

To the graduate council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Katherine Martin Williams entitled *Sang the Sun*. I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

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(Original signatures on file with official student records.)

Sang the Sun

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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Katherine Martin Williams
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Abstract

This novel is not about a man who knows exactly what he wants out of life. This novel does not have a readily identifiable narrative arc with characters who have readily identifiable motives compelling their actions. This novel is about a man, who despite having all kinds of outward signs of success, cannot figure out why he must leave it all to find something else in another place. Even after he's found it, he's not even sure what *it* is. In short, this novel is about real life.

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Critical Introduction: Shouting Out Our(silent)selves

In my mind, it goes like this: When I walk into the room, you're all staring at me. I can't say that I'm nervous. I can only say that I'm prepared. Prepared for the chopping-block quality of the whole procedure. I wish there was some local anesthetic you could administer straight to the part of my brain that manufactures all the enzymes that make me tweaky in situations like these.

You sip coffee from a plastic cup, one of the SoHo variety designed for cold beverages. I allow myself the brief distraction of seeing the bottom fall out covering your desk – and my novel – in black dark roast. Instead, you take a sip, and place the cup on the desk. Cross legs. I sit. We exchange pleasantries – which for some reason reminds me of 'toiletries,' and I am happy I'm done with the teeth-brushing that signified the end of all the weeks of preparation for this day. The toothpaste I used was a new tube and tasted more of licorice than peppermint. Focus. I will replay this day, a discussion of all that means anything to me in terms of literature and art and my work, once on the way home, and then it will be over, like a Nicaraguan dream.

Kate: Sang the Sun. What was the inspiration for the title?

Kate: Sang the Sun comes from a line in Dylan Thomas' famous "Do not go gentle into that good night":

...Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

While there is nothing overtly Welsh or Thomistic about *Sang the Sun*, much of what Thomas writes of to his dying father in this poem is picked up by Will. Will and his father have a tumultuous relationship that never is allowed to play itself out. Thomas confronts the image of his own father that he had always known in life, now that his father is frail and weak just before death. Will struggles with the images he has known of his father. While it is often easy for Will to vilify him, there is a part of Will that depends in a very real way on his father's actions. To say that his father's desire to save Yelba from the poverty she experienced in Nicaragua is myopic might be tempting for Will, but he can't deny the reality of Francis as savior. Will resists that notion and responds with anger and the similar stubborn defiance embodied by Thomas' "rage against the dying of the light."

Dylan pits the villanelle, a form usually written for rhapsodic and pastoral themes, against the solemn and menacing foreboding of death. Will, in his own art as it reaches maturity, chooses to use children in scenes of play to depict the struggles of adulthood that often take place on much larger stages with more dire consequences.

For a time, in earlier drafts of this novel, I had also included various quotations to open different chapters. One or two were from Thomas. Some were from Edward Munch. Munch's post-impressionist paintings revealed an intensity of his own perception of surroundings that appealed to what I was beginning to craft for my

character of Will. I was also equally inspired by Buñuel and Dalí as surrealist artists taking Munch's work to another degree. After the world witnessed Wilde, Woolf, Joyce, and Ford, they then saw World War II. Some artists' answers to this in extremely general terms: a rejection of reality, again like Dylan rejecting the reality of his father's death. Another answer came from the realm of visual art in the form of Surrealism, echoed by the loose nonsensical babble of the beat generation. Both depict a reality that exists in a completely unknowable plane.

And on a very literal level, I also intended to deal with the juxtaposition of light and dark. The constant force of nature's process parallels the Progress of our Hyper-Industrialization. Ever since I experienced Nicaragua firsthand, I've been fascinated by the parallels of this constant that exists in both worlds. The dictates of the sun guide the workday in Nicaragua. The dictates of the economic forces of the city structure daily life in the city.

Kate: You can't possibly hold all these ideas in your head when the cursor blinks its incessant "feedmefeedmefeedme." What do you think about when you sit down to write?

Kate: You're right. I don't sit down to make any grand attempts at symbolism, huge metaphors, weighty imagery. I did not intend for there to be sacramental references of say, Faulknerian water-as-baptism. For one, I don't believe my characters are seeking redemption. I start writing from experience. I get dream-like visions (not Blake vis-à-vis Ginsberg, more like Dalí vis-à-vis his nightmares). In other words, I don't have all my notions about art and meaning and mimesis floating on the surface. They do exist somewhere in the scary subterranean bits of my mind, but I really come to the page

attempting to capture the images I've either experienced, or "dreamed" of experiencing, which is why my novel is episodic and imagistic.

So I knew there was going to be Nicaragua. I knew there was going to be an American city –the actual placename of little importance. And gradually Will came into view. The more I wrote Will, the more it became clear that his circumstances for getting where he had gotten in life – twenty-six, wealthy, and successful – were more interesting than Will himself.

Kate: So why Will at all?

Kate: Will Dante is the strange convergence of life in the twenty-first century, in the post-industrialized world. The cityscape sections are set in the near future. One comment I received when workshopping some early portions of the novel was that at any minute, the reader had the feeling as though a futuristic car might whiz by overhead. He said he could read it that way because of the strangeness of the building. But in many ways, I think that's where we are living now. An architect named Santiago Calatrava really does build buildings that look like body parts and cost obscene amounts of money. We can communicate with other parts of the world in insanely fast and increasingly impersonal ways. But we still take Pepto-Bismol for temporary relief of indigestion. It's a strange crossroads, and I see Will as the artist who feels all of these things, but doesn't know exactly how to make anything of it.

I see Beckett in him. But of course, there's also a lot of Chaplin in him. His pathos comes from Chaplin. He walks around taking down pictures in his sketchbook, but he can't communicate any of those ideas in his human relationships. His most

meaningful relationships are not with flesh-and-blood people. Certainly not with his father. He fails with Arri. He is most connected to Figueres the architect, and then later with Marbelys, with whom he struggles to communicate in another language. And even then, Marbelys does most of the communicating. And here again, it is dreamlike, and episodic. Also, she is a woman whose memories of people must suffice in place of their absence. He finds his only means of communication in any lasting way is his art. But he is also confined to his art – which for him, means leaving the city. Ultimately, he thinks in the new place he'll find – I won't say happiness, because Will is just nihilistic enough to know that happiness might be too much to want for – but at least satisfaction in his isolation and creation. Within the novel, I attempt to explore this juxtaposition of living life against observing and recording it.

In the end, I believe artists do end up in this same place. Beckett was in a nursing home at the end of his life. Chaplin was forced to flee the states. Dylan Thomas, drinking. Woolf's suicide.

Kate: Can you elaborate?

Kate: There's something mildly masturbatory about having to write your own intellectual autobiography. You hope that in the end much of what you believe, what you know about fiction, about art, is revealed in your work. And that your work can stand alone without your *ars poetica* to explain it. But I also know that I'm still very much a work-in-progress.

Nonetheless, Will at the end, reminds me of Beckett; he recognizes and intimates the futility of language, but persists in the exploration and dissemination of a *version* of

life, bleak as it may be, which is why the final film we see of his, is his foray into silence. It is a silent film that deals with the potential of good and evil in children. He questions the process of a world that would bring his path to intersect with some individuals so coincidentally and yet significantly all at the same time. For example, there's no real reason why he should have met the little boy Ben. There may be psychological reasons explaining why Will finds him to be so influential, but he wonders how, for other people, this experience of meeting this boy could be completely meaningless, but for him, it has shaped big portions of his life, of his art.

Will no longer engages in the act of writing *language*, as the only character to speak in *What Happened to Simeon Adams* is the schoolteacher. All that he has experienced: his doctoring of others' language, his own foray into filmmaking, his search for the meaning behind his uncle's death have culminated in his eliminating the possibility of language ever expressing anything accurately again. I want the character of Will to explain the exact opposite of Beckett: that he would no longer make attempts at explanation. But, there is something too apocalyptic about that notion. (The claim Elie Wiesel made – after the Holocaust, there can be no more poetry – would be too much for this story to bear.) There is hope in that he continues to make the attempt, though still convinced of its futility.

Kate: What then is the "function" of art?

Kate: I read an interesting article in *Slate* magazine. Many artists were asked to write brief paragraphs explaining what piece of art (literature, film, essay, event) helped them make sense of the world, particularly of the post-9/11 world. The artists and writers who

responded ranged from Robert Pinsky to Sam Tanenhaus. Some people mentioned memorial services, or the posters hung on telephone poles that moved from “missing persons” to testimonials and memorials as the days continued on. Others mentioned poems or films. Then the article turned to Harold Bloom, that paragon of literary scholarship and the man who wrote *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. His response was this: “I’ve seen absolutely nothing adequate to the event. It may be another sign that our culture has grown numb.” The “function” of art, then, lies somewhere in the repeal of that statement. First, there is something narcissistic or xenophobic about elevating what happened to America after 9/11 to the heights Bloom does by saying “there’s nothing.” He makes this comment wholly aware of Wiesel’s famous suggestion. That there could be no art. And in a way, Bloom equates the two. If Bloom is in fact right, then art has failed. Art is all that we have to make sense of our own humanity. Of the Woolfian gig lamps we pass through at symmetrical intervals.

I said earlier that my characters don’t seek redemption. They don’t seek it, but their presence in the story, their “function” garners it nonetheless. Figueres’ building and his subsequent disappearance redeem the ugliness, the by-products of the post-industrialized city. His art stands on its own. Despite advances we make, despite the trajectory that seems to impel us on a track towards hyper-isolation, his is the sort of work that continues to fuel us. And even though there are people who work in the building, and Francis, who do not ultimately understand it all – or like it for perhaps the “wrong” reasons – it still remains a beacon of change, or potential for redemption. It is just like Dak’s continued jazz playing – his stubborn adherence to an era of music that predated but inspired hip-hop – reflects a portion of the population’s commitment to

roots. And the building itself is an homage to cave dwellings, to communities, to the ancient agora, just as Will pays homage to silent films and black and white.

Kate: So who do you pay homage to? What are your roots? The traditions to which you stubbornly adhere in the face of all this Forward Progress? You're not writing Calvino here. You're not writing hypertext. Why does your novel take this form?

Kate: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* manages to negotiate this interesting divide between homage and fiction that is decidedly turn-of-the-millennium. McEwan's novel has a manipulative frame. It is divided into three parts; in the first part, we meet Briony, a little girl who lives on a large estate, directs plays, and generally bosses around her siblings to entertain herself. The narration is third-person, limited omniscient, where we as readers are at the elbow of several different characters throughout. There is a moment in the first part where McEwan describes a gazebo on the grounds of the family's estate through the consciousness of Briony, the writerly pre-pubescent protagonist. The description extends for some two and a half pages and rivals any lyrical description you might find in Henry James:

The island temple, built in the style of Nicholas Revett in the late 1780's, was intended as a point of interest, an eye-catching feature to enhance the pastoral ideal, and had of course no religious purpose at all. It was near enough to the water's edge, raised upon a projecting bank, to cast an interesting reflection in the lake, and from most perspectives the row of pillars and the pediment above them were charmingly half obscured by elms and oaks that had grown up around. Closer to, the temple had a sorer look: moisture rising through a damaged damp course had caused chunks of stucco to fall away... (68)

Much of the prose is extremely Jamesian in style. And McEwan intends this all. In a reversal, part three of the novel reveals that much of the novel has been, in fact, a fiction.

