said Luisa, bracing herself for the insult. “Do you want to see my passport too?”

Taj interrupted, slamming the small navy book down on the counter. He jabbed his finger beside the word: Nationality. “See! Canadian.” In terrible French he added, “Canadien!” It sounded more like Can-uh-dee-in.

“Calm down, guys,” said Beau. “Let me talk to him.”

Luisa and Taj stepped back. They couldn’t make out what Beau was saying, but Luisa caught his ingratiating tone. He used it at restaurants sometimes when he sent back something that wasn’t cooked well, or on the phone with any kind of customer service agent. She watched, with Taj at her side, as Beau threw his head back in a loud laugh.

The guard laughed too. Then looking over at Luisa and Taj, he pointed at Beau. “He is Canadian!” said the guard. He swept his hand before him as though he were scooping the three of them up. “Go, go go, Canadians. You all go.”
Beau grinned back at them as he led the way into the club.

A giant red maple leaf was painted on the bottom of the club's outdoor pool. Little golden lights looped over the high surrounding walls and reflected on the surface of the still water. Nobody swam. Luisa and Beau sat together in a quiet corner of the patio, drinking Caesars quickly and silently. Beau said the music wasn’t good enough to make him dance. He said he was getting a headache, and conspicuously rubbed his temple. Taj had left them almost immediately to mingle. They watched him now as he circulated the terrace, around the dancing couples, and through the standing groups. Luisa took off her cardigan, draped it on the chair, let her bare arms into the world again. The warm night air felt soft and unfamiliar on her skin.

“He reminds me of a trapped insect,” said Beau. “Buzzing around.”

She sighed. “Oh yeah?” She was growing tired of his disdain for both Taj and the evening.

He reached for her hand now, kissed her palm. “Is everything okay?”

Luisa said she was fine. They both leaned back on their reclining chairs. She lazily placed her hand on Beau’s stomach, played with the dip of his navel. She didn’t want him to think she was upset, but, without a doubt, something was wrong. A strange, uncomfortable energy pumped through her, made her want to do something crazy — scream, smash her cocktail glass against a wall, jump into the pool fully clothed, sing the Canadian anthem in a chipmunk voice, impersonate an alien.

Taj swung by just then with a new friend and another round of drinks. The Canadian Club was somehow also exempt from the country’s prohibition laws. Luisa and
Beau stood as Taj introduced the slight young woman at his side. Her name was Parveen and she was a communications officer at UNICEF.

“Parveen,” said Taj, “these are my countrymen: Beau and Luisa.”

They all greeted each other, twisted off their blue beer caps, and clinked their bottles together. Taj beamed. Without a hint of irony, he said that this was one of the best nights of his life. He loved the music, the people, the beer. “I can’t tell you guys how much I’ve missed my Molson Canadian Draught!”

Parveen said, “Beau, you must feel the same? About the beer?”

“Actually, no,” he replied. “Molson is horse piss. I’m more of a Fin Du Monde kind of guy.”

His shameless churlishness embarrassed Luisa. She turned to Parveen, asked her about her work. The group fell into a lively discussion about global development. Luisa mostly listened as Taj and Parveen talked about the Global North’s responsibility to help lift countries out of poverty. Then Parveen paused. She looked directly at Luisa and asked her how she liked Bangladesh.

“Oh, I think it’s beautiful here,” Luisa said. It was her stock answer. “But I really miss home,” she added. “We really miss home.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” said Taj, winking at Luisa yet again. “I miss home too. Bangladesh is a nightmare! That’s why it’s so good to have you two here. We Canadians really need to look out for each other.”

Beau groaned quietly and began to laugh.

“What?” asked Taj. “Is there a problem?”

Beau raised his beer. “Nope, I’m good.”
Taj continued talking about Canada, how he missed everything, even the air, especially the air. “Guys, sometimes I get so homesick that I —”

“Alright,” interrupted Beau. “Do you really think you know what we mean about missing Canada?”

Luisa saw Parveen’s eyes widen at Beau’s aggressive tone.

“Why wouldn’t I?” Taj said.

“Come on,” said Beau. “Do you even have family there?”

Luisa held up her hand. “Wait a sec. What’s that got to do with anything? I don’t have much family in Canada.”

“That’s different Lou, you were basically born there. Taj lived there for like maybe eight years—”

“Stop it, Beau.” She’d never before seen him so sharp-edged, so scornful and imperious.

“No, it’s fine,” said Taj. “Let him speak. I’d like to hear why he thinks I’m not Canadian enough.”

“I’ll tell you,” said Beau. “It’s because you can’t stop talking about it.”

Luisa grabbed Beau by the arm, yanked him away. “What’s wrong with you?” she hissed. “Taj, I’m sorry, he’s had too much to drink—”

Beau shook her off. “Don’t apologize for me. I haven’t had too much to drink. I just think Taj should know that this act of his isn’t fooling anyone. Having a passport doesn’t automatically make you Canadian.”

That uncomfortable energy churning through Luisa hardened. Without thinking, she stepped away from Beau, closer to Taj and Parveen.
“Tell me, Beau,” said Taj. “What makes someone Canadian?”

“Well, Taj, if you have to say it over and over, if you have to prove to people that you are, you’re probably not.”

Luisa could not quite believe what was happening. She took another step back away from Beau. How much of her life had she spent trying to prove that she was Canadian — answering the question of where she was actually from, explaining the story of her family’s migration, making clear that she’d come to Canada as a baby, acting like she had no allegiance to anywhere other than the Great White North? And why did she always have to do this? A Jewish guy in high school once told Luisa her skin was the color of shit. She’d spent her whole life trying to prove she was Canadian because of the shape of her nose, because of her black hair, because of her turd-colored skin.

Taj laughed dryly. “Thank you very much for your useless explanation of what it means to be Canadian. I just love hearing racist people think out loud.” He cut through their circle, walking away without another word.

“That wasn’t racism,” said Beau to Parveen.

Parveen nodded politely, excused herself, and walked away.

Beau turned to Luisa. “I’m not racist. You know that, babe. I just think he’s annoying.”

She didn’t know exactly what Beau was thinking, but she realized right then that she no longer cared. Four years they’d been together and she still didn’t truly know him. What else was he hiding? It struck her now that she often felt like she wasn’t enough for him. How many more years would she endure that feeling, waiting for his approval, for his certainty? She looked down at her hands. The Bengali sun had deepened the contrast
between her skin and her palms. Some might say the sun had made the contrast worse. Maybe Beau would say that.

He reached for her shoulder. “Let’s go home, Lou.”

She looked up at him. “I’m going to stay,” she said. “But you can go.”

Later that night Luisa sat alone, sipping soda water with lime by the pool. She was thinking about Beau, about the Indigenous people of Canada, about their brown skin, their black hair. They’d never been treated like Canadians. It was funny, Luisa thought, because most people knew that the name for Canada came from the Iroquois word for village. What if the Indigenous people were actually more Canadian than everyone else?

Taj sat down next to Luisa in the chair that Beau had earlier occupied.

She put away her thoughts. “I’m sorry about, Beau,” she said. She told him it was terrible the way Beau had acted. She said it was unforgivable. Taj didn’t respond. He looked deflated. She wanted to tell him that of course he was Canadian, but she no longer knew what the word meant.

The crowd was thinning out. The music had mellowed. Some sleepy singer-songwriter, or another, crooned over the speakers. Taj regarded her intently. “You look so Bangladeshi,” he said. He sounded surprised, astonished by nature’s mischievous ways. “We could be related.”

Luisa shook her head. Laughed. It sounded like she was crying. “You know the first people of the Americas crossed the Bering Strait from Asia,” she said. “Maybe we are kind of related. Maybe I am kind of from here.”
She couldn’t get over the dark peppercorn color of his nipples. She marveled at the swirls of black hair that covered his stomach muscles. She felt satiated by the rich color of his skin, nourished even, like when she ate cashews or other fatty nuts. They were kissing in the back of the terrace, around the corner from the pool, in the storage area next to the cleaning supplies. She’d unbuttoned his shirt and his pants, though she was still fully dressed, her scarf draped safely over her chest.

With every press of their lips, her relationship with Beau cracked a little more. She was breaking it into tiny pieces. It didn’t feel good. Taj’s rough tongue was nothing like Beau’s. She didn’t like his smell the way she liked Beau’s. Whenever Taj touched her chest, she pulled away. Who knows how far she would’ve taken it, how long she would’ve lasted, if a maintenance worker hadn’t jingled his keys at them. Tsk tsk tsk.