McEwan's fiction, yes. But McEwan writing Briony writing a fiction. We are meant to believe that all the point of view posturing, as well as the elements of plot have sprung from Briony's mind as she recounts the events of her childhood. We are navigated through all of the events – and the unfortunate repercussions of her actions as they changed the course of her family members and close friends – through the eyes of the seventy-seven-year-old published writer Briony finishing up her final piece, a memoir of sorts. We jump from the points of view of Briony as a child, and Briony imagining the point of view as her mother, or the family friend who comes to visit. But when we watch as the events of the second part unfold, and then finally realize Briony has been imagining the points of view of all the other characters, then it becomes important that McEwan has not revealed to us in the opening sections Briony's unreliability. Is she telling the truth about what happens, or manipulating the re-telling to orchestrate her own atonement? While the style of multiple close-third points of view, as well as the devotion to realism resemble James, the question of the manipulation of the reader is decidedly of a different era. McEwan complicates reality in that there is more than just the one world, as we would normally be entering in *The Portrait of a Lady*. This complication, this second level of world-making, enters him into the canon of post-modern fiction writers. While not disposing of traditional form or style altogether, he pays homage to the success, the efficacy of that "realist" tradition of fiction, while at the same time stating that "realism" can be wider than that. Zadie Smith pays homage in *On Beauty* to Forster's *Howard's End*. But Smith doesn't succeed on the level that McEwan does because she fails to add another level of complication to the piece. So it becomes instead

a second-rate adaptation of *Howard's End* rather than a stunning complication of the original.

I have tried to make use of elements of literary traditions I find fundamental, while still paving my own way thematically. McEwan's world may still be one confronting the universal struggles of morality – very Jamesian indeed. *Sang the Sun* picks up the pastiche form of novelist John Dos Passos, but thematically I deal with issues quite different from Dos Passos. Smith tried to say, this is the twenty-first century version of realist fiction. I don't think there's much risk involved in that.

Kate: What of "risk" in fiction?

Kate: I know the post-modern bunch, or the post-post-modern bunch did not corner the market on "risk" in fiction. Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Woolf's and Joyce's stream of consciousness in modernism, W.E.B. DuBois' double-consciousness, Marquez's magical realism: they're all about taking risks in their fiction. Jonathan Safran Foer takes monumental risks. (I might offer his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* for its risk-taking, but also his assessment of where we are now in this post-9/11 world to Mr. Bloom as evidence that we're not growing numb.) Excellent writing makes me happy, but excellent writing that also takes a risk, that adds some alternate level of complication as with McEwan's *Atonement*, makes me happy to be a writer. It inspires me.

Kate: If you start with images, why did you construct Will's world in its two parts? Why did this world, and its construction, appeal to you?

Kate: I have always been interested in Beckett's notion of language as irrevocably fallible. He asserts it is incapable of adequately expressing the complexity, the minutiae of human life, but he refuses to give up the habit of trying. In his first novel *Murphy*, he writes, "I know of no form that does not violate the nature of Being in the most unbearable manner." One might say it is telling that he wrote these words in his first of what would be a long list of novels, including his trilogy, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. Or, it might just be evidence of his continued downward spiral from *Murphy* to the final work in the trilogy where the protagonist is nothing but a jar of excrement that truly signifies him at his most jaded with regard to the possibility of language. This paradoxical theme appears over and over again in Beckett. Of his writing, Beckett enigmatically explains, "Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness" (qtd. in Gussow 139). In *Waiting for Godot*, he has one of the quintessential characters of post-modern Theatre of the Absurd explain, "Writing is disimproving the silence." Is it better to remain in the silence than to make an attempt to explain it and fail? Yet, how do we explain Beckett's continued attempts in the prolific body of work that followed *Murphy*? Obviously he had some faith in the attempt, if he continued, even if it meant depicting jars of excrement that said things like, "*De nobis ipsis silemus*, decidedly that should have been my motto" (329). Perhaps we should remain fortified in our understanding of Beckett in his most optimistic about the nature of writing in his play, *Endgame*: "I have long believed that here in the end is the writer's best chance giving in to the synaptic chasm." Despite all of the hopelessness he lends to the capability of language at truly communicating the complexities of emotion.

The fascination for me lies in attempting to depict a person entirely devoted to recapturing the connections of meaning in one's psychological interpretation of the world. For Will, this notion of recapturing connections becomes even more difficult to interpret as we see him devoted to an observation of life, even as he in many ways fails in the course of experiencing it. But in hyper awareness, he has become so self-analytical that his own psychological construct has been as much a creation as the fiction he creates in an attempt to understand reality.

Kate: What difficulties did you have constructing these worlds, and why?

Kate: Perhaps my concentration on the subject of fragmentation, on the piecing together of life in its series of "unrelated" episodes, resulted in a frustrating experience relationally for readers. My desire was to depict our fumbling towards connection in relationships, especially with the people from whom we most desire intimacy. I'm sure that I've not negotiated the representation of this ineffectual communication as masterfully as my writers of influence. In Pinter, the experience of characters not connecting is frustrating and alarming, but finally as close to "the real" as any exchange of dialogue out there in theatre or fiction. I have not reached that level in my dialogue, but aim for that exposure of "the real."

I also believe it is difficult to construct the psychological landscape, especially of a character's life that unfolds so melodramatically. Everything Will encounters in the space of story time, his actions, his motivations, his idleness reads in some ways as unbelievable. He encounters every decision, every obstacle with a finality and drama that becomes overwhelming. Even I question the "believability" of a character who insists on

making the entirety of his situation somehow worse in his own isolationism – but I know that he represents the seeming incomprehensibility of reality.

Perhaps this is all too blatant a revelation, like when Briony in *Atonement* makes assertions about artists as Gods. McEwan expresses similar concerns about the decidedly unlikable character of Briony as I have for Will: “deeply flawed and yet I hope still sympathetic.” I feel Will is strange and esoteric but not unsympathetic. His psychological landscape is drawn from the images he commits to memory. Some of these images are made of his own memories.

Though, I still find it difficult to judge the responses of readers. I have often been accused of prolix prose; I fear that my aim to affect the audience with a sort of wash of language, as one might experience it jumbled and discordant in Will’s nightmarish mind, may be at times lost in melodramatic clutter.

Kate: Why do you write?

Kate: Some of this is a bit premature in the asking. There are certain milestones, certain benchmarks in life at which it is important to take stock, to commit ideas, progress, intellectual position to paper. Or maybe reel-to-reel tapes. But I commit these ideas here, to posterity, to the dusty virtual world of the University of Tennessee’s Theses & Dissertations e-shelf with the following caveat: I still have much more writing to do. I still feel as though I’m very young in this learning process. I have a lot of maturing to do as a writer; I have a lot of maturing to do as a human being. Were Jonathan Safran Foer, at the ripe ol’ age of twenty-seven, asked to wax philosophically on *ars poetica*, I’m not sure that we wouldn’t say to ourselves, “What does he know? He’s only written two

novels.” He’s only just begun the journey of the more precise definition of those intentions. Something tells me he might not be shy in offering where he *is* now, but with a similar caveat: all notions subject to change.

Nonetheless, I write because I’m not at all stunted by Beckett. And as I do more and more reading, I think in the end, even when he made his shift to radio, TV and then film, I think he was, dare I say, an optimist. He wasn’t going to stop trying, even if he did think language inadequate in expressing the complexities of human emotion. But he had lasting fortitude; he could create, despite the constraints he felt. He was liberated despite the construct of language’s limitations. The intensity of his characters’ emotions is still overwhelming. In *Krapp’s Last Tape*, when Krapp rewinds and plays back and rewinds and fast forwards through the events of his life and stops on the moment of his lovemaking, you can see the tears in his eyes, the painful recollection of a memory – a memory that he can only fully reclaim if he also admits his abiding and inevitable regret predicated on that painful remembering.

Kate: Another theme in your novel.

Kate: Yes. For all my characters, there is an inherent pain in memories, but as humans, we have to admit, in some ways it is more painful to (try to) let go of those memories. Yelba, Will, Marbelys, Figueres, and Arri all struggle with that paradox of existence.

Kate: Who else has influenced you as a writer?

Kate: Sterne for taking risks before they were even risks. (One of the more prophetic and poetic moments in the 9/11 report was the committee’s recommendations for change.

They suggested there were four places where we as a nation need to improve: policies, management, communication. Right. Sure. But the last was Imagination. And of course they then went onto explain a very sterile and pragmatic take on federally-initiated Imagination, but I think there is hope in the word choice.) I would do well to allow myself to step into whatever dark room Sterne was able to enter where everything in the whole world was a possibility to him in 1759. Imagination indeed.

Joyce for his ambition: the maudlin Stephen Daedalus and the quotidian Leopold Bloom inhabiting the same journey of a day. I admire (and envy) his facility with language and his unrelenting object in making the novel ‘hard’ for readers. After Joyce (and Proust), readers had to learn to read novels in a new way.

Arundhati Roy I admire for her gorgeous prose. For being a woman writer writing male relationships. For her loving care in writing children, something missing in other of my male writers of influence (save for Foer). And her ability to write from a place of immense, unabashed political polarization. She navigates what must be a mind rife with anger and fervor but still manages to deliver prose as subtle, tenuous and well-balanced as a lily pad:

It was past midnight. The river had risen, its water quick and black, snaking towards the sea, carrying with it cloudy night skies, a whole palm frond, part of a thatched fence, and other gifts the wind had given it.

In a while, the rain slowed to a drizzle and then stopped. The breeze shook water from the trees and for a while it rained only under trees, where shelter had once been. (273)

Yeats writes of writing that has the “click of a well-made box.” I find that in just about every line of Roy’s prose.

David Foster Wallace. He resembles Joyce in his genius with language. A stunning command of the English language and the intensely complicated narrative weaving of more than ten different plotlines baffles readers into submission. In reading his tome, *Infinite Jest*, I continually asked myself if he could really ask this much of me as a reader and be serious about it. He expects worlds from his readers, and I appreciate that immensely. Wallace has his own literary judgment of the “new voices” in fiction that I find appealing. After the complimentary reviews of his first novel, *Broom of the System*, and the completion of a draft of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace was asked to write an essay for a special edition of the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* called “Novel as Critic”:

There are, of course, uncountable differences between the formative experiences of consecutive generations, and to exhaust and explain all the ones relevant here would require both objective distance and a battalion of social historians. Having neither at hand, I propose to invite consideration of just three specific contemporary American phenomena, viz the impacts of television, of academic Creative Writing Programs, and of a revolution in the way educated people understand the function and possibility of literary narrative. These three because they seem at once powerfully affective and normatively complex. Great and grim, tonic and insidious, they are (I claim) undeniable and cohesive influences on this country’s “New Voices.” (3)

Wallace manages to speak for a new generation of voices admirably. We’re kidding ourselves if we don’t believe that television and film have changed our thinking. It has changed the way we can choose to look at literary narrative. I like that Wallace continually manages to place the work that writers do in the larger context of the world. Yes, it’s important to look microscopically at writers on the level of language (like with Beckett), or Roy (with image), but also, like Wallace does, it’s important to comment on the place of your work in the world too, to realize that your work is irrevocably connected to and influenced by the time in which you live.

Kate: And lastly, because this is your imagination at work, we'll finish with your imagination. What is your favorite word?

Kate: I have four. They're all from *Ulysses*. Biscuitfully. (Yes, it's an adverb. Stephen King eat your heart out.) And "ineluctable modality of being."