Luisa panicked. She ran back to the party, dazedly found a chair, dropped her shameful weight onto it. The air smelled like rain. A strong breeze rippled the water. The giant red maple leaf painted at the bottom of the pool looked to be folding slightly over itself, so that sometimes it was missing one of its points, sometimes its stem. Taj sauntered over, said a very courteous, almost formal, goodnight. Luisa didn’t move, didn’t even look him in the eye. She sat completely still until the first raindrops began to fall and a gust of wind lifted the end of her scarf. It fluttered in the air for a moment, and then whipped across her face, smothering her in sour silk.
Young Woman with Plant (2011)

Luisa wakes up to find the plant she calls the rainforest plant — the soft, blurry-looking one in the turquoise pot — has grown five inches overnight. She stares and stares at it.

Finally, she whispers, “This explains everything.”

Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 1 (2008)

Luisa and Andrew lie naked in bed watching a lion chase a zebra. Sir David Attenborough says sometimes the smaller, more amusingly colored mammal gets away.

“Pass us the tea, will ya babe?” says Andrew.

Luisa wonders what she’s doing here in Birmingham, who she’s become. Andrew has told her that part of why he likes her so much is that her skin reminds him of milky tea — his favorite drink. She reaches for the mug on the bedside table, hands it to him, tells herself that Yoko probably felt like this.

Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 2

Luisa crosses her arms over her bare breasts. “I’m not going to be a hairdresser,” she says.

“Why, not?” Andrew asks. “It’s a good job, yeah. You can find work anywhere. You could leave Canada, come move here, be wiv me.” Outside his window the sky glows grey — a prolonged flash of astonishment.
“Well, if you like the job so much, why don’t you be a hairdresser?”

“Cha! I’m a welder, I am. I make sixty thousand quid a year.”

Luisa pulls the duvet up to her chin.

“My mum is a hairdresser,” says Andrew. “She makes good money, yeah.”

“What about a nanny? I reckon you’d be good with kids.”

“Let me be clear: I’m applying to masters programs. I’m not going to be a hairdresser or a nanny.”

“You saying you too good for it then?”

She looks directly into his eyes. “No, she says. “That’s not what I’m saying.”

*Cleaning Lady with Sponge (1988)*

Luisa sits with her father and little sister at a food court table in Winnipeg. It is after hours, the mall is closed. Apart from security, they’re the only ones there. They’re waiting for Luisa’s mother to finish cleaning the Chinese food stall. The counter door is open, and Luisa can see through to the kitchen where her mother kneels beside a black plastic bucket. Her mother scrubs grease from the floor with a large, pale yellow sponge. There are brown stains across the front of her white t-shirt, and the collar is nearly translucent with her sweat. Luisa wishes they could take her home right now. At home, her mother makes decisions and wears clean clothes. At home, her mother and father split chores. At home, it is only her daughters’ messes that her mother cleans. At home, her mother uses a mop.
They share one pillow. Andrew runs his palm up and down Luisa’s arm. There is something reverential in his touch that makes her feel like she’s made of gold.

“Well, babe?” he whispers. “How we goin’ to stay together then?”

She didn’t know they were together. She’s only visiting him for two days. Then she’ll return to London to finish her vacation. She came for the galleries and museums. He is a bonus. Other than a few video calls, she hasn’t seen him in six months. Not since the fruit farm in Australia where they met. They’d spent a month picking warm peaches, smoking joints, having sex in the orchards.

“Let’s not worry about it right now,” says Luisa. She slips her hand down the front of his pants.

It’s the part of him that keeps them together.

“Now this is a propa English curry house,” says Andrew. They stand in the foyer of the restaurant waiting to be seated. The pluck and hum of sitar music reverberates off the wine-colored walls. “Nice place for our first date, innit?”

“It’s very nice.” Luisa looks around at the busy restaurant. Electric candles glow from the chandeliers. The tables are covered in white cloth and topped with small fishbowl vases that hold burgundy mums. “It had to be special though,” she says.

“Watcha mean?”

“You know this is the first time we’re eating a real meal together?”

“Nah, shut it.” He gives her a playful shove.
“It’s true!” She laughs. “We never sat down to a meal at the farm.”

The maître d’ approaches and leads them past the other diners to the back of the restaurant. Luisa sits first, while Andrew stands beside his chair, rolling up his sleeves.

“Well, order whateva you like,” says Andrew. “I’ve been looking forward to treatin’ my special visitor.”

Then, without seeming to notice what he’s doing, he grabs at his groin, gives himself a good tug.

Luisa blinks fast, as though her lashes could erase what she just saw.

**Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 4**

She orders shahi paneer, he orders chicken korma. The food arrives in hammered brass bowls with handles. Andrew pulls his bowl very close to him, so that it sits at the edge of the table. He grips a fork in his fist and hunches forward till his face hovers directly over his food.

Luisa hasn’t even placed her napkin on her lap, but already he’s shoveling overloaded forkfuls into his mouth.

“Hungry?” she says.

“Famished, I am.”

Luisa can barely stand to look at him. She pretends to find the naan fascinating. So big! So perfectly teardrop-shaped! She rips it in half, the same way she would a hot tortilla, sets it on the side of her plate. She reaches for her food, comments on the bowls.

“The brass is really nice, isn’t it?”
Andrew inhales another bite then looks up. “Sorry, babe,” he says. White chunks of chicken bounce across his tongue. “I don’t converse much when I dine. That’s just how we builders are, yeah.”

“Ohkay.” She says it too quickly, too brightly. “That’s fine.”

They eat the rest of their meal in silence — but who is she to judge?

*Stay for Dinner (1992)*

A stained glass lampshade hangs over the dining room table. French doors lead outside to a hot tub. Luisa picks up a sleek wooden shaker and jiggles it over her mashed potatoes. Nothing comes out.

She turns to Charlene. “Where are the holes?”

Charlene’s mother says, “It’s pepper, dear.”

“Yes,” says Luisa. She turns the shaker again, taps it against her palm. “Is it broken?”

Charlene plucks the mill from Luisa’s hand, turns it right side up, holds the bottom and twists the top. “Like this,” she says in a strange tone.

Luisa forces a grin and fixes her gaze on the black flakes dotting her plate.

*Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 5*

“This is where I grew up,” Andrew tells Luisa. He points to a two-story brick townhouse on the other side of the street.

She cannot distinguish it from any of the other homes in the long, winding row. They even have the same white lace curtains. “I like it,” she says.
“I’d take you inside, but my mum’s boyfriend is over. There’s his car.”

“That’s okay.” She doesn’t want to meet his mother. “It’s nice just to see it. The brick is so fancy.”

He looks hurt. “You’re taking the piss. This is council housing, yeah.”

“I’m serious,” she says. “The brick is so pretty.”

“I bet you grew up in a nice place in Canada, didn’t you?”

“Sort of,” she shrugs. “It was a nice neighborhood, but our house was the smallest, ugliest, most run-down one for blocks. Yours is much nicer.” A single raindrop smacks Luisa’s cheek. Another lands on her forehead.

Andrew asks if she brought a brolly in her purse.

She turns her palms upwards. “No, but I think we’ll be okay.”

They barely walk a block when the low, charcoal sky opens up. He grabs her hand and they jog down the street to a small park with a playground. They climb up the rope ladder, take shelter under a little triangle-shaped house, sit on the dry wooden slats. Luisa wipes the water from her face. Andrew doesn’t bother. Drops roll down his fair cheeks.

Out of nowhere, Andrew leans over and spits. His aim is off and the saliva doesn’t go through the gap in the slats, but lands on top the wood. Tiny bubbles float on the surface of his spit. Once, in a thrift-store parking lot, Luisa spat and her father scolded her, said it was crude. She never spat in public again. Now she turns to Andrew. “Ew,” she says. “Why’d you do that?”

“I were just freshnin’ up, I was,” he replies.

Usually the way he spoke made up for his peculiarities. She felt a thrill when he shortened words, inverted sentence structure. She thought him sexy when he ignored
grammar rules. But now, with his spit pooling between them, it occurs to her that maybe he doesn’t know how to speak any other way.

Burberry

Luisa and Andrew sit quietly, listening to the rain rattling the playground’s pebbles. A young man and his pit bull walk by. They’re wearing matching beige plaid outfits. The man’s trench coat, rubber boots, and umbrella are all beige and plaid. The dog also wears a beige plaid raincoat and four beige plaid booties. There is a heavy gold chain draped over the man’s chest, and a heavy gold collar tied around the dog’s neck.

“Chav,” says Andrew.

“What’s that?” Luisa asks.

Andrew points at the man. “That.”

Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 6

They take a black cab back to Andrew’s flat. Luisa nods whenever he points to one of his favorite neighborhood landmarks. “That pub there is four hundred years old,” he says. “I’ve been going there since I was a wee boy.”

The taxi stops at a red light and a group of young South Asian men cross the street.

“This place is barely English anymore,” says Andrew. “They’re alright, but they take all our jobs. That’s what wrong with this place. England’s a mess. Makes me sad. Know what I mean?”
Of all the things Luisa knows, she does not know why, or even how, he could say this to her. She cannot think of an adequate response. She does the easier thing: “It must be very hard for you,” she says.

Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 7

It is their last morning together. After they finish in bed, they hold each other. She’ll miss his cut-sapphire eyes, but not his casual racism. She’ll miss the way he makes her laugh, but not how little he seems to know her. More than anything, she’ll miss feeling desired.

“Let us take a picture of you,” says Andrew. “Just one, yeah?”

“For a million bucks, sure.” She likes him enough for a fling, but not enough to give him her naked likeness. It’ll probably end up on the internet.

“You’re good lookin’ enough to be a Page 3 girl. Really, I think you could be.”

She recalls with disgust the topless young women that appear daily in his favorite newspaper. “Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“’Course it is.”

Luisa squeezes her eyes shut. Their little arrangement doesn’t make sense. It had never made sense. Perhaps it was always just a bizarre experiment to find out how little she had to understand a partner, how much she could stand to be misunderstood.

“What, you wouldn’t want to be a Page 3 girl?”

She shifts onto her other side, looks at the DVDs that fill his bookcase. Since they’d met, she’d been trying to believe that it could work. They both grew up without much money. Neither of their parents were professionals. She thought they might connect
at a deeper level, but she sees now that they would never approach the world in the same way. It was the difference between taking *The Guardian* to Hyde Park on a Sunday morning, and suggesting your lover bare her breasts in *The Sun*. A distinction that, apparently, wasn’t tied to your parents’ salaries, or to your own.

“You mad at me?” Andrew rests his warm hand on her head. “What’s wrong?”

She looks over to the drawing she’d given him that hung on his wall. A pencil sketch of a dandelion — *Taraxacum* — highlighted in watercolors. “Nothing’s wrong,” she says, trying to laugh.

*Young Latina with Young Englishman No. 8*

He says he bought her something.

“You bought me something?” she replies. “You shouldn’t have. I didn’t get you anything.”

“You stopped here to see me, yeah.” He gets out of bed, goes to the oak chest. “I didn’t think I was going to convince you to do that.” From the top drawer he pulls a small package wrapped neatly in polka dot paper. “You probably won’t like it,” he says. “That’s okay, though. I can handle it.”

She tries to preserve the paper, but tears it despite her care. Another package lies inside wrapped in a strip of silk printed with Japanese cherry blossoms. Luisa unties the ribbon and rolls out the material to find a set of three wooden brushes with long horsehair bristles.

“These are beautiful, Andrew!” She slides one out, and holds it to her nose. The wood smells sweet.
“For your art degree,” he says. “Your master’s.”

“Thank you, Andrew,” she says. “These are perfect. I love them.” Outside, a fire truck wails, and Luisa can’t quite make out his response, though she thinks he hears him say — And I love you. She nestles the brush back into its silk pocket and hopes the moment has passed.

“I’ve never loved anyone before,” says Andrew. “But this feels good.”

“Doesn’t it,” she says. “Doesn’t it?”

_Vancouver (2009)_

On her first day of grad school, Luisa packs her art supplies into her tote bag and boards the 99B. She makes sure to take a window seat so she can admire her new home. There is green everywhere: giant firs, drooping vines, gnarled arbutus, lush bushes. Large wispy clouds cling to the humped mountains. When the bus passes a wide avenue, Luisa can see the glass surface of the bay. The bus motors up a hill, the engine straining against the long ascent. They reach the top and Luisa sees the whole of the city — treetops, skyscrapers, slanted roofs, ocean waters, and a staggering blend of cloud and peak. It is more beauty than she’s ever expected.

_MFA No. 1 (2009)_

Oleanna doesn’t seem the type to take a student like Luisa under her wing. A once-famous sculptor, she refuses to be called professor. She wears silver leather boots with upturned toes that make her look elfish. Luisa stares at those boots as Oleanna critiques her painting, which is spread across the floor. The studio is silent while Oleanna
prowls around the 12 x 10 ft. canvas. The painting is of three suburban houses. Two are made of wood. The middle one is made of leaves. It is, in fact, an oversized blackberry bush carved into the shape of a house. It’s part of a series Luisa calls *Introduced Species*.

Oleanna stops prowling. “The aim of art is not to mimic life.” She points to the foreshortened branches at the bottom of the canvas. “This piece is missing *gesture*. Does everyone see that?”

The six other students nod, some more eagerly than others.

“Do *you* see, Luisa? Look at Danica’s piece — do you see how gestural it is?

Luisa glances at the drawing taped to the wall. It looks cartoonish to her, but she nods dutifully.

“No,” says Oleanna. “You are not seeing. You do not *see*.”

A month into the program and Luisa still doesn’t have sight, let alone vision.

*MFA No. 2*

There was a right way to be, and Luisa didn’t know what it was. It only made sense that she would be kicked out. She feels queasy as she sits in Oleanna’s office.

“Luisa, you may have heard that I’m writing a book about the role of compassion in 20th century art?” Oleanna straightens a pile of books on her bean-shaped desk. “Now, I don’t normally do this, but I’d like to take on a student researcher for this project.” She explains the book’s concept, how Luisa would need to read articles from a bibliography she’d already prepared, how Luisa would need to write a précis for each. “How would you like that?”
Luisa has never heard the word précis before, but as Andrew used to tell her, chance is a fine thing. “I’d like it very much,” she says. She doesn’t ask why Oleanna chose her — she doesn’t want to hear the answer.

MFA No. 3

Luisa’s marketing major and visual art minor didn’t prepare her for this type of reading. Even alone, she’s too embarrassed to try to pronounce Nietzsche’s name aloud. She’s never heard of Kant or Foucault. She sits in an armchair, in her boarding house room, feeling like she can’t get enough air into her lungs.

The MFA program is studio based and she lots of time. The problem isn’t time. The problem is that she’s an idiot. An ignoramus. She knows nothing. For the first month of reading, she’s convinced that she spends more time flipping through the dictionary than doing any research. She berates herself for the year she spent backpacking through Australia. She should’ve been undertaking a program of self-directed study, as Rob, the conceptual video artist, had done. In the hallway before class one day, he told her that after his undergraduate degree he’d put a “multi-year moratorium” on all writers other than the Great Thinkers. He stroked his smooth, pointy chin and very seriously said, “It made me who I am today.”

MFA No. 4

Mondays, Luisa visits Oleanna’s office to hand deliver her précis. (She’s learned the hard way — through a sharp correction from Oleanna — that the plural is not précisis.) Eastern-influenced jazz plays from the professor’s computer.
“Luisa, this is Coltrane.” Oleanna closes her eyes. Her head trembles on her thin neck, as though the music has possessed her soul. “You must listen to Coltrane.”

Luisa is getting used to these impromptu music lessons. On previous visits, Oleanna has asked her to — “Meet, the one and only, Philip Glass,” and “Listen to the understated quality of Eric Sah-TEE.” The way she articulates the names, makes Luisa wonder if her professor simply luxuriates in teaching, or if she isn’t entirely convinced of Luisa’s ability to speak English.

“Thanks so much for the tip,” says Luisa. Gratitude seems like the safest response to this unsolicited mentorship. “I’ll definitely check him out.”

“Her name is Alice, dear. Ah-LISS Coltrane.”

_MFA No. 5_

After Thursday studio sessions, Luisa drinks with her class at Koerner’s Pub. She never quite feels comfortable. At first, she tries backpacker friendliness, but her classmates only give her startled looks in return. The only student she feels a connection to is Patrick Ng, but he’s already a big deal in Hong Kong and is too busy painting to go out. Everybody else seems so competitive, that she isn’t sure she can trust them. One evening, over pints of beer, Bree asks her what her goals are in the program.

“Oh, you know, to learn,” says Luisa mildly.

“Hmmm,” Bree says. She’s a faculty favorite, whose ceramics are sold in boutiques all over the city. “What’s the deal with you and Oleanna? I always see her giving you bags full of stuff.”
“Always?” Luisa laughs. “Twice she’s given me some of her old clothes from the seventies.”

“She must really like you.”

“To be honest, I don’t know.”

The conversation moves to Halloween costumes and Bree says Luisa should go “All Latina.”

Luisa has no response to this.

“I’d love to see you with big hoop earrings,” continues Bree. “You could wear a hot pink shirt and slick your hair back.”

“And pluck my eyebrows real thin too, right?”

“Yes!” she cries.

_Trompe L’oeil_

Oleanna _highly recommended_ that Luisa pay a visit to the vegan hairdresser on 4th. And so, Luisa brings lunch to school every day for a month until she sets aside enough money for a cut. She specifically asks for a trim, something to get rid of the dry ends, but the stylist says she needs to cut more, way more.

“It’s in terrible shape,” she says. “We need to take off at least six inches. _And_ I’d suggest a nice black toner to get rid of these highlights.”

No number of repetitions of the word valiente stops Luisa’s eyes from flooding as the stylist transforms her. Luisa is stunned to see so much of her self scattered over the floor, swept away, and thrown into a garbage can. She leaves with a chin-length bob, and a one-hundred-and-twenty-five dollar dent in her bank account.

Her relief is humiliating. Had Luisa looked so offensive?

_Semiotic Overload_

It is November and so it is raining. Luisa stands at the bus stop, waiting in the drizzle, for the 99B to take her to school. A black BMW pulls up. The passenger window opens. “Hop in,” hollers Oleanna.

Luisa has never sat on heated leather seats before. They drive through Point Grey, as Oleanna tells her about the time she was invited to the Venice Biennale. She tells her about friends who are showing in Berlin, New York, Mexico City. Though it is warm inside the car, the soft hairs on Luisa’s arms rise.

They park behind the art school building. Luisa steps out of the car and asks if she should lock the door before closing it.

“No, dear,” says Oleanna. “It’s _automatic._” Her tone has the sharpness of a single raised eyebrow.

Luisa can’t resist; she slams the door shut.

Inside the car, Oleanna jumps in surprise. She steps out and says, “That’s _not_ how we close a door.”

The rest of the day, Luisa cannot stop thinking about that moment, and about Andrew — the way he ate, spoke, spat. Suddenly, she sees that everything is coded and that she’s been leaving signs everywhere and that people here noticed all of them.
For a long time, she cannot stop scrutinizing every aspect of her self: mannerisms, habits, even her posture. She begins to say well — not good — when someone asks how she’s doing. Sometimes, she forgets and says less instead of fewer. She stops wearing the colors pink and red, forces herself into dirty-smelling thrift stores to buy a new all-black wardrobe. She follows Oleanna’s advice, checks the tags to make sure the clothes are made of natural fibers. And even though her wide hips look duck-like in skinny jeans, she buys three pairs.

Part of her wants to resist, wants to have some pride, but she cannot risk this opening into the world of her dreams, this chance to learn the symbols of success.

**Excuses**

Luisa hasn’t called her parents in months. She doesn’t know how to talk to them about her life. How would she explain Oleanna? Or the idea of sublimity? Or even why she cut her hair? It was easier to talk to her sister.

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t come home for Christmas?” asks Luisa.

“I’m just warning you,” Miriam says. “Of course we want to see you, but Dad’s gone really crazy with his stuff. It’s in our room now too — he got rid of your bed yesterday to make room for some hideous antique desk.”

“Seriously?”

“You can share my bed with me if you want.”

Yesterday, Luisa had reluctantly declined Oleanna’s invitation to her Christmas Eve party. But now, everything is simplified. “You really don’t think they’ll mind if I don’t come home?”
“Oh, you know them,” says Miriam. “I’m sure they’ll understand. Or at least say they do.”

The Christmas Tree

The first thing Luisa notices is that there is no stuff inside Oleanna’s house. She lives in boxy, modernist bungalow on the water, overlooking the North Shore Mountains. The next thing Luisa notices is the clean smell. No dust motes live in this house. There are no thrift-store knick-knacks here. The basement certainly isn’t moldy or unfinished. It is the opposite of her childhood home.

Luisa follows Oleanna to the kitchen. Abstract paintings and oversized photography line the walls. The chairs, lamps, and tables are all unusually shaped — some seem barely functional. Classical music and voices drift over from a room at the back of the house.

“Let me get you a drink, dear,” says Oleanna. “We have whatever you want: malbec, grigio, cab sauvé, chardonnay. An aperitif perhaps?”

“Um, the first one please,” Luisa says, laughing nervously. She sips at the red wine. It tastes like fermented wood, but she tells Oleanna it’s very good.

“It’s better than good,” says an old, slim man, who Luisa recognizes from a picture in Oleanna’s office. “That’s a 1999 bottle. We bought this near Kelowna, remember O?”

“That’s right.” Oleanna jingles the row of silver bracelets on her arm. “Bob said there was nowhere else he’d rather witness the end of the world than a wine cellar.” They both laugh.
“Come join us in the lounge, Luisa,” says Bob. He leads her through the dozen or so chattering guests to a white leather ottoman. She sits on the edge. The leather is petal soft.

“So, what’s your story?” asks Bob.

Luisa doesn’t quite know what he means, so she gives him her spiel about being born in the sky and growing up in Winnipeg.

He nods too quickly — the nod of someone who has already heard the story, or is simply not listening. “What do you think of our Christmas tree?”

She hasn’t noticed it till now. A small leafless deciduous tree stands in the far corner of the room. Ornaments and tiny fairy lights hang from its crooked branches. Luisa remembers a photo from one of her family’s albums. It is their first Christmas in Canada. Luisa sits between her mother and father in front of a tree just like this one.

Bob must see the shock on her face because he launches into an explanation. “We were in Mexico in the sixties,” he says, “and we just fell in love with how the people there do Christmas. We haven’t bought a pine since.”

The woman next to him, in the black-framed glasses, laughs approvingly. “No needles to clean up!”

Luisa excuses herself. She wanders the halls until she finds the bathroom. Her reflection in the mirror startles her — wide, lost eyes and flushed cheeks. She tries to push away her thoughts of her little family spending Christmas Eve alone in their tiny, cluttered house. She runs the cold water, bends over, and tilts her mouth directly into the stream. She can feel coolness travel down her chest into her stomach.
When she returns to the party, Bob is eating olives out of a bowl on his lap. Everyone looks intently at him as he declares that artists would do better to appeal to the masses rather than the elite. “It’s unfortunate,” he says. “But the great majority of people go through this life asleep — worrying only about money and television. I’ve come to accept that it’s our duty to help them see the light.”

There is a silent round of nodding in which Luisa recognizes Alice Coltrane’s harp. She thinks of her mother and father— how much they worry about money, how much they enjoy television.

“Oh, Bob,” says Oleanna. “That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but I do agree — it’s the artist’s job to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.”

Did all these people want to afflict her family? Luisa fights her urge to speak up, to tell them life isn’t so simple, to tell them that they don’t have any idea what it’s like not to be well off, not to be white Canadians.

She feels increasingly ill as the night wears on. At one point, her wine reappears in her mouth by way of her esophagus. Her instinct is to spit it into her glass, or to run to the kitchen sink. But by now she knows that the only way to proceed is to swallow it back down.

“Is the wine alright, Luisa?” asks Oleanna.

“Yes, it’s delicious. It’s maybe just a tad too bitter for me, though.”

“Oh, no dear —you mean dry.”
Despite Luisa’s protestations, Oleanna orders her a cab. Luisa’s student loan budget doesn’t include taxi money, so she gets out after only a few blocks and walks the rest of the way home. She stops for some fries, remembers how her parents used to take her and Miriam out for fast food when they were girls. She should call home.

Instead, back in her room, she falls asleep with her laptop on her stomach, while on screen the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* tricks his butler into thinking he’s won the lottery.

Tabita comes to visit from Salt Spring Island where she lives off the grid with her girlfriend. “Your hair, Lou!” is the first thing she says. “I barely recognize you.”

Over flavorless tempeh at The Naam, they recall old memories, long-forgotten jokes. Luisa listens to Tabita tell her about the work she’s doing with First Nations communities, about her new meditation practice, about the Earthship she and Erin are building.

Luisa tries her best to explain the reasons for her haircut, for her transformation, for barely staying in touch with anyone. The more she talks about it, though, the more she realizes she herself doesn’t understand.

“I guess that’s part of the artists’ way,” says Tabita.

When they hug goodbye, Tabita squeezes her tight. She smells of sweat and lavender. “Don’t forget your ancestors,” she says into Luisa’s ear. “They haven’t forgotten you.”
In the spring, she gets a text from Andrew: got some time off work. want to come see u in Canada next week. Luisa is surprised and unsettled. Apart from the odd message and one quick video call, neither has put much effort into the relationship. Now, her cheeks burn, as she imagines Andrew meeting her art school friends, shaking hands with Oleanna.

Luisa musters all her courage and calls him that same night. She tells him it’s not a good time for her. That it probably never will be. She needs to focus on her work, maybe for years. “You deserve better,” she says. “Someone who isn’t so selfish.”

He sounds sad, but says he understands. “I always thought you was too good for me.”

Afterwards, she deletes his messages and weeps.

At the end of the year Oleanna lets it slip that Luisa would be awarded a prize for her second semester photography project. Luisa had given up on her *Introduced Species* series and shifted her focus to street photography. She’d gone to the Downtown Eastside and taken portraits of some of the refugees and immigrants who’d wound up on the streets alongside the First Nations people. After she developed the photos in the dark room, she’d applied clear nail polish to the prints and used a heat gun to make the chemicals react. It took several attempts to get it right, but eventually, the glossy polish created a cracked aura around her subjects, one that did not in any way mimic real life.
Oleanna says the award is for capturing human suffering in a new way. Or something like that. Luisa can’t help but wonder if it’s actually a reward for shedding her identity, for mastering the fine art of social climbing.