Kate: What is the word you like the least?

Kate: Guilt.

Kate: Lastly, if heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say to you when you arrive at the pearly gates?

Kate: Maybe I'd have Him say, "I'm a big fan of your work."

Kate: Seriously?

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“I was walking along the road with two friends. The sun set. I felt a tinge of melancholy. Suddenly, the sky became a bloody red.”

- E. Munch, diary entry
22 Jan 1892

Part 1: Cazando Nicaragua

Int. Airplane, 13 October 1977 – Early evening

A week from today, the person least likely to recognize the direction Francis' life had taken would be Francis. In five days, Francis would return to the United States a married man and the new CEO of Congranja. His boss, a man to whom he had referred since his first days in graduate school simply as Doc, would die at age 56 slumped over his bare mahogany desk of congestive heart failure, a tiny porcelain mug of coffee smashed under his weight, caffeine settling into his veins.

But on the Wednesday, before his boss would die, before he'd meet the most intriguing woman he had ever set eyes on, Francis was just another first-class bachelor on a business trip, a promotion contingent on his performance. He watched the city's lights flicker out all at once as the clouds passed between the plane's window and the rest of the world. Wispy streaks that looked painted hurried in frenzied patterns and various distances past the cold hard plastic, obscuring the city's lights. He reached up and turned off the overhead light that he had been using to avoid the jagged things that had begun appearing before him in the dark. He tried to distract himself with the magic of the disappearing city. A whole city present then gone. Present and gone. Blacked out. A cosmic magic marker stripe.

He distractedly traced the shape of the triangle on the Nicaraguan flag on the page of Nicaraguan facts. A triangle with a crest emblazoned on a field of royal blue and pure white. He traced each finite side to their corners. Three points. America. Congranja. Nicaragua. One. Two. Three.

He forgot to pack his lighter and asked the snoozing man next to him if he might borrow a match, though it wasn't really borrowing. The end of his cigarette flared

briefly, caught, and then settled into a slow burn. Francis inhaled greedily and rested his head, the imprint of a giant steaming volcano frozen in black and white on the backs of his eyelids.

Ext. On the tarmac – Continuous

The blast of heat hit Francis like he'd had the wind knocked out of him. He blinked, both to adjust to the glare of the sun off the asphalt of the tarmac, but also because he was still a bit groggy from his nap. He couldn't believe he'd slept through the landing. His entry into the country, were it not for the men at the gates with the sub-machine guns and the ambivalent faces – so much the same from one man to the next, they might have had no faces at all – would have seemed like any other plane ride. What was he expecting, after all? Could there really be that big a difference? The airport appeared to be under construction. This is a good sign, right? Progress had already begun to touch the infant Nica.

He had packed light, because he did not expect to spend more than a couple of days on this first discovery trip. He was met at the automatic sliding glass doors in the front of the air conditioned building (not so different at all), by a man carrying a sign with his name scribbled on it. "Welcome Frances." Yes, it was spelled wrong, but he was there. And on time. Something the Nicaraguans would never again repeat over the course of his entire trip. Timeliness. Also, this was the last time Francis would feel the coldness of conditioned air for the next five days.

"Hello."

“Hello, Mr. Francis. Nice to meet you.” His words ran together.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr...Bojorge, is it?” Francis left a gap here for the man he thought was his translator to fill in. He couldn’t for the life of him, remember what his name was. Francis was under the impression that the man who would pick him up at the airport would be his translator for the trip. But this guy from what he could tell didn’t speak a word of English. And the only Spanish Francis knew was the bit he memorized for the opening of his talk tomorrow.

“No, no amigo. No soy Santiago. Me llamo Pedro. Pedro Alberto. Señor Bojorge no está aquí porque está enfermo. Pero, mañana por supuesto, el será aquí para ir con usted al asamblea.”

The air had suddenly gotten stuffy inside the cab. Francis couldn’t tell if it was the weather or this man’s fast-talking that was making him feel the way he did, but he was dizzy.

“¿Entiende?”

“You don’t speak English?” Francis struggled to recall something. Anything. En español. He felt suddenly three years old again. “No español. No hable español.”

“Ahh.”

“Yes. Ahh.”

“I take you to hotel. No problema.” The jolly guy rolled down his window, put the car in first, and pulled out into the airport exit traffic without looking back over his shoulder. Or at the rearview mirror. There was no rearview mirror.

“Right.”

Sweat rolled off Francis's forehead making an ugly splotch of gray droplets on his shirt front. As soon as they'd pulled out into the two-lane stretch of road, the man lurched forward towards Francis, his fat face only inches from Francis's crotch. As if by some weird instinct, Francis reared back, throwing his arms up over his head. Pedro was only reaching to roll down the passenger-side window. He let out a huge laugh that seemed to come from somewhere underneath his giant hard belly. His head went straight back for several seconds before he returned his attention to the pedestrians and bicycles and cars he seemed bent on nearly swiping. Repeatedly.

"Oh. Sorry." Despite the language barrier, Pedro seemed well-versed in the fine art of sarcasm.

Pedro lunged at him one more time, just to see him flinch. He repeated his belly laugh.

Francis, now more than a little peeved, reached back into the back seat for his suit jacket to fish out a cigarette. He'd finally found the pack but remembered he didn't have a lighter, and there was no chance of this little hatchback having an in-dash lighter. Defeated, he threw the pack on the floor in front of him.

The driver used two hands to root around under his seat, while he drove with his knees, at times even ducking his head below, and emerged with the unmistakable attitude of triumph. He handed Francis a hot pink lighter with a naked girl on it. He gave Francis a toothy grin and nudged him in the ribs. Francis lit up and made to hand the lighter back to the driver.

"No. No. Es tuyo ahora. Insisto."

“Gracias.” Francis took the lighter. Pulled some tobacco off his tongue and busied himself with watching the new place pass by his window. There was a woman carrying a brown baby on one hip, and a big plastic jug of water against the other. A boy peddled past on a bike with a piece of rebar, most likely pilfered from the construction at the airport, balanced across his shoulders. Dangling from either side were small tied baggies of sweaty electric pink, red, turquoise, and purple colored liquid, like those pictures in National Geographic of the women with the animal-bladders of water balanced on either side of a stick. He called something over and over again, deftly maneuvering through crowds of people.

Within the space of a minute or two, the asphalt gave way to a rocky mix of sand, gravel and dust. Francis saw a limping, badly malnourished dog with drooping nipples and felt a sharp pang of sympathy. The size of the shanties on either side of the road, grew smaller and smaller, their gardens in the front or to the side, browner and more dead.

Francis glanced over to the dash to see how fast they were going. They couldn't be traveling more than 40 miles an hour, but with the bouncing and jostling, it felt somehow faster, like any minute, they might hit a hole or rock and flip the little tin can they were riding in right over. On his dash, smack-dab over the speedometer, Pedro had taped a badly curling school picture of a pig-tailed girl frowning seriously into the camera. Francis caught himself wondering how old Pedro was. He wondered how much money he made. What kind of a place he had.

The shacks on the side of the road, with their chain-linked fences and their bits of what looked like aluminum siding as roofing, fell away and in their place, came the lush

and beautiful plots of land packed with corn and rice and beans and the brightest green he'd ever seen. It must be after four now. Francis was confused. His secretary had booked reservations for him at the *Hotel Colonial* that was supposed to be in the center of the city. And the largest in Managua. The only one with air conditioners. Window units, but that was, Mary had said, "the best you're gonna get in that god-forsaken place, Mr. Francis." She also, said she "couldn't help but be a little worried about him, what with all the crazy Mexicans down there. You never know how they'll take you. They don't understand us down there. And some of them, I've heard, can be downright mean." Now, he began to wonder if Mary's fears were grounded in some kind of reality.

He only had the bit of research Mary had given him on Nicaraguan history before the trip. His work researching politics and history was quickly subordinated to climate and culture. He knew that the Somozas had been in power for more than seventy years and had brought stability to a volatile country. There were rumors of cronyism, but they didn't seem much different than the rumors that pervaded Washington. It was important to have a stable government in place, one that the United States could do business with. Then, it was up to companies like Congranja, companies based in democratic ideals, to come in and help bring their brand of governance in through sound, well-established business models. If the culture of the company could be learned within the walls of a building, then the culture could be taken home. Brought to employees' families. Could be spread, like what, like laughter, even to the government. It would be contagious.

Francis pulled his suitcase onto his lap, and looked for the map he'd brought along. The map on the Xeroxed page from the *World Book* had an inset of the capital city. And precious little else.

“Uh, amigo,” he awkwardly pointed at the inset, “where are we going?”

“Qué?”

“Uh, hotel? It’s here. My hotel.” He tapped the paper.

“Ah. Yes. Yes. Un momento. Primero, vamos a la playa.”

“What?” The heat of day, the travel, this annoying driver, the absent translator. It had begun to take its toll. He was agitated. Full-blown agitated. Pissed.

Pedro pulled the taxi off the ‘main’ road and onto a road that was in much worse shape – quite an achievement in and of itself, Francis thought. He could feel his spine retract and cringe with each bump and jostle of the car – a car whose shocks were all but non-existent. Francis’s mind began to wander uncontrollably now. Free-wheel through all kinds of scenarios. Surely the National Guard wouldn’t employ fat, jovial taxi drivers to conduct unknowing American businessmen to their tortured deaths in the middle of a Managuan field of beans. Right? Mary didn’t know what she was talking about. He was just tired.

“My God.” Francis reached up to hold the roof of the car from his head that kept managing to bang into it. They’d been in the car, nearly an hour and a half. It was clear they were not heading to the hotel.

“Un momento, Francees. Un momento.” Another 1,000-watt grin.

And then he caught sight of it. The ocean. The vast blue expanse. Pedro slammed on the brakes, kicking up sand and dust behind them. He had nearly driven them right into the Atlantic. Right there, right in front of him. Nobody as far as the eye could see. Just Pedro, Francis, and the dingy-rusty white hatchback, visible waves of heat incandescing off its hood. Francis wondered if he might not incandesce too, right

there on the spot. He opened the door, and for no other reason than he wanted to, pulled off his tie, unbuttoned his shirt, untied his Italian leather shoes, unplastered his gold-toed socks and threw them all in the back of the hatchback. He hadn't felt sand between his toes since... it must have been since he was a child. He glanced back over his shoulder at the happy Pedro, who too had removed his shirt and was inexplicably patting his belly, a bit like a summer Santa Claus, and nodded his affirmation to Francis.

Francis silently scolded himself for ever thinking the worst about this happy man. About this beautiful place. He couldn't wait to meet the translator. He wanted to ask him about Pedro and his family. He wanted to give this man a job. He could be the official welcomer of everyone who came to visit the new plant.

“¡Bienvenidos a Nicaragua!” Pedro shouted over the din of the waves, arms outstretched.

“Gracias,” Will called back over his shoulder, unsure what he meant, but thankful all the same. He inhaled deeply, dug his toes into the sand, and right where he was, right where he was meant to be, he sat.

“Estamos aquí.”

Francis fought the urge to hug him.

Int. The Duumvirate – Lunchtime

“These days the only thing we get excited about as a nation is hating radicals and saving sea turtles,” she paused and as an afterthought added, “and going to war for the former, never the latter.”