_Shifting Life of Flowers No. 1_

With the school year finished and the rains gone, Luisa is inspired to revisit her _Introduced Species_ series. She spreads the pieces out over the floor of her studio at the university. Her idea is good, but it’s not translating. No one understands her reference to migration when they see the work. They just think she really likes plants.

She’d had other ideas — but something was always wrong. Once, she thought to take a glass bottle and insert a small brown woman, like a ship, but Oleanna told her that an American artist had already done that in the nineties. Luisa also thought about creating a wax effigy of herself and burning it, but then she saw a Buddha candle at a cheap gift shop.

Always, she goes back to her love of the canvas. For as long as she can remember she’s felt a peculiar empathy for paintings. She knows what it’s like to wait to be truly seen, to have that expectation — or hope — of being understood.

She pulls down a heavy botanical book from her shelf. She flips through pages, then stops to look at a framed picture on her desk. She stands with her family in the garden near the trellis. Their house may not be much, but her parents’ garden is spectacular. There is a diamond in the sky, where the sun is supposed to be.

Luisa stands and goes to the window at the front of her studio. English Ivy — introduced and invasive — stretches across the wall of the next-door building. The plant
has dug its tendril claws into the finest of cracks, the shallowest of dips in the stone. The foliage is so dense it looks like a green fur coat. The way the leaves drape along the wall, it is impossible to tell in which direction the plant has grown. Perhaps the ivy was climbing downwards.

A person could ascend downwards. A woman could rise to her personal depths. Luisa could climb higher and higher, not by standing on her parents’ shoulders, but by scaling their hearts, mounting their heads.

**Shifting Life of Flowers No. 2**

While leafing through the botanical book for inspiration, Luisa’s attention catches on the science of plant classification. She reads about taxonomy. She learns about the varying classes of vascular plants. She studies Linnaeus’s system — kingdom, phylum, class, family, genus, species, cultivar. Soon she finds herself with the start of a small chart of her own.

Family: Anzalduaceae

Genus: anzaldua

Species: Anzaldua Luisa

But when she comes to cultivar— a plant variation that has been produced in cultivation by selective breeding, or through deliberate hybridization, and can be reproduced to produce more of the same plant — she cannot continue.

**Shifting Life of Flowers No. 3**

Luisa calls her mother that night, and greets her in Spanish. “Hola, mamá.”
“Hola, mija.”

Luisa cannot remember the last time she spoke in her mother tongue. They continue in español, and Luisa is stunned to find that it allows her to speak more freely, that her mother asks more questions, that they can actually engage with each other. Luisa tells her about the prize she’d won, about her visit with Tabita, about her hair cut.

“And what are you up to?” asks Luisa when they finish catching up.

“Me and your father were watching a documentary. Your dad loves them.”

“Really?”

“It’s one of those were the lion chases the zebra.”

“Oh, yeah. I know those.”

Luisa tells her mother about the ivy overtaking the building near her office, about all the azaleas and magnolias bursting into bloom all over the city. “You guys should come visit me out here. I think you’d really like it.”

“I’ll tell your father.”

There is silence. The conversation threatens to die, the way it always does, but Luisa pushes on. “It’s funny the way plants climb,” she says.

“Yes, we were watching another documentary about a plant that walks.”

“No!”

Her mother tells her about the Central American walking palm. She explains how its roots grow above ground. How the old roots die off, and the new ones grow in the direction of sunlight. How eventually the palm migrates. “I’m surprised I never heard of them back in El Salvador.”

“Yeah,” says Luisa. “You’d think a walking plant would be a big deal.”
“Well, some scientists say we can’t call it walking.”

“Oh. Ha. Well, I like the idea of little plants and flowers walking around on root legs, finding new homes.”

“Yes, it’s a little true. They do move to where there is light, where it’s better.” She pauses. “You never know, Luisa. Maybe one day, they will discover a plant that really does walk.”

It was their longest conversation in years.

Still Life of Cultivars (2010)

Luisa watches the random shapes that blossom in the blackness of her closed eyelids. They are meaningless and temporary, until one perfectly clear image appears. She jumps out of bed, turns on the lights, and sits down at her desk. She opens her largest sketchbook. At the top of a blank page she scribbles, Still Life of Cultivars.

She finishes her initial sketches hours later, just as the night sky overflows. The clouds unleash a gentle hum of rain that washes the kingdoms, slakes the classes, nourishes the families. Gives life to all the little flowers walking.
Vuelo, 1982

Tomás and Gloria’s little girl — not yet named then, still known only as el bebé — was spared the hideous sights in San Salvador that year. Tucked inside her mother’s womb, she didn’t witness all that made their faith in humanity dry out, leaving behind only ugly shriveled things. On the day of their flight to Canada, the couple sat in the back of a Red Cross jeep, each with a small duffel bag at their feet. It was early, and the morning still looked like night. Ken, the Canadian embassy official who’d arranged the couple’s paperwork, sat in the front passenger seat, next to the driver. Ken turned to Gloria and Tomás, asked in Spanish if they were ready to go.

“Sí,” whispered Gloria. She picked up her bag, placed it on her lap beside her hard rounded belly. She unzipped the bag enough to slide her hand inside. She rummaged past the clothing, past her favorite childhood doll, past the cotton blanket her mother had given her before she died. Finally, Gloria’s hand rested on a small photo album. She needed to make sure it was still there.

Tomás did not whisper. He declared that yes, he was ready to leave. The duffel bag at his feet contained only shirts and pants provided by the Red Cross. His circumstances hadn’t allowed for gathering meaningful belongings. Tomás took his wife’s hand as they drove past the embassy’s tall metal walls. He wove his cold fingers into the spaces between hers, which were even colder. It was May and warm, but fear has a way of drawing blood from the extremities, sending it to the heart.

Tomás heard Gloria sigh when they passed the central market. He turned to her to see if she was okay. She looked worn out. More than eight months of pregnancy and two
years of official war (everyone knew the fighting had actually begun with La Matanza in ‘32) had drained her face of color. She was missing the brightness that twenty-two-year-olds used to have in El Salvador before the war. Her hair still shined and she wore it in her usual modest way, wound low at her nape. Her wine-red dress and the large swell of her belly gave her a sacrificial mien.

Gloria surveyed the city as they drove. She took stock of all that she was leaving behind. It wasn’t pretty anymore. Torn bougainvillea branches lay tangled amidst rubble in what had once been the nicest part of town. In her own barrio, children hadn’t played futbol in the streets for years. Neighbors no longer stopped to chat at Señora Bacha’s tamale stall. Teenagers gave up blasting American music out their windows, and nobody went to watch movies at La Almada on Saturday nights. Gloria’s memories were still bright, but they were becoming more difficult to call forth, like a scared child under a bed.

“Look at those trees!” said Gloria now. “La chermoya, sincuya, los pepetos. My mother had those in her garden.” She could almost smell her mother’s fruit trees. Nobody answered.

In the quiet of the ride, el bebé shuffled energetically within her. Gloria leaned into Tomás and told him that the stress was giving her un dolor de espalda. She never used to get aches, but ever since she’d conceived, all her worries and fears and regrets gnawed at her lower back. “It’s been bothering me all night,” she said.

He let go of Gloria’s hand and slid his palm along her back until it wedged between the vinyl seat and the curve of her spine. His heat soothed her pain. They’d been
reunited a few days ago, and touching still felt miraculous. She leaned into him. “That helps,” she said.

She wished he could rest his palm on her grief. Gloria had lost her mother without getting a chance to say goodbye. Mamá Luisa died of a stroke the night the government’s death squad came looking for Pablo, Gloria’s teenage brother. That was a year ago. Gloria had been at the beach with Tomás that night, the night she conceived. She didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to Pablo either. He’d fled into the hills with the guerillas the day before the death squad came. He hadn’t been heard from since. And yesterday, only hours ago, Gloria had left without saying goodbye to her father. She couldn’t bring herself to tell him she was leaving him on his own to deal with the dead thuds of nightly mortars. She’d left a letter instead, explaining that she was going with Tomás to Canada where they’d been granted asylum. They would live in a city called Winnipeg. A city they’d never heard of. A city chosen for them. She caught her breath as a spasm of pain radiated from her back into her legs. She leaned into Tomás’ palm.

They drove under a bridge on the outskirts of the city. Two decapitated bodies, hanging by their feet, spun in slow, grotesque rounds. No one said anything. By now, Gloria knew how to look, but not see. “This is the highway to La Libertad,” she said suddenly, without intonation. “The beach has black sand. It comes from volcanoes.”

She couldn’t stop herself from reciting these odd facts. She rattled off statements about the best pupusa restaurant, which happened to be near the airport, how her father often took the family there and ordered dozens of revueltas. Gloria felt safer speaking, as though words protected her against the past, shielded her from the blankness that lay
ahead. And so, she listed her favorite dishes, her favorite churches, her favorite beaches:

“La Libertad, El Tunco, El Sunzal….”

“Can you be quiet?” snapped Tomás. He felt desperate. “Please?”

Gloria pushed his hand away. “I can talk if I want to.”

“Yes, I know, but I…. It’s —” He didn’t know how to explain his hatred for this country.

“Is this how it will be in Canada?” she said. “I won’t be allowed to remember? If that’s how it’s going to be, I’m not going. They can stop the car right now. I don’t care if I die here.”

Because he was two years older, because she had chosen to join him in his necessary exile, because she was carrying his baby, and because she was his wife, Tomás wanted very badly to make her feel better. But so many memories howled inside his head. A chattering echo of machine guns rose from the surrounding hills. Tomás tensed and shut his eyes, till it passed. All night he’d told Gloria they would make it out fine. We’re protected, he’d said, but now he was beginning to worry about a war between them.

He reached mindlessly for the lock on the door and opened and closed it, over and over and over again. Even if he’d wanted to, he could not appreciate her recollections. This land — gangrenous, oozing pus — made his body ache. The air smelled like the blood of the dead. All he wanted was to stop remembering. It would be easier once they reached Winnipeg, or as his wife called it, Weepeeneg. Tomás looked over at her, saw the glistening in her eyes. He laid his hand on her upper thigh, so that the tops of his
knuckles grazed her belly. “We’re almost out of here, my love,” he said. It was the best he could do.

It was not quite enough for Gloria. Did he want her to remember the gruesome instead of the good? The day she attended Monseñor Romero’s funeral and the military opened fire on the thousands of mourners? Or maybe one of the massacres at the university? She hadn’t been able to return to school after the first one. Or perhaps he would prefer she remember the corpses left around the barrio, once in front of her father’s plant store?

Gloria inhaled sharply and straightened her back.

Ken, plump, bald, and serious, turned from the front seat. “It’s not the baby, is it?”

Gloria shook her head no. “It’s stress.”

She glanced at her husband now. He looked like a teenager with his t-shirt and jeans and shaggy dark hair. He was quite thin now, slightly concave. His muscles were noticeably smaller than before he’d been taken away. Gloria felt a wave of tenderness. For two weeks, she’d thought she’d never see him again, and now here they were on the brink of starting a new life. She would need to try harder; she had, after all, agreed to join him of her own volition. As they approached the airport, she felt weighed down with a startling sense of never again.

Tomás guided his wife into the airport, almost but not quite pushing. The departures terminal was small and dimly lit. Other bewildered looking couples stood in lines. A few young men in wheelchairs, missing limbs, were quietly going through security. It seemed
to Tomás that everyone shared the same haunted posture. He let Ken lead the way to the 
TACA counter for the first leg of their flight to Mexico City. From there they would fly 
to Toronto, and then on to Winnipeg.

They were about to get in line when, out of his peripheral vision, Tomás noticed a 
familiar man stepping up to the counter. The man’s thin mustache, high temples, greased 
hair, and arrogant bearing triggered Tomás’s reflexes. He immediately dropped his eyes 
and head, tucked into his wife.

“¿Qué pasó?” asked Gloria.

His heart raced and sweat covered his body, but he wasn’t even sure.

Ken looked at Tomás carefully. “Did you see someone… you know?”

Tomás would not have said he knew him. That wasn’t quite the right word. To know 
someone implies some kind of understanding. Acquainted would be a better choice.

“It can’t be,” said Tomás. He turned to Ken. “Do army men ever get asylum?”

“If their lives are at risk, maybe.” Ken paused. “But it would be a difficult case to 
make in these circumstances. In El Salvador.” He added that the Canadian government 
took human rights abuses very seriously, that, as they both knew, the interviews were 
long and thorough. “It would be extremely unlikely,” he said.

For Tomás, words such as ‘unlikely’ no longer held any meaning. He often thought 
about the emptiness of once powerful words like crimes, rights, truth, and of course, 
dignity. This was to say nothing of the utter uselessness of adjectives —terrible, 
impossible, horrific, etc. — all of which were now nothing but mere sounds floating lost 
in the hopeless dark.
The peculiar look on her husband’s face made Gloria’s back pain even worse. She didn’t know him the way she used to, the way she did before he was taken away, but she saw that his body had not relaxed in the slightest.

“Let’s wait a bit,” she said. “I’d like to sit a minute before we get in line.”

Both men immediately asked how she was, if the baby was alright. The Canadian embassy had made special arrangements for her to fly, even though she was thirty-seven weeks along. Again, Gloria dismissed their concern. “It’s not that,” she said firmly. “It was that drive. I just need a minute.”

It pleased her that Tomás sat down close enough beside her that she could smell his sweet, airy scent. She picked up his hand and placed it on her belly. “Do you feel that?” The baby gave a good kick, and the surprise of it seemed to bring Tomás back; he smiled straight into Gloria’s eyes and buoyantly held her gaze. She didn’t dare move, even breathe. Since they’d been reunited, she’d tried to imagine what had likely happened to him. Probably those things that were whispered about at night in low, neutral voices that kept the horror at a safe distance.

Last week, when the human rights officer had showed up at her father’s house, she’d gotten into the agency’s Land Rover and gone to the aid station where Tomás was being treated along with a five other political prisoners. That night, as they sought refuge in each other’s arms, Gloria tried to search his body for injuries but he would not let her. She asked what had happened. He was silent. His eyes seemed to close, though they remained open.
Sitting so close to his wife, Tomás found it easier to remain present. When the man at the counter finally turned and walked towards the corridor, Tomás observed that he was, in fact, too short. No, no, it could not be the same man. He’d been mistaken. Tomás once again felt that urgent desire to leave. “Bueno,” he said, standing. “This is it.”

“Yes, alright.” Gloria smiled, stood, and followed him.

At the counter, Tomás watched as Ken presented their tickets and many documents. Technically they were refugees, but the Canadian government was accepting them as immigrants — people who chose to move to Canada. Ken had persuaded them to apply as immigrants instead of refugees. He said it would be better for the baby. That it would help the family assimilate. The offer was available. Why not? Tomás didn’t hesitate. The word immigrant gave him some semblance of comfort. He would not have to think about being forced into exile. He could forget he had no choice in the matter.

Tomás took his wife’s hand in the hallway leading to security. He thanked Ken for all that he’d done for them.

“Don’t even mention it,” Ken replied. He wished them the best of luck in Canada and shook hands with Tomás. He looked at Gloria. “That little baby better stay put.”

Gloria clutched her stomach and nodded.

“Que les vaya bien,” said Ken finally. The typical Salvadoran farewell — may it go well for you. Tomás and Gloria responded together in kind. “Que le vaya bien.”

Those farewell words rang falsely in Tomás’s mind, as he guided Gloria along the tiled corridor. The sentiment and his memory of the man he thought he’d seen combined cruelly in his thoughts. He and the other political criminals kept in that cement cell never learned the man’s name. Tomás would sometimes see him walk past his cell. The man
would wear a military uniform, but Tomás could never determine his rank. Awful screams would ring out from down the hall whenever the man was there. Tomás would try to control his imagination, refusing to envision the terror. But on his third night in captivity, shortly after the man arrived, two guards dragged his cellmate Atlacatl away. Atlacatl was an indigenous peasant and painter, who’d been caught organizing the people of his village. The next morning a guard tossed him back into the cell; he was bleeding profusely from his mouth. They had cut out his tongue. He died later that day.

Tomás felt grateful that he’d only been subjected to a method they called avioncito, or little airplane. The man with no name had ordered the guards to strip Tomás naked. They tied his hands together behind his back with rope. They attached the rope to a hook on a ceiling and hung him by his arms. They accused him of organizing the student protests, of sympathizing with the guerillas — and they were right. They didn’t want a confession. They wanted punishment. They demanded information, but Tomás did not have any. He was only a third-year economics student. Had it not been for the guerillas, who negotiated the release of one of their commanders, Tomás would not have made it out.

The inside of the airplane surprised Tomás. He’d thought it would be much bigger. Tomás could not keep himself from scrutinizing the faces of the other passengers, as he walked the aisle. The flight was full. He noticed the wealthy people: the landowners, business owners, bank owners, coffee plantation owners. The country’s miniscule population of owners. In a country of poor, brown-skinned, black-haired people, it was their fairness and wealth that easily gave this ruling class away. They were the same people that used to fly to Miami for the weekend. They were the people from
whom everyone else was demanding a shift towards equality. They were also the people
the military was defending; it was in their name that the soldiers were decimating
villages, mortaring fleeing families, slaughtering citizens. Tomás guessed these cheles
were not going away for a weekend this time. Surely, they were leaving permanently.
Almost all of the white people had already left, leaving behind heavily guarded mansions.
Tomás found it hard to believe that he and Gloria were getting out too, just the same.

Gloria thought the plane was surely too solid and heavy to lift off the ground. She
sat down next to Tomás. Her stomach was so big, the seatbelt barely fit. Was it possible
that she had once weighed ninety-seven pounds? A flight attendant approached. The
name Rosa was embroidered onto her red blouse. Rosa looked at Gloria and shook her
head, lamented that the seatbelts were not long enough for pregnant women.