Will paid careful attention to the lunch crowd banter at *The Duumvirate*. But especially to Arri. He listened to her careful commas and sharp-breathed pronouncements. Arri intrigued him more than the others. Will made six figures and had been mildly content to use the daily lives of his fellow urbanites as his muses for several years now. But he was about to do something drastic. He was either going to quit his job or allow himself to fall in love with this woman he had never officially met before. Or both.

“Never mind the fact that we’re all fucking going to hell. Never mind The Great Divide. We preach on and on about the gap between the rich and the poor, but what about the gap between the poor and the middle class?” the Prophet said in his baseball cap and pink bowtie.

It was characters like this guy making pronouncements like that, that kept bringing Will back. Every time he came in here, that guy was hurling some glancing generalization at anything from social ills to media bias to conspiracies amongst the purveyors of gardening tools. Little, big. Fat, skinny. It mattered not, but it was always delivered at the same decibel level: Loud and at the behest of no one in particular.

And this was where he had first come into contact with the inimitable Arri, a red-headed regular with a curt-but-intelligent mouth and matching attitude. She had once explained matter-of-factly to someone horrified at one of the more colorful remarks of

the Prophet, as some had taken to calling him, that he wore the hat because he was balding and didn't want anyone to know, and the bowtie because he was smart and wanted everyone to know. Her arms gestured so wildly they gave the illusion of occupying a much larger space than they actually did. Her voice had similar ambitions. On the opposite end of the counter mounted to the glass window that had once been a display case for high heels and alligator handbags, Arri conducted her own court. For this, she needed plenty of room. Her arms worked feverishly to keep pace with her diatribe. They were the commas, semi-colons and the question marks of her syntax. Really, they served as some of the only grammatical indicators anchoring the unfathomable pattern of her thoughts. And something told Will she knew this. She knew she had nothing to say and so made grandiose gestures in an effort to distract her throngs of followers who could not, who must not know, she had this dirty little secret. She was a face with red hair and beautifully befreckled arms. Will was instantly drawn to those among them who had things to hide, for he had a secret of his own: he was one of them.

Today's throng seemed to be comprised of the usual Arri-followers. She had a round table discussion going concerning the tired question of race. It must be a Monday. Not in top form. Will, from countless "working lunches" like this one, had learned that Arri was an environmental lawyer with plenty of acclamations. She was well known in the city. He often followed her cases in the papers. She had made headlines for a case when she held the press conference at the site of a demolition. She chained herself to a bulldozer. Nothing new about crazy people chaining themselves to trees, but she chained herself to the machine itself. It never would have been covered had Arri been a middle-aged defense attorney. The city liked having a high-profile environmental lawyer. It

made them all feel good about themselves. Will found it oddly endearing, even though he loathed the concession it automatically made: I'm a lawyer, *but* I'm the do-gooder kind. She had started out in criminal courts but, and exhaling, rolled her eyes, "They're all too freaking corrupt. We're intent to put half the planet behind bars, before it's all said and done. Meanwhile, we're installing metal detectors in preschools. We're all walking paranoiacs. Drug us all, man. One prescription at a time." And she refused to be a part of that, dammit. So instead, she looked to affecting change on a different level. No word yet on whether she felt the change was inherently good or evil.

"Let's face it. You're white. You were born in America. You just won the fucking lottery, bro." She was unnervingly interesting. She seemed somehow more clever, more alive than the other players in the shop. But there was still something irking him. Her façade. A beautiful outside, but some grey coldness inside.

Over and over again Will came back to hear shit like this from people like this. No, that wasn't exactly true. He came back because *The Duumvirate* had this bohemian feel that made him somehow feel like less the colossal asshole than he actually was. And that wasn't really it either. *The Duumvirate's* sandwiches were the best he'd found in the city *and* the material was ripe. Some of his best stuff had been completely lifted from the clientele of *The Duumvirate*. There was undeniable humanity here. In the everyday. He had to walk eleven or twelve minutes to get here, passing several more upscale, more suitable places for Will Dante to be seen on West End street, but he returned, two or three times a week, religiously. Not enough times to be noticed or particularly noted as a regular, he felt, for he came at high lunch rush, but often enough to take fastidious notes at the feet of the regular royalty perched atop the crap bar stools with the endearing

wobble and cracked faux-leather cushions that exhaled the stale air of numerous years and asses that had come before him.

These were the reasons he told himself. But in the night, staring into the ceiling fan, when he would find some rest in a state somewhere between sleeping and waking, he could tell himself the truth about why he had begun to eat repeatedly, downright habitually, at the crusty old sandwich shop. He had been following Arri. Not in the trenchcoat-scary way, but definitely in a way that made Will realize, even though he played it off as something other than obsession, this was something more. His fascination with her, this intrigue, was different. He felt okay about it because he knew this would go somewhere else. It wouldn't just become new fodder. New material. All of this would be justified because in the end, they would end up together.

“I once gave one to a girl from my rowing team. She was like in desperate need. We were on this trip to the San Diego zoo. High School, right. And she went to the bathroom and couldn't handle it. Handle it.” The new girl with the Rastafarian get-up was explaining to Haylan, working the counter.

“Seriously?” These were the servants to the kings and queens of West End.

Haylan, who'd been here long enough to know the regulars, had recently done enough cajoling of the manager to get the other girl hired. Her buddy, who on this day was in charge of running the awkward food prep area, was busier recounting the story than she was with the unwieldy stacks of plastic containers she attempted to balance. *The Duumvirate* had leased an old retail spot twenty years ago and had never gotten around to doing any of the envisioned remodeling. One of these imaginary business plans included installing a freezer on the premises. They leased space in an industrial cooler from the

Chinese restaurant on the other side of the block. The two establishments shared an alley way and the mechanically chilled air so necessary for the mayonnaise-based salads of *The Duumvirate* that had a kind of cult following in West End. So during the lunch rush, they always had an extra barkeep on staff to make the necessary runs out into the alley to Cathay Egg Roll's cooler. For this reason, some of the salad-type sandwiches, particularly the egg and chicken, had a decidedly yet entirely accidental eastern flare, the ever so slight hint of ginger root and soy. Some people liked it; Will stuck to the tomato barley gazpacho – anything as long as it wasn't potato.

“Yeah, like she went in there. I had given her one. And she couldn't do it.”

Rasta girl was just back from the freezer.

“Goddamn, that's...that's.”

“Scary?”

“No, it's like pitiful... incredible, really.”

“Yeah.” She dumped the industrial-sized plastic tubs onto the counter and pulled out the clear-but-yellowed container of apple-tuna salad and a pita.

“I didn't know there were still women like that.”

“I know.” She used one of those cafeteria-style ice cream scoops with the crank and spring-loaded action handle, pulled out a scoopful, slapped it into the pita, and with a graying plastic spatula, smeared it around the inside of the slit. He wondered if anyone else had heard what they had been talking about while preparing the food. He was thankful he had ordered the bowl of soup and hoped it had not been the girl's own trip to the bathroom after – or before – her trip to the freezer that had spurred the odd memory, but knew all the same, it probably was. The dirtiness of everyday life. He threw down

the cash for the soup, tipped her an extra five for her unwitting contribution, and left *The Duumvirate* recharged and satisfied.

On the outside, in the daylight, surrounded by strangers, Will sniffed the air and blinked into the sun. He had an abiding sense of embarrassment. For the world. For its brutality. The disparity he witnessed every day. For living metropolis-ly.

This was not to be confused with a lack of confidence, though people were often persuaded to believe otherwise due to the quickness with which his face could go from fair to flush. The pink-y, vaguely, rare meat quality of his cheeks was nearly translucent buttressed against the blackness of his aggressive hairline that toyed ever so subtly with his Nicaraguan mother's widow's peak. He was never the least bit ill at ease with his angular features that gave him at once a severity and femininity. In fact, he believed the last bit of dis-ease with his body had left him with the remaining vestiges of his pubescent self. He lacked self-awareness entirely, at least with regard to his appearance. He didn't care that his dark features and fair face made others question his identity, his heritage, nor did he concern himself with the haphazard way his clothes seemed to attach themselves to his frame. Those who were privy knew his naked body to be nothing short of a detailed exercise in form and space in the most disciplined minimalism. He seemed at once architect and architected. Will Dante was somehow his own creation. Even his last name. He dropped his father's last name for the sake of simple aesthetics (and perhaps for the unfortunate association with his father). He was the sculptor and

sculpture. Yet, unless you knew of these sinews that seemed carved in bas relief, you would never suspect a perfect frame underneath his fine, though ill-fitting, attire.

On the way back to his office where he pretended to do all of his writing, newly armed with more blank-screen-defeating material, Will deliberately made a pass by the coffee factory on the outskirts of the warehouse district downtown, the eastern-most end of West End. He passed by a food pantry where this week's schizos, psychos, and belligerents bantered with themselves, gestured wildly, and pitched their fits; he blushed for them. And this time, like every time, the clammy hot-coldness began just under his collar and choked its way heavensward, an invisible hand forcing the last remains of the toothpaste up from the bottom of the tube. His emotions were this way. Always readily available if one knew how to squeeze him. Unscrew the lid, and there they were. This too, he inherited from his mother.

The heat was oppressive. People were a-flutter of late with the heat wave. It was the kind of heat you were forced to swallow – a hot, caramel kind of heat. In his younger days, he might have become lost in a vivid imaginative oasis slash delusion of the asphalt's hot waves curly cuing their – what must be – poisonous gases around the soles of his feet. So poisonous in fact, they'd melt straight through the soles. The toxic fumes seeping through his poly-cotton blend dress socks. (Don't some chemical burn patients, in fact, suffer a form of toxemia or septicemia when the chemicals from their man-made clothing seep into their bloodstreams because it has actually become a part of their physical body chemistry? Had the purveyors of hemp clothing added this to their bulleted lists of pros and cons in buying hemp products?) He would have imagined it melting his toenails right at the cuticles into his flesh and all the muck and fungus and

germs and bugs, a whole battery of microbial organisms would march right into his type AB blood. But, he had to grow up. There had to be more than that, right? More than the fabricated metamorphosis of fancy into money. It had been too easy, his rise to the top. He'd worked too little. Been too, he felt, un-talented. Known too few people to have succeeded as he had in as short a time as he had. True, his father was big. But he had had nothing to do with Will's meteoric rise in this city, despite their close proximity to each other.

"Fucking-a," he exhaled to no one in particular. Five years of walking out the same door down this same street and he was just now putting it together. And he seemed to do this less often than he used to. The private proclamations to no one. Was he proclaiming less? Or was he just, on the whole, less philosophical? Merely a function of age? He was comfortable with either. It's the Maxwell House coffee factory. He always sort of assumed the smell to be something burning at the food pantry a couple blocks west. Or perhaps just the by-product of the morning shift and The Homeless. He thought for sure the stench had to have been body-based. But it was the fucking coffee factory.