“How far along are you, cariña?” she asked.

“Almost thirty-seven weeks,” Gloria said.

“Would you believe, last week we had one woman at thirty-nine weeks and
another at forty!”

Gloria assumed Rosa was Mexican. She had an air of nonchalance that Gloria had
not seen in El Salvador for a long time. Clearly, Rosa had not learned to live and sleep
beside fear, had not forgotten how to laugh. “Did they make it alright?” asked Gloria.

“Did they deliver on the plane?”

“No, thank god.” Rosa tittered. “Imagine the mess!”

The aircraft rushed forward with a loud and droning surge of the engine. Gloria
crossed herself and began to pray.
Tomás turned away from his wife. Why should God, who didn’t even exist, look after this flight? It almost offended him that she would pray for them, when the war was only beginning. Countless innocent people were being tortured, children were being forced to watch as their parents were executed in their kitchens, students were being plucked off the roads and stuffed into the plateless cars of the security forces. But what Tomás did not know was that Gloria was not praying for either herself or the flight or for him. In fact, she was praying for his family, for his mother left alone with two kids, for her surely heartbroken father, and for their bebé.

Suddenly they were in the air. The moment they left the earth, several women on the flight — and a few of the men too — cried out. Tomás was reminded of the feeling when someone took a heavy bag from his shoulder.

Gloria was reminded of swimming in the ocean with her little brother Pablo, of the moment when a wave lifted her body relieving her of weight and effort. The exhilaration did not last long. Gloria thought about her brother and felt herself growing weak. The weight of the baby on her pelvis became almost unbearable, intensifying the constant pain in her back. She wept silently for everything, for everyone. She wept because she foresaw that one day the pain of her losses would lessen, and when that day came she would no longer have the desire to return to El Salvador. Gloria rested her head on Tomás’s shoulder, wrapped one arm comfortingly below her stomach. Her tears left a large wet spot on his green t-shirt, a mark shaped much like the wide canopy of a ceiba tree. She fell asleep.
Rosa, the flight attendant, woke them up as the plane descended into Mexico City. They had both slept, holding hands, more deeply than they had in weeks.

“Looks like you’re carrying quite low,” said Rosa conspiratorially. “A boy?”

“We don’t know yet,” said Gloria.

“What names are you thinking?”

Gloria felt caught out. Never, in all the madness of the earth splitting open, was there a right time to discuss names. “We’re still deciding between a few,” she said.

“It’s difficult, no?” said Rosa “A name can determine so much.” She continued gracefully down the aisle.

The plane began its descent. Gloria looked at Tomás. She thought she saw a similar sense of embarrassment in his eyes. She leaned her head to his, till their foreheads touched, and they began whispering names. Pablo? Zyanya? Alejandra? Osmín? And on and on — all the names of people they had lost. This was why they had put it off. Thinking of a new life forced them to think of those others whose lives had been so violently destroyed. Gloria was about to suggest her mother’s name — Luisa — when her backache flared. It came in waves this time, not unlike menstrual cramps. Her husband massaged her through tens of thousands of feet, all the way back to earth.

Tomás was tempted to stop and buy tacos and pozole for his wife. The Mexico City airport was bigger and nicer than San Salvador’s. Tomás would’ve bought the food, but they only had two hundred Canadian dollars. Ken had said it wouldn’t matter. Through the government’s settlement programs, they would have free housing for a year, and English classes for six months. They would even have help finding jobs. Tomás
could not believe any country would care so much for its people, and for new arrivals at that. At first, he’d thought Ken was trying to trick them. Once Ken had convinced him, Tomás wondered why his fellow Salvadorans ever went to the US. He knew people who had accepted asylum in Switzerland and Australia, but he also knew dozens who had fled to America illegally. The US did not have a refugee program like the other countries. Tomás wondered why his friends risked so much to go to that place where they were not wanted? Why go to the source of El Salvador’s strife? The Americans were financing the Salvadoran military, had long been training Salvadoran soldiers, teaching them tried and tested torture techniques, passing on their wisdom on how to scorch earth.

Soon they were boarding an Air Canada plane with two aisles. The flight staff greeted them in English, and Tomás responded with bright confidence. He’d picked up some of the language after years of memorizing the lyrics to songs by Led Zeppelin, The Doors, Pink Floyd; from watching subtitled episodes of *The Dukes of Hazzard* and *The Andy Griffith Show*. Though frightening images were still careening through his mind, and though he couldn’t stop himself from examining the face of every man on the plane, this change of language let him breathe deeper. There was more air in English.

Gloria reluctantly followed him to their seats. From her first step onto this new plane, she felt deeply uncomfortable. The flight attendants were staring at her belly accusingly. She didn’t understand a word anyone was saying. She had always preferred Spanish, was never interested in learning English. Her body ached now, she was exhausted. She struggled to orient herself, but couldn’t tell one person from the next. There were so many similar looking people on this plane, with the same washed-out skin
and pinched noses. Gloria watched as Tomás lifted their duffel bags into the overhead compartments and sat down.

“Have a seat, mi amor,” said Tomás, smiling.

She detected hope behind his smile and quite suddenly her anxiety took on the force of the moon over the tides. Fury rose from deep within her and wrapped like a band around her belly. Why was she going to this blurry, frozen land? How could Tomás have let her follow him, let her leave her lonely father, her mother’s grave, her vigil for her brother?

“I’m not going,” she said. “I can’t go.”

She turned around and as she did so, saw how Tomás slumped, broke. Whatever hope he’d found seeped so quickly out of him that it swept Gloria’s anger with it. Were they fated, she wondered, to forever trap each other in spells of anguish and fear, grief and disappointment? Perhaps their present was doomed to hurt forever.

A tall, thin flight attendant swooped over and asked Gloria to sit. When she didn’t move, the flight attendant, whose silver badge read Sherry, repeated herself and motioned for Gloria to take a seat. And so, Gloria sat.

They didn’t speak for hours. Tomás wrestled with his hopes and memories and what was left of his beliefs. What had happened to him was not as bad as what had happened to other men. He had also not said goodbye to his mother, or to his brother and sister. His father, a teacher who had been guilty of talking to his students about land reform, had been shot at the start of the war. Tomás had not said goodbye to him either. Was there any sense in dwelling on all of it? On any of it? Tomás knew of much worse
things than not saying goodbye. He stared out the window at the hazy Mexican mountains and volcanoes. Gloria kept getting up to use the bathroom and each time she left, Tomás felt a pang. The pain of her absence revealed to him that he could one day forget his past. He could make himself let go of the anguish. It was the only way he could help Gloria. They would not survive if he couldn’t be strong enough for the both of them.

Gloria sat back down, her face pale and gaunt.

“What about your mother’s name?” he asked. “If it’s a girl?”

She turned to him with such relief that he nearly laughed.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes!”

Tomás took her hand, which was plumper than he’d ever seen it. He told her that Luisa was a good name in English. “It’s borderless,” he said.

“And if it’s a boy,” she said, “we can name him after your father, Teodoro.”

Grateful and solemn, he nodded.

The tribute to her mother reoriented Gloria’s feelings. Both her doubts and the pain in her back subsided. It was as though the dark clouds had parted. She could now begin to envision them as a team of two, heading off on a great adventure. They would probably be fine in Canada. They were a close couple, with an easy and exciting certainty between them. They’d met in university, before Gloria’s parents forced her to quit and she’d gone to work at her father’s store, managing ledgers, ordering orchids and lilies. At the time, she had been taking science courses in the hopes of becoming a marine biologist. During spare periods, the two of them used to walk through the campus looking for the turquoise torogoces that flew from tree to tree flaunting their delicate pompom tail
feathers. She and Tomás would wrap their arms around each other and press their bodies so tight, as though they were trying to fuse together, form a fortress wall.

They’d made their baby by accident at La Libertad beach. They had taken the bus there, one of those buses that before arriving in El Salvador used to transport American children to and from school. She and Tomás had been swimming when a woman’s bloated, bullet-ridden corpse washed ashore. It was already such an eerily common event, that there was barely a stir at the beach. The ladies didn’t scream. The children didn’t point. The lifeguards carted it away with practiced efficiency. Gloria, however, was shaken. She couldn’t get used to the bodies. She and Tomás found a large cave-like outcropping of rock and lay down underneath, holding each other. At sunset they were still there. Foolishly, they sought comfort in the warm life of the other’s body. It seemed vital to them that they remember they were alive, human. It seemed more important than the risk. They’d already planned to spend their lives together, so neither was crushed by news of the pregnancy. But it did mean a quick marriage ceremony at City Hall. And it meant Gloria had to put away her lingering dreams of a career.