Left over from the old factory district of downtown, Maxwell House occupied an entire city block. It had the look of a building for which there was never a heyday, doomed to be dated from its inception. Dark red brick upon dark red brick. Terrible signage: an old multi-bulb job that half-heartedly blinked "Maxwell." A little cup and an ethereal drop that also blinked. Somebody, probably fifty years ago, sitting in a boardroom at the big debate concerning the new sign contract wanted the drop to look as though it were coming from the heavens itself, dark coffee goodness dropping into your morning routine, straight from the source of All That Is Good. Everyone around the table

must have nodded in solemn agreement, hands pressed together in collective steeping at the profundity of this proposal. But the giant pole supporting the drop from its base on the roof was always illuminated clearly by the light from the drop itself. The ultimate example of the delusion of grandeur. There was something phenomenally dreary about this place. He had never quite figured out how to work it into his material. It was pitiful and sad and rich. He'd always decided to leave it alone. He, not yet worthy of its great stores of reality. From the deteriorating structure to the very lack of life surrounding this factory that was still somehow operating, he got the feeling he should just leave it be, a sleeping lioness. Even the homeless gave it a wide berth. Another generation might have gathered at its withered sidewalk, the generation of vagrants who spawned the parents of this generation. But now, even they wouldn't loiter here. Too depressing a has-been. They've got to be closer to the middle. The Beat. The pulsing rhythm of the city's churning.

Will too felt himself resisting the pull back into its axis. He turned back up Shepherd that ran parallel to West End. He felt an impending unproductive afternoon. Not unproductive in terms of thinking, but in terms of product. Too much unsettled coursed in his blood. Too much yet un-chronicled. Too much un-bastardized. He would have to spend most of the afternoon first getting it down. Then much of tomorrow would be devoted to editing, manipulating, distilling. Working on others' scripts was the experience of regurgitating into mushy manageable bits that which could be fed back to them. At this he was as masterful as a mother bird. At tricking people into laughing at the audacity, the mendacity, the ignorance, and the idiocy of themselves and all the glorious judgment to which it was inextricably linked. His devices remain undetected,

like Advil, until six hours later, when its effects started wearing off, when the people who had seen his material, realized he had been using them. They were his fodder.

And they kept coming back.

If Solomon blushed at the amount of money Will made, Will blushed at what he did that earned it. He was a script doctor. A writer doctor for writers. He got scripts, sometimes six or seven in as many days that needed some kind of “tweaking.” But the reason he would be called in is because whatever it was the script was meant to be doing, it wasn’t. It wasn’t getting the response the original writers, producers, directors had in mind. And because writers and directors for the most part won’t believe that the error has anything to do with their ineptitude, they’re quick to blame the scripts. Nine times out of ten, they’re right.

Sometimes they’d call Will into the set if the script was already in production. And he would listen to actors reading their lines, and know intuitively how to change the course of the film. Better dialogue, more action, less telling, more doing. Cut all the scenes in half. Sometimes, if he had a long-standing relationship, he’d take the script to directors’ homes to revamp with them. Most of the time, he just received scripts at his office, and would later get a phone call from the sender, asking how much time and money it would take to fix it, to fix the problem. Sometimes what he was looking at had potential, sometime not, but always there was a lot riding on whatever it is Will was meant to do. Somehow he knew it intuitively in his blood, and he got paid for letting.

The cosmic joke was that he couldn’t stand the attention it would take to work with all these stars, all these personalities. To be sized up in the way he had always sized up everyone else. So mostly he worked alone. He grew to know several directors, and

some actors, but lately he'd been getting recognition himself for the work he had done for these shows.

He basically wrote the stuff, and somebody, somebody everybody knew, delivered it all to the masses. Directors you've heard of. He wrote the best of their stuff. He created dependency. He was good at it. Once they started using, they couldn't get off it. They'd never be good on their own again. Without him. The shows he'd written were always sold out. Every seat. How much longer could the market sustain him?

Will sucked it in through his nostrils. Goddamn. It's coffee. Several blocks after the fact, one could still inhale the smell. He pushed the air into his mouth as if to aerate a wine he'd never tasted. Charred a bit around the edges, but there was something primal in it too. This is why he'd never recognized it before. It couldn't have been pure coffee. Not like the smell coming from the pot in the morning. No, mixed with the world, upon exiting the factory, there was something sexual in it. Rich and full. Fetid; sweat and repetition of movement almost to the point of sickness but, and he pushed it down the back of his throat, deeper, past the buds that are responsible for sour signals firing to the brain, he swallowed. The punctuation – sweet. Good.

He hooked a left at Fairview, passed the building that was not his father's though everyone said it was and went in to work.

Ext. Hotel Coloniàl, 13 October 1977 – Night

When they pulled up to the *Hotel Coloniàl* it was way past dark. He felt like they'd been at the beach for hours. Both men wore happy smiles. Francis took note of the large statue of Franklin Roosevelt in bronze welcoming guests from the circle drive of the hotel. He'd would make a note to ask the translator about that. The first Somoza, who they called Tacho I, had been one of the first Central American leaders to make a good impression on the American government. Apparently, down here they'd felt like Roosevelt was one of the first American presidents to make a good impression on *them*. It was funny how those things got interpreted by the people, including himself. Francis would make it a point to always look at his dealings with the Nicaraguans from both sides. It was important that this new plant would be good for both Congranja at home, and the Nicaraguans here.

Before he climbed into bed, he opened his window. The air conditioner was broken, *roto*. The man who stumbled through some English when he checked in informed him. They hoped it would be fixed by the morning. Open the window, and our night wind will sing you to sleep, señor, he said, adding a smile. He stripped down to his boxers, pulled the sheets and comforter off the cheap bed, and laid his head down, peering out of the window at the October sky. He didn't even set the alarm for the morning. He hadn't overslept for anything since he'd sworn off drinking his junior year at UPenn. He'd worry about the translator in the morning. He was too exhausted to think about all that tonight. As he fell asleep, he glanced over at the ticking clock by his bed and was surprised when he saw that it was only 7:20. He'd get some rest, and wake up with the sun in the morning.

He inhaled deeply into his chest, rolling his neck from side to side, and breathed in the heat of the descending night. As soon as his head hit the pillow, he was wide-awake, the gears in his mind cranking. His mind reeled from the events of the day and what was to come tomorrow. He played yesterday's conversation over again in his mind. Every time he entered Doc's stainless, sterile, impossibly bright office, Francis felt the empty coldness of the room reflected as Doc's own stalwart drive forward. Doc's children, two young girls, had flitted into his office on their way to school carrying pictures they'd crayoned for him made heavy by string and jaunty, off-kilter skyscrapers crafted with popsicle sticks painted silver. The drawings and the children had looked sorely out of place there.

"There are three things you will need to remember about these people," he had said. "First, like my girls, more than anything in the world, they will want to know that you understand them. That you 'get' them. That you care about them."

Doc was systematic about his lists.

"Two. The hitch. The thing you must overcome, is that before you ever get off the plane, they'll be sure that you never will, that you won't get them. They will have been instructed to think that we're greedy, that we're alien, that we care nothing for them and only for money. They'll be sure of it.

"Number three. You know something that they don't. Deep down, they want to be proven wrong. They'll hope against hope they're wrong. Hell, they'll go to church every day for two hours, praying to the goddamn heavenly hosts that they're wrong. They'll pray that you're different. That the hope you bring them isn't just smoke and mirrors. They want it to be real. The good news is, like my girls, it won't take more than

your being prepared. Like hanging up their drawings at the right time. Just the nod. The pat on the hand. Because, see, even though they're doubtful, they can't help wanting what they want. They want so badly to be on the other side. They want so badly for this to be the opportunity they've been dreaming of. See, so when it actually comes. When it actually comes to their little town, they know they'd be crazy not to give it try. They can't be any worse off than before you came. And this is why you'll have to succeed. It's impossible for you not to. You *are* bringing them hope. I've every confidence in you. Every confidence. You'll win 'em just like you won all of us at that defense of yours."

And with that, the meeting was over. Like a total eclipse in stop-action – one frame the moon's exposed, the next, there's blackness – his face clicked off, and Francis knew he was dismissed. He never verbally assented to anything. But it was enough for Doc that Francis never said no. The meeting was over without Francis ever having to say a word. To Francis, this was the ultimate form of respect. They didn't have to worry about contracts. Doc knew him like his own son. For the two years at UPenn, and the four years working right in the shadow of him, Doc knew what Francis was going to say before he ever said it. And vice versa. To the outside observer, it probably appeared as though there was not much love between them, but Francis felt as though this understanding they had come to was the pinnacle of a human relationship. It was what everyone hoped to reach. Little expression, little emotion, and just about open-access to all the stores of the free world's power.

He went home and packed his bags. The next evening, before he left for the airport, his secretary handed him his paycheck, an itinerary, a plane ticket, and a file with

the few pages copied from the *World Book* on Nicaragua. On the front of the file, Mary stapled a colored picture of the Nicaraguan flag. So thorough, he thought. She always took care of Francis, like a son, really. She was older, never had children. She was well past the age at which a man in Francis' position might even consider the merits of an older woman's experience to outweigh a couple of wrinkles or varicose veins spilling the beans about the woman's age all the way up her thigh. No, Mary was plump and grandmotherly and, well, perfectly lovely.

With the light off, he succumbed to the thoughts he always had in the dark. Francis's resolve to be a different kind of executive, to be a different kind of man, like Doc, interested in the world and kind of place they were leaving to other generations decreased proportionately to the size of his paycheck. His ambition seemed to be seeping into his bloodstream, mixing with his platelets. He could almost feel it carried along with the oxygen, in the constant pulse-throb at his temples.

He thought about his photocopied pages of almanac information on Nicaragua. Surely a land this plentiful couldn't be home to the most illiterate, the most unemployed, the most forgotten of the world's hopeless. There should be no reason that large numbers of people should still be dying of tuberculosis in Nicaragua. He was not so short-sighted as to think that all technological advancements equaled progress or even old-fashioned goodness. He'd taken enough history, politics, and sociology classes to know better. But the availability of knowledge, the free and democratic exchange of ideas between cultures could never be a bad thing.

Francis rolled over searching for a cold part of the pillow. There was none. He smelled the accumulation of the day's cigarette smoke in his hair and on the pillow. He never smoked, except when he was nervous. In the past year, he'd smoked more than he ever had, even when he was a young Ivy Leaguer presenting his MBA thesis to a roomful of academics, men of monstrous proportions responsible in their business administration prowess leading companies like Union Carbide, Proctor & Gamble, and Monsanto. And that was a public defense. His business plan had been a four-year process for bringing a company in the industrialized world to the developing world that could exist as a dynamic exchange, a symbiotic relationship between both countries. On the outside, it appealed to the humanitarian side of things. On the inside, it was a savvy plan to enter markets the United States had all but overlooked, because the developing world had only been viewed as pariahs. Now they could be their clientele and their providers. Both.

It was a beautiful defense. It had been the reason he got the recommendation to Congranja. It was the reason he was here now, why he was going to meet tomorrow with the people of Managua to discuss the plans for the new manufacturing plant to be built, staffed, manned, and maintained entirely by Nicaraguans. The products they produced would be solely purchased by the United States, who had bottomless pockets ready to buy off their products and send the córdoba skyrocketing. With that, they'd be able to build better clinics. Build new banks. Supply them with American medicine. Bring them health. Francis felt good thinking about these things. His ambition had taken over where his fears had left off.

Int./Ext. Office building – Just after sunrise

On a Wednesday morning, a little after nine o'clock, Will Dante pulled the industrial-sized trash bin from the hall, set it down in front of his door, unlocked his door, then pushed the door open with the butt-end of the bin, making an enormous scene out of it all – the kind of scene he abhorred writing. He propped the door open with the bin and began dumping everything out of the drawers, out of the desk, and off the shelves. He dumped the dusty scripts from the top of the filing cabinet, the uninteresting scripts despite the big-named directors he'd received and put on the back burner. He pulled the ones off the desk that he'd been working on, a project from Ken Watanabe. Followed by the lavender envelope he received a week ago from Bruce Cohen and Dan Jinks, charming as it was. There were several highly confidential pieces from Sofia Coppola who was becoming quite desperate due to the repeated shouts of "sophomore slump" since her big splash Academy Award and the dearth of viable screenplays in its wake. It all went. Nothing was going to be saved. Page after page rained down into the bin. The end of his script-doctoring. He cared not what people would think of him. He was only concerned with ridding himself of the façade.

He pushed the bin out past the posh receptionist waiting area into the elevators. The thing had no wheels, and the scraping of the industrial-grade plastic on the marble in the elevator foyer caught the attention of more than a few people. Maybe it'd come in handy in his new endeavors. Maybe not. He pushed the button for down and waited to be ejected on the ground level again as he had been every day for five years, five days a week. Once and for all.

On the ground, stepping through the heavy glass doors, he had that sick feeling in his legs – the kind you used to get as a kid on the playground having just narrowly avoided being tagged. The victory, the adrenaline so great, even though you know it's only a game, standing there on base, heaving and broken in half at the waist, your body is reacting as if you've avoided the spindly hand of Death. He passed the doorman, the last vestige of the old metropolis, as ornamental as the cement gargoyles that guarded the precipice on the roof.

He had made the decision the day before when he had stolen a glance into one of the buildings on Shepherd and saw Arri crouched against a marble wall with her laptop precariously balanced on both knees. Most of the time, she left her left hand still, poised on the side of the keyboard ready to attack the vowels on the left, but most of all the consonant work on the right and everything on the left was up to her right hand. He had watched her enough to know even her typing tendencies. She was always working on the go. Will knew of no home-base Arri occupied. She seemed to just roll her office around with her, which was why at first it wasn't necessarily out of the ordinary to see her ducked in some cranny on the cell phone, Blackberry, or whatever portable device she'd invested in recently to make her life easier.

As he watched her, he knew it was true. Even the most devoted to concealing their innermost secrets, the things about them that were the most guarded, were always right there to be had, tiny revelatory moments of blinding brilliance. This is what he lived for.

Arri was rarely alone. Will assumed that it was because she was one of those people who didn't know how to be. Who couldn't stand the quiet moments, couldn't enjoy, find warmth in the solitude where things and people flitted by your mind in tiny protean shapes of black and white.

But he stumbled upon Arri in her most unguarded, perhaps most real self. And he felt a pang of understanding, of sympathy. It wasn't like she needed it. Like she was asking for it. There was just this potential smallness about her, that made him want to stroke her red bangs back and kiss her forehead. Shocking, he thought, how feelings of initial exhaustion or nagging perturbation could be so quickly replaced by affection, by aching even. Maybe because he knew exactly how she felt right there, and exactly how she would have felt had he interrupted, despite the fact that he finally wanted to. He had never wanted to since having first seen her, until right then.

He walked slowly through the city's streets, hoping its life, its secrets would be absorbed into him. Inhaled and processed. It was something he did when he wanted to think and it was too bright in the daytime for staring into the sky, the other thing he could do to get away. It was the first time that he'd ever not seen her in public. In front of people. And not just with her throngs. She was – all at once – not public. She was hunched over a laptop. Right there in the breezeway of one of downtown's many interchangeable buildings. Just sitting cross-legged.

There was a certain glare from the sun that struck the double paned doors in a bleary way that made her reflection appear as if she was more an apparition than an actual person. And the glass was so thick, it looked as if it might contain her in it, were she to spontaneously jump up and vanish. Like the glass might remember her shape and

her presence there and hold it in the sun for just another moment. He wondered if she could see him from her vantage point. He wanted to trace her figure on the glass.

What was she writing? It couldn't just be email. She was so wholly enthralled. Her body dipping into the glow of the screen, hunching around it so that the computer screen and the gaze of her body made one continuous loop, unbreakable. Unwilling to be broken. She grimaced. His heart ached. Her bottom lip lurched towards her left hand and she pinched it with her index finger and thumb. Her breath seemed to come a little more labored, her chest visibly heaving now. Was she crying? Her brow furrowed. And she froze, staring at the screen. She'd stopped blinking. What was it? Without warning, she snapped the screen shut, breaking the loop. She untangled her knees and arms and got up to leave.

It was that moment that he decided to do something drastic. Will decided he would have his life change in two ways, not just the one. What the hell? It felt good to take the leap. Even if he was leaping while holding somebody's hand. So he would take the other leap on his own, without hands. Why not? He thought. And why not? He was going to quit his job. And start all over, as another writer. His own writer of film. He would have greater control. He would invest himself in both the inception and the product, the performance. The end. Instead of just working always with the one end, he'd work with the whole thing.

The hand he would be holding, then, was Arri's. But she didn't know it yet. He wondered if Arri would always have that effect on him. If she would remain always the reason, the person who made him feel the way that he did, make him take leaps he'd never otherwise take. Be the reason he'd feel safe enough to do it. Stop thinking. He

said. She couldn't be his everything. It would never work that way. It'd never succeed. Why couldn't he just make his mind stop its endless circling, endless hypothesizing? Why couldn't he just be here now? He realized she was completely and irrepressibly already in his head. And there was something about her place there that screamed finality. Something about her that was so wholly infused there. It would never change. It would never be any different. But the truly unrelenting idea that Will could not get his feeble mind around, in that blurry other body-less life between waking and dreaming, was that Will didn't want it to.

It was awkward walking back to his apartment with the four-foot tall trash bin. It was too wide to carry strong-arm out in front of him, but too heavy to support it from the bottom. So he hobbled along using both hands on the side, and balanced it against his right leg, as if it were a crutch. In the heat of the day, the work felt good to him. The sweat on the back of his collar felt more real than any of the work he'd done inside for the last five years.

The moment Will decided to quit his job and the moment when Will decided he was going to commit himself to the pursuit of this woman were inextricably linked in his mind. It was a paradox. Was he able to quit his job because he knew he was going to be with Arri, be protected, have someone to protect? Or was he clinging to Arri in a way that made him seem even more vulnerable because he knew, somewhere in the back of his mind he was about to enter into the hardest self-imposed phase of isolation and unknowing he had encountered in his life? It was like the ouroboros myth, the snake

eating its own tail. He was glad that the only truth capable of being drawn from paradox is that one can never really know the answer.

Yes. At that moment, it all changed. The trash bin might as well have been on fire in his mind. The two images conflated in his mind irrepressibly. Arri in the glass and his trash bin of wasted life. He saw them both reflected somehow in the glaring double paned door. The haze of the city's broken air, Arri's sudden vulnerability, his own end of an era.

He smiled. He wasn't giving up. The air outside grew heavy and wet, and something that had been dormant inside him for a very, very long time grew restless.

Ext. Masaya, 13 October 1977 - Day

When they had advertised in the local markets and churches that an American company would be coming to the southern outskirts of Managua, Norlan, a vivacious and eager sixteen-year-old, brought his eighteen-year-old sister Yelba, along with him, to scope it out. It took an stubborn and well-wrought campaign to convince his older sister of the trip's merits. She didn't want American companies looting the land and buying it out from underneath her neighbors, as the older ladies she worked with (and her mother, for that matter) had told her they had done before. Norlan, for his part, was interested in making good on his own ambition. He wanted out. He wanted new shoes. He wanted to read and write and learn English. He wanted to move to America. He didn't care what his mother and sister had to say. If he was going to change, he couldn't do it from Managua. He'd have to leave. He'd come back, of course. But later. Lots of the Puerto Rican baseball players did this. They'd go make some money. Live in America. Marry Americans. Then come back and save their families from destitution. Norlan couldn't play ball, like those guys. But he had a mind. Of his ten brothers and sisters, Norlan knew he was the smartest. He read all the books in the house by the time he was nine. And he was close to getting through all the books at the only lending library in Nicaragua (after all, it had only been open two years). If only he could show them how smart he was. They'd hire him, he could work his way up, and...get off this bus. He was only sixteen and already so tired of these people.

Their days began at sunrise. When roosters shouted their caustic calls, Norlan and Yelba, the oldest two of the family, got up to help out their mother with the early-morning chores. The mud floor would have to be swept and then leveled off; this was

Norlan's job. Yelba began to stoke the fire that had usually only just dropped off by the time the daily cycle was ready to begin again. On the fire, she would put the angry black pot of rice. The beans would boil in another pot, partnered sustenance to feed the eleven Bojorges. She'd pull out the worn hyper-green plastic bowls to feed the kids before they ran off to catch the bus to school, year-round. Six little bowls of rice, beans and a bit of the salty *queso blanco*. She poured a small cup of coffee with more sugar than water for mama. This was Yelba's job before her job.

After they finished, they prayed together with mama, kissed her on the cheek, and walked the short way to board the packed bus. Shoulders rubbing, they'd sit or squeeze, sometime arguing, sometimes chatting, but always together, just after sunrise, packed with already sweating people on the way to work, or to continue the search for it, down to the last person. But today, this day, was different. Norlan had convinced Yelba, a feat over which the family was in awe, to skip her job at the *proyecto*, where she worked for the French woman, Apell.

Yelba was employed to teach the woman how to plant and harvest and subsist off the land. Apell had hired her, in the beginning, for the planting season. That was two years ago. The woman had kept her on to teach her Spanish. In exchange, the woman paid her ten *córdobas* a week (an amount unheard of in Managua). In the two years, Yelba had never missed a day of work, six days a week. Apell had even invited her family over occasionally to roast a chicken and remember the dead on *el Día de los Muertos*. Days after her father died, when her uncle Pedro, happened to pick her up while he was carrying a fare – a graying French woman just in from the airport in Managua – she felt it was the work of her padre. Both her father, and her Father in

heaven. For the woman, Apell, would from that day on employ Yelba as, at first, a sort of tour guide because she said she had a face that inspired Trust. Later, Apell had just kept her on at the house, because she knew more about living than Apell did. *Joie de vivre*, she said. Yelba called it *el trabajo del Señor*. The work of God.

Ext. Tipitapa – Continuous

“Norlan, you have to wonder why they’re here. Why are they coming? Open your eyes, brother.” They were able to talk to each other more freely now that they’d gotten off the packed bus from Managua to Tipitapa, where Congranja was hoping to build its plant. The two figures of Norlan and Yelba appeared infinitesimal framed against the ponderous smoking Vulcán Mombacho and miles of golden fields hotly unmoving.

Norlan swatted at the gnats swarming around his face. Yelba watched him with equal parts skepticism and undying love. His face still looked like it did four years ago. Not a child, but not yet a man either. He never would look like a man. Just a beautiful little boy face. His body had sprouted in the last two years, at least six more inches. His voice had dropped. But his face, his button nose, large chocolate eyes, they all looked the same as the day when he was born. She stayed up next to his pallet all night long swatting the flies from his face, wanting to squeeze him forever, close to her breast.

A cloud passed in front of the sun, darkening his already sun-kissed features. His brow furrowed with the shadow.

“Why must everything always be so dark and scary to you? All Americans are not evil. Some do good things.”

“Norlan. All I’m saying is, be careful who you trust. You can’t know. You don’t know.” Yelba was protective of all her siblings, but especially Norlan. He was different from the rest of her siblings, the rest of her friends even. More alive. It was not uncommon to wake in the mornings and find Norlan, grinning ear-to-ear, belting out the latest pop tune to wake the house, this week it was Simon and Garfunkel. There were two stations that played nothing but American pop. Norlan’s voice cracked every time he got to “feelin’ groooovy.” He belted it unabashedly. Yelba cringed at the thought.

She’d seen terrible things. She had seen the country devour itself. She had seen the influence of outside involvement, the unceasing fighting, the anger it created, the disruption. But she was still able to thrive on the love of her family. Of new babies. Birthday parties. After all, they weren’t as bad off as most of their neighbors. She had twenty córdobas in her coinpurse to buy three fat chickens for their littlest sister, Marcela’s, birthday this Friday. It was two weeks worth of her wages, but hell, she had it. Though father was gone, their mother was still going strong. And they had six siblings who could go out and work to bring money in for the family. If Norlan got this job, if that is, they offer him one, that’d make seven. She thought, maybe, they’d have enough that he could go back to school, then. Maybe. This was the only reason she’d agreed to come with Norlan to this place. And, the chickens. She had inherited her mother’s pragmatism. She came along with Norlan, only if she could somehow make the trip worthwhile. She had to prepare for the party anyway and this would cut down on having to buy bus fare again.

“Mombacho’s still steaming,” Norlan said. Against the darkness of the October rain clouds, he could see the steam circling around the sun, strangely rendered mute and less powerful by the darkness of the clouds. Its sphere was still defined, and he could stare right at it. He would be bold when he met the man from Congranja. He would need to do something that would make the man remember him. Norlan Bojorge. His name begged to be remembered.

*IX. Oh, terremoto mental!
Yo senti un día en mi cráneo
como el caer súbitamente
de una Babel de cristal.*

*De Pascal mire el abismo
y vi lo que pudo ver
cuando sintió Baudelaire
“el ala del idiotismo”.*

*Hay, no obstante, que ser fuerte;
pasar todo precipicio
y ser vencedor del Vicio,
de la Locura y la Muerte.*

*IX. Oh, a mental earthquake!
I felt it one day in my skull
like the unexpected falling
of a Babel of crystal.*

*I looked into the abyss of Pascal,
and saw what he could see
when Baudelaire felt
“the wing of idiocy.”*

*We must, nevertheless, be strong;
pass by each precipice
and be a victor over Vice,
over Madness and Death.*

-Rubén Darío, Nicaraguan poet

Ext. Apell's farm, 14 October 1977 – Day

Apell's cottage was made of clay. It was like a monastery compared to the buzz of the Bojorge house. Yelba's house had no land for farming as the family seemed more apt to grow itself. There was a stripe of land on which her father had planted three tiny mangoes that had borne the sweet fleshy fruit for as long as she could remember, but nothing else. But Apell had field enough for 50 rows. She had enough to designate two full rows of her garden for Yelba's family. And this day was for planting.

Together, Yelba and Apell, began the task of mothering seedlings into the umber-black dirt. Yelba used the soft mallet to hammer in spikes every three feet, on each side of the garden's rectangle. Apell drew the twine in between each peg. Then together, they worked from either end of the garden – Apell on the south side of the rows, Yelba always on the north – walking towards each other, digging with two hoes the accepting slit in which they dropped the seeds. She used to think of each little row as a row of tiny beds where the seeds would sleep, until waking with the cool water and warm sun. She hummed the same lull-a-byes she used to sing to Marcela as they sowed the lines. They walked barefoot – you don't walk on the ground that will bear the food you will eat in anything other than your skin – dropping measured handfuls into the earth. Yelba and Apell passed each other, without crossing paths. The two women couldn't have been more opposite. Apell, a wiry European, Yelba a petite native daughter. With the twine and the pegs still drawn over the cultivated earth, Yelba thought it looked something like the drawing paper she used to learn to form her letters.

Sweat-drenched and worn, Apell poured them both Cokes in real glasses. Even though she had a small air conditioning unit in the window of her neat home, Apell preferred to sit in the dirt outside in the shade of the long line of tall plantains that lined her property as the sun set behind them, slivers of gold carving past them over their shoulders and into the ground. Yelba whispered a tiny prayer under her breath – as Apell was not an especially religious person and she wished not for anything in the world to offend her – asking for protection and wisdom in caring for the food she and her family would eat.

This woman, with her stringy blond hair, reminded her of American movie actresses. She had icy blue eyes and her hair was very straight. Apell had not been overly warm or overly cold to her, either one. They had just learned to work together. And they did it well, with little talking. Sometimes, after the day's work in the finca was done, if the beans weren't ready to be pulled, or the corn not ready to husk – a task Yelba enjoyed least of all – they would sit together at Apell's glass table in her kitchen, her hot arms spreading foggy outlines of warmth on the tabletop. Sometimes they'd share a glass of white wine and Apell would practice writing her Spanish. From what Yelba could tell, she was embarrassed with her pronunciation, and preferred writing sentences that she might use in hypothetical situations. Yelba, for her part, understood completely. She too was self-conscious about her ability to shape her mouth around the new words. There they'd sit at the table, both composing their own imaginary conversations between imagined people. Apell would chew on the end of her pen, thinking of something new to write in Spanish. Some new question. Yelba doodled pictures of puppies – cartoon like – that looked nothing like any dog she'd ever seen. Or flowers. She could draw an

especially good likeness of the star of Nicaragua if you imagined past the blue ball-point ink. Yelba would do her best to answer in French.

She had no real desire to learn French. She did not like the French tongue. Though there were many similarities, she felt it soft and indistinct. In the four years that she had worked for Apell, because the most communication they had was of hypothetical people doing hypothetical things that had little or no resemblance to themselves, cowboys who liked to read books and buy clothes in stores and drive fast cars with pet monkeys, the things they enjoyed, the things that they wished they could do, the things they most wanted to be “when they grew up,” were still a mystery. She knew precious little about Apell. She only knew that she had moved from France to get away from her parents, parents who were Americans, not French at all. Despite her parents’ native tongue, she had only ever spoken French. As soon as she was old enough, she fled.

Yelba knew that Apell loved the hot weather and unrelenting sun, though Yelba had one time gotten to the *finca* early and found Apell naked in her bedroom aggressively rubbing coconut oil into her body. She said something about UV getting straight through her clothes. (She would later remember Apell every time she lathered her fair-skinned Will in the same oily lotion with its artificial coconut that was supposed to smell somehow tropical.) Apell hadn’t looked a bit surprised or even embarrassed at Yelba’s intrusion, though Yelba had felt her blush color deep into her bones. Yelba was frozen. She couldn’t move. She suddenly wondered about never having seen Apell with any other person but the members of Yelba’s own family. She shopped in the markets and traveled after harvest and before replanting started through Central America taking her camera and her knowledge of the earth. But Yelba had never once heard of her

entertaining any guests – male or female – at her home. Yelba also considered at that moment, for the first time, the fact that Apell – a woman whose exact age she never learned – had never spoken of children. Her body did not bear the marks of a woman who had been stretched to accommodate the growth of another body. Nor did it seem to adhere to the universal law of gravity. Here she stood before Yelba and the closest thing she could compare her shape to was not her own body, Yelba’s being too short and lopsided to be compared to the almost translucent body in front of her. She could see her veins in the wrists of her arms.

Int. Marbelys’ house - Morning

Norlan couldn’t believe his good fortune. Yesterday he was riding the smelly hot bus with Yelba, listening to her silly worrying about the American company “swallowing” them all up. And now, now, this very morning, shirt freshly pressed, he’d be meeting him. That lazy son of Pedro’s really missed his chance. He giggled to himself. But not too long, because he knew how quickly God could turn on him. He nodded and sent up a brief though sincere apology to God. He would not be so crass as to smile on that kid’s misfortune.

Thank you. I hear you Poppy. I won’t get it wrong. I won’t.

See, Pedro, the same Uncle Pedro that drove the airport beat in his beat-up white Chevy Joy hatchback for the last five years, the same Pedro who had driven Yelba right into Apell, had now driven Francis of Congranja practically to their home for Sunday dinner. Well, not exactly. The opportunity was supposed to have gone to Pedro’s son

Santiago. But when Mr. Francis' plan changed and he would be arriving in Nicaragua a day earlier, it conflicted with his baseball game. So, despite Santi's having one more year of English class in *collegio*, Norlan got the job. He was the next best in terms of English. So because of the elections, because that meant Mr. Francis would be here early, because Santi was obsessed with his Wednesday night baseball games in the neighborhood, because his Uncle Pedro had the heart of a saint – not as big as his father's – but big enough, because of all these things, he was going to meet Mr. Francis.

So here Norlan was, shoes freshly polished, tie on (it wouldn't matter that it was the school-issued royal blue uniform tie – Mr. Francis would not know the difference). The handsomest of the Bojorge's, he didn't mind admitting to himself. And to others. He'd always been popular in school, with the girls and his cousins. Well adults too. He had tremendous charm and so far it had served him well.

Just don't let me down now. Please. Don't let it run out.

He checked himself one more time in the warped mirror screwed into the cinderblock wall of the kitchen. He adjusted his tie, tucked in his shirttail for the thirteenth time, and smiled. No beans in his teeth.

"Norlan!" his Mama shouted from her bedroom.

"Senora?"

"Norlan!"

"Si, senora, si." He hurried to her.

"Norlan, don't forget to take the man some coffee. Take him one of our mugs. Put the sugar in it. Bring it to him and tell him it's from your mama. And she can be his mama too while he's here. Tell him."

Mama Marbelys had long, thick black hair. In the last two years, since their father had died, a brilliant wiry shock of white had grown in right in the center of her head so that when her hair was parted, her face was framed like the illuminations of halos surrounding the pictures of the Blessed Virgin on her wall. Yelba expertly plaited her long hair. In one graceful, nearly mechanistic movement, the braid was completed, a rubberband was placed on the end and the whole thing was twisted round and round on itself to form a perfect bun just atop the nape of her neck and fastened with only two criss-crossed hairpins. Yelba's elbows moved so powerfully during this whole process, she'd one time given their little sister Marcela a black eye when she had gotten too close to Yelba's whirling arms.

"Mama. Why are you saying such things? You don't even know this American businessman and you're already welcoming him into our family."

"What?" Marbelys shrugged. They moved into the kitchen.

"Thanks Mama." Norlan pulled the hot water off the fire, "Good idea."

"Mama, really. You're going to get his hopes up."

"He's going to be fine. And it's a nice way to welcome the new man here."

"But Norlan doesn't even know if he'll get a job. He doesn't even know if he'll be able to do the job he's got for now." She was nearing her shrieky voice.

"I'm not fourteen anymore, Yelba. And I'm standing right here."

"Peace Yelba. It will work out the way it is supposed to. In the meantime, I want the man to have a proper cup of coffee." The matter was closed. "Norlan, not that mug." She pushed him out of the kitchen, along with the straggling chicks that pecked at breakfast crumbs.

“Yelba, cool it. Oh ye of little faith.”

Yelba smoothed some of Norlan’s hair over his cowlick in the back. Marbelys handed Norlan the full mug to him. The hotel was only a mile or so down the road. It would be just the right temperature when he finally met the American. Marbelys laid her hand on both Yelba’s and Norlan’s heads, closed her eyes and said a short prayer.

When it was done, they whispered “Gracias El Señor.”

“Marcela! Get your breakfast and get that dog off of your school clothes. I swear when I am done beating you, you’ll be a greasy spot.” Just like that, Marbelys was beginning the day for everyone else, as Yelba and Norlan had done for her. Uncle Pedro beep-beeped and for a change, the two of them did not board the stinking and hot bus. They would ride to the hotel in the taxi to meet the man they would later bring to the workers of Managua. They walked out of the gate, blessed and full.

Int. Hotel Coloniál, 14 October 1977 – Morning

Francis was awakened by the shrill ring of the phone by his bed. He glanced over at the clock, and did his best to make the hands and numbers and ugly orange glare make sense in his mind. The second hand ticked in irritation, it seemed, as he waited for the stubborn fingers of sleep to leave hold of his brain.

“Buenas!” the receiver said to him.

6:15 AM. He’d overslept. The alarm never went off. Or maybe he had never set it. He wasn’t even sure if he remembered how to set the alarms on the little ticking plug-ins with the sweeping second-hand. What time was he supposed to be picked up?

“Good Morning? Sir?” the voice on the other end was still talking at him. It sounded young.

“Yes. Good morning. What time is it please?”

“6:15. And it’s time to begin. If you are ready. Of course.”

“Ah yes.” Wait. Who was this person on the other line? It was not the front desk.

“We’re ready in the lobby, Mr. Francees.”

“I’ll be there in five minutes. Thank you.” He didn’t know if it was the little machine that pretended to count the seconds on the nightstand next to him, or the hotness of his sleep that had failed him and caused him to oversleep, but he knew he had never slept so soundly as he did last night.

After a quick shower, he met them both in the lobby. He was surprised to see Pedro and his white hatchback pull up to the curb. A young boy, no older than fourteen perhaps, had shoved a painted mug of too sweet coffee in his hand, and pulled him by the shirtsleeve out to the circle drive. The boy leaned against the foot of FDR as he spoke a mile a minute.

“Mr. Francees. We’re all so happy to meet you. We have been hoping for this day for a very very long many time.”

“Yes. Me too.”

The boy reached for his suitcase and patted Francis on the back just as he was going to take a sip. A little dribble spilled on Francis’ white shirtfront.

“Lo siento. Oh, sorry, sorry. I’m sorry sir.”

“No. No worries.” And it really wasn’t a problem. He felt good. He felt there was something more honest about him. About this trip. He patted the boy on the back. He grinned. Francis, in all of his life, had never met more smiley people. But who was this boy? He was still groggy, almost like he’d been on some bender the night before. He couldn’t decide if he’d had too much sleep, or too little. Oh, shit. Is this Santiago, his translator?

“Please, come this way.” The kid grandly gestured to the decrepit hatchback as though it were a Cadillac. In two steps, they were at its familiar passenger door. Pedro waved sweetly from the driver seat. And there, in the back, a beautiful girl was staring blankly through him out the front window.

Norlan hopped to and pulled the seat back, climbing over the girl with the blank face, to sit behind Pedro.

“Please, come in,” Norlan said.

Francis had been standing a bit too long staring at the petite dark-haired woman in the backseat. He was struck. Who was she?

He folded his six-foot-five frame into the car again, wondering whether the shorts had been a good idea after all. She was the first unsmiling face he’d met in the flesh since he’d arrived, other than the guards at the airport and the picture of Pedro’s little girl. He glanced at the picture again.

“So, you’re Santiago?” The abrupt wake-up call, the kid translator and now this woman quietly smoldering in the backseat, just behind him. He couldn’t make the synapses organize themselves in any way that made sense.

“Ah, no. No. I’m Norlan.” He thrust his hand into the front seat awkwardly trying to introduce himself from the backseat. “Santiago could not make it today. Big game today. I am your translator. My name is Norlan.”

“Norlan?”

“Yes, I hope that’s okay.” His name, or the fact that he looked pre-pubescent?

Francis glanced over at the girl, hoping to garner an introduction for her too.

Norlan didn’t quite catch on. Maybe she speaks English too.

“And you are...?”

“Yelba. My name is Yelba.” Success. She speaks English. He reached his right hand over the seat for Yelba’s. For the first time, she looked at him. Still unsmiling. But it was if he’d never been looked at before. Not in that way. He felt all wrong instantly. Whatever confidence he’d found at the beach. Whatever he’d talked into himself yesterday in the plane high over the mountains of this middle America place vanished. He looked away first.

Later that night, in his greasy mush bed, staring at the plaster on the ceiling above him, he would see three halos of light. One would surround the sick mother dog he’d seen on the side of the road, the other was the girl on the dash in the heat-seared photo, and the third was the picture of that unrelenting face. Yelba.

But now, at this instant, he allowed himself just the mental picture of Yelba, as a point of light, staring a sharp pinhole into the back of his chair as they bounced along to the biggest moment of his career, of his life. And though this meeting represented the future of Congranja, and in turn, the direction his career would take, he could think of

nothing but what he hoped had been the tiniest glimmer of a smile cross her lips as her cheeks had blushed hot just before he turned back to the front of the car. They were off.

Int./Ext. Outdoor church, Tipitapa – Continuous

The back wall was made entirely of cinderblock construction, and seemed the only solid thing about the place. The feeling he'd gotten when Pedro, the happy taxi driver, had taken him off the path before he knew where they were going, rose in Francis' belly again as they parked behind the wall and he read the words spray-painted in red: "U.S. = Terrorista = Insurgencia." Francis thought the meeting was going to be held in a church – their church. Where were they now? Nothing was ever written in stone in this country. Plans changed as quickly as he would have liked to change shirts, had he brought more shirts. But he was surprisingly calm given his need to control every last aspect of his life, straight down to the smallest detail. Something else had come off when he peeled the sweaty socks from his feet at the beach yesterday. This country made him free.

Norlan saw that Francis had seen the graffiti on the wall. He shrugged and smiled. "No worries. They are just – how do you say – punks? – who are writing this. No worries."

The air was tense when they walked around the wall of cinder blocks. This was the church. It consisted of the cement slab, the cinderblock wall, two supports on the other corners, an aluminum roof, and fifty or so plastic lawn chairs set in nice neat rows and filled with a sea of beaming faces. Behind the slab of concrete, behind their glowing

amber faces, there was a field of plantains, *chagüite*, their big broad tropical leaves that Francis had only ever seen being fanned in front of some starlet in a toga, now bowed and flapped loudly with the slight breeze brought about by a subtle shift in the weather. Their bottom branches he'd seen on the side of the road in some places, rotting and fetid smelling, were being mercilessly culled by a couple of shirtless barefoot men and one small boy. Norlan explained how you had to cut the new growth to allow the old growth sufficient room and space to benefit. Old growth and death.

He could see that special mix of hope and fear – was it awe? – in their faces, just as he had predicted. Francis' anxiety was gone. He was ready to help them. That was what he was doing here. No more convincing. Just offering them hope. That's all.

When it was over, the workers – hopeful men and women – were gathering in small groups sipping *refrescos* out of plastic baggies chatting about the promises of the man from America. The meeting had finished. The most skeptical chatted about the land they had been promised that was far from where they were now. The most hopeful anxiously awaited the first paycheck. The move. And planned what new things they would be able to buy for their children. And for themselves. Their were rain clouds threatening to open up overhead, but the shade and cool breeze deterred the gnats from swarming as much as they usually did in the swelter of midday. Instead, the air was filled with pregnant anticipation.

“You must come home to have dinner with us tomorrow.” Norlan, Yelba and Francis stepped away from the makeshift podium, where the priest usually stood in their church. “You must come to the party. We insist.”

Norlan refused to look at his sister after having blurted out this invitation. He felt so good about how the meeting with the townspeople had gone, he up and quick invited Mr. Francis to eat with them at home. Sure he hadn't kept up exactly with the man's speech, and he did have to slow him down. Plus, the script of the man's speech he'd been handed by Santiago sounded nothing like what Francis was telling the people. It seemed at times the man just started gushing emotionally with his appeals to the people. His honesty and hope was easy to convey, but not necessarily all the details. Surely the sentiment was more important than the actual words he spoke. He remembered one day in *colegio* they had been made to read some of Rubén Dario's poetry in translation. There was much discussion about the cultural differences impossible to convey, but that poetry was a universal language, for if one was to confine emotion and Truth to the page, the purest and, for that matter, only way was through poetry. So Norlan was content to do his best to get to the truth of Francis's speech and give that to the people. And he felt it was a special deal he'd be giving to Francis, for there was no way Santiago would have been as intuitive, as perceptive as to equate Francis' talk to poetry. And translate accordingly. The connection to this man was so great, he couldn't help but bring him to their home.

But just as soon as the thought entered his head, a feeling of dread pushed it back out. From euphoria to the bottom of the well. He flushed already with embarrassment

thinking about swinging open the front gate and shoo-ing the chickens out of Mr.

Francis' way. Would the man be offended?

He could feel Yelba tense up along with him, right by his side. Norlan had not even time to weigh the all but certain silent treatment he would receive from Yelba against the hope of having Francis accompany them home for the big celebration for their littlest sister. He just said it. She was like an earthquake tremor, indicating the volcano's angry gurgling only days before the big disaster and Norlan was the dog and the poor beasts who could sense the trouble long before the blissfully oblivious people.

Before she even knew it, watching that man give his speech, she could feel her presumptions about Mr. Francis sloughing off like so much dead skin. After the first five tense minutes, during the introductions, while Norlan clumsily struggled to find an appropriate rhythm between the man's speech and his translation, they hit their stride. A perfect duet they were. Within the next five minutes, she'd stopped listening to her little brother altogether. She latched on to Mr. Francis's voice. Or more accurately, her heart latched on to his voice, to his black hair, his milk skin and there was nothing she could do about it. All the doubt, the anger, the reluctance about this American man had evaporated along with the morning dew off the fields of recently harvested and therefore broken and spindly gold cornstalks.

At 6 o'clock this morning, when Marbelys was busy making a fuss over the American businessman and his most assuredly dubious ways, Yelba was skeptical. At nine o'clock after the speech and before they'd set up the table to chat one-by-one with

each of the families who had come to give up their land in exchange for the guarantee of five years employment and a much smaller plot of land a long way out from the city, it had all vanished. And in its place was a grand hole built from the top of her belly to the little hiccup in her throat. By noon, with the October heat and humidity of the noon sun beating down upon the tops of their heads, casting painful shards of pure heat reflected off the aluminum roof of the pavilion helter-skelter about the area, she felt in her heart, the only thing that could possibly fill the space made way in her previously full 22-year-old person was this man. It was unbelievable but true. Once before she'd felt something like this as a teenager at the academy. It was a boy three years older. He was so sweet and caring and unlike any of the other boys at school in that he never once made fun of her. But within weeks, her mother had become pregnant again, the boy had dropped out of school to go work for his father, and Yelba had quit school to go work for Apell.

She had been whole before – when her path appeared to be laid out quite simply in front of her. She'd stay at home, in the privileged position of her mother's right hand. Her mother's confidante. It had meant lots of work, and caring for the nine other children in the household, but it also meant respect. And she knew that her fathers, the One in heaven and the one in heaven who had been married to her mother, were pleased with her diligence and hard work. She might marry. She might not. But she had a healthy large family. And a steady, well-paying job. In moments of solitude, she sometimes allowed herself the hope that some day, with her voice, she might be able to move into one of the big churches in the city's center and sing with the choir. Or maybe even step out with a small solo. She allowed herself only that, because, quite simply, a girl