In the skies an hour south of the Mexican-American border, the throbbing pain in Gloria’s back took on a pressing gravity and warmth. Rather curiously, at the same time, Tomás looked left down to the end of the long row and saw the same man he’d noticed at the airport. Again, his body reacted first. His mind was close to following the panic down its spiraling tunnel — could it be him? sitting just eight people down?

Gloria arched her body and cried out. “Ay, Dios!”
Tomás recognized the sound of true and urgent pain, but coming from his wife, he found his reflexive response to the man swiftly overshadowed.

“The baby’s coming now, isn’t she?” Tomás was unaware that he’d stopped calling their child by the default masculine, el bebé.

“Yes,” said Gloria, with a terrible grimace. “Right now.” Her words faded into a yell and then into ragged panting.

She doubled over with the pain of a severe contraction. She kept thinking that it was too early. She kept thinking about her mother. Taunting images of ripe, sweet fruit, floated before her eyes. Then the pain was so great that she felt darkness tugging at her.

Tomás acted without thinking. He unbuckled his seatbelt and stood, yelled for help.

Sherry, the flight attendant, appeared briskly. “How can I help you, sir?”

“The baby is coming now,” he said in English. He gripped his wife’s shoulder. The cotton fabric of her wine-red dress was damp.

“Miss, are you okay?” said Sherry.

Gloria did not register that the woman was talking to her. A tremendous gathering up inside her body made her feel as though her heart were about to be vacuumed out. The fiercest pain yet hit her now, and a thundering moan dropped from her mouth.

“Let’s get her to the back,” Sherry said.

Tomás took his wife’s arm and levered her up to standing. The passengers noticed and broke into murmurs of discussion. Sherry led the way to the back of the plane, where coffee brewed, and ovens heated ham and mashed potatoes. Soon flight attendants were everywhere. Over the speaker system, the co-pilot announced an emergency turn around. Gloria lay on several fleece blankets, propped up with a pile of small pillows with the Air
Canada maple leaf embroidered at the top edge. A request for a doctor went unanswered, but a Guatemalan nurse did step forth. The nurse, named Marta, said she had not been in a delivery room in many years, but she took to monitoring Gloria’s pulse. Things were happening so quickly, too quickly. Tomás yanked Marta over to next to him, between his wife’s knees.

No one in that small room at the back of the plane heard the female passengers commiserate with each of Gloria’s bellows. Nor did they notice the gripes of disgruntled passengers, angry that the airline had let such a pregnant woman aboard — what with her stomach already pushing the limits of decency. The flight attendants kept saying the word ‘contractions’ in English. They pointed to a black digital clock over the coffee maker. But there was no time for such measures.

Later the doctors would tell Gloria she experienced something called “precipitous labor” — a punishingly rapid birth. One minute she had back pain and her husband was massaging her gently with his warm hand. The next moment she found herself in a single ceaseless contraction that rolled and grew, sucking everything she knew out of her head, like a tsunami that pulled back the water from the beaches, inhaled the seabed, built up the necessary power until it became a force that could not be stopped, and an unspeakably immense wave rushed forward, pushing out a new human covered in a bloody white paste. She slipped out of her mother’s body and landed solidly in her father’s waiting hands.

Silence ensued on the aircraft. Only a moment ago, there was one body. Now there were two — two female figures still connected, sharing the same blood, the same
lungs. The quiet broke when el bebé — no, Luisa — let out her first primal, fiery, living scream. The passengers erupted in cheers.

Tomás stood trembling, holding his daughter, while Sherry announced the baby girl’s birth over the speakers. Luisa’s irises were a vague greyish color, but the whites of her eyes were spidered red. A small trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her left eye, staining the skin around her nose. Marta said it was from the pressure of the birth. Then Marta took a blade from the first aid kit and severed the worm-like umbilical cord. She cleaned and swaddled the baby, placed her on Gloria’s chest. “Que milagro,” said Marta. “We have to thank God nothing went wrong.”

Gloria had barely caught up to the fact of what had happened. She felt as though she’d been gone for a long time somewhere indeterminable. The pain — so tremendous, unexpected, ceaseless — had shocked her deeply. Now, she did not even think to examine the baby in her tired arms. Vivid images of hule trees and tamarindo fruit filled her mind. She called for her help, and Marta swiftly took the crying baby from her. Gloria fell into a profound sleep.

Tomás felt unsteady. He stood by the small round window, shifting his gaze from his stunned wife, sleeping on the floor, and the bright glaring world outside. There had been no windows in his cell. He’d spent much of his time reminding himself of what was real. Pain was real. Land was real. Bones were real. Love was real. Tomás had stopped believing in much more than that. Marta passed him Luisa, and now, with this new warm creature, this tiny person who cared not at all for her parents’ pains, he saw that there was indeed more. In Luisa, he was surprised to find an impudent bundle of truth.
Gloria, Tomás and Luisa were the first ones off the plane. As the paramedics wheeled Gloria down the aisle, people called out, “Felicidades! Bravo!” They made jokes about free flights for life that would never come true. An indigenous woman wearing braids and a shirt that read I ❤ Cuscatlan (El Salvador’s pre-colonial name) said to Tomás, “This birth is a good omen for your daughter. She is a child of the skies, of the world.” There was so much genuine elation coming from these strangers, that when Tomás suddenly came upon the man, he forgot to look away. Some unreadable emotion crossed the nameless man’s face before his mouth stretched into smile. “Que les vaya bien,” he said.

The family got stuck in Mexico City for several months, trying to sort out Luisa’s nationality. Tomás found himself searching for the man during those first few weeks. Gradually, through much deliberate effort, he was able to let the obsession wane. It helped that they were busy. There were visits to Mexican lawyers, and government offices, to airline officials, and embassies — El Salvador’s and Canada’s.

Gloria, who was still getting used to her new life, wanted her daughter to be Salvadoran. She was struggling with how small their family felt, how incomplete. “It’s like we’re a plant without flowers,” she would say to Tomás. “Or like a tree without branches!” She insisted that Luisa have Salvadoran citizenship.

Tomás said it would be better if she were Mexican. “I don’t want her anywhere close to El Salvador’s stench.”

At night, with Luisa asleep on their bed, they lay in the dark and wondered if they dared make her Canadian. It was a Canadian plane, and so a strong case could be
argued, a Mexican official had said. He also said that for the right price he could make Luisa Zimbabwean! French! Australian!

They discussed the issue at length, as though their entire future depended on a single decision. During this time, they lived in a small motel room paid for by the Canadian embassy. The country’s largesse felt overwhelmingly kind, and so when their Canadian visa officer suggested Luisa Anzaldua be made Salvadoran, like her parents, Tomás finally relented.

Later in life Luisa would wonder if that was where all the problems started — with her borderless birth, in those borderless skies. Oh, she would come to learn that, in truth, the problems started much further back: with hawks and military aid; and even further, further back with Spanish oligarchs, defenseless blood, invaders on a land whose people carried no antibodies for those new white bodies. But for a long time, before Luisa could see the truth, her problems would appear to belong exclusively to her.

Finally, on a windy day in August, the family of three boarded their plane to Canada. Tomás half expected to see the man from his past sitting in first class, speaking English and sipping whiskey, but he was gone, lost to the world’s shadows. Tomás turned his mind wholly to the future now. Their baby slept on Gloria’s chest. As he buckled Gloria’s seatbelt for her, he told her once again that they would live in the safest neighborhood in Winnipeg they could afford, that they would find a house near a library and a park, and send Luisa to the best schools.

“I hope so,” she said.
Gloria’s outlook was improving, but not as quickly as his. Tomás seemed to be adjusting remarkably well. Even the way he was staring out the window looked hopeful to her. Gloria could not deny that the promise of safety and opportunity for her daughter, for her husband, and for herself, did bring her some happiness. However, there was still much to mourn. She was troubled that Luisa would not know her ancestry, might not even care. Gloria felt better each time she’d called her father back in San Salvador. His understanding had eased a sliver of her guilt, enough at least to let her join Tomás in looking ahead.

The plane hit a patch of turbulence. Gloria felt her friable sense of calm start to slip. The table trays rattled. The flight attendants hastened to their seats at the ends of the plane. Gloria closed her eyes, held Luisa tighter, and suddenly remembered a dream from the night before.

Last night, her mother had paid her a visit. Mamá Luisa had looked just as she did the last time Gloria had kissed her cheek goodnight. The strange thing was that her mother wore the same wine-red dress that Gloria was wearing the day Luisa was born. It was gauzier though, and the fabric billowed out, as wide as a parachute. Without moving her lips, Gloria’s mother told her that the world was not as vast as she feared, that, in fact, it was more like a large room with secret corners and invisible doors. Don’t worry so much, mija, she’d said. Then the skirt of her dress grew until it enveloped both Gloria and the infinite space behind her. When she woke, Gloria knew from the heart of her existence that it was possible to continue living in a place long after the body had left, and that their baby, baby Luisa, was the proof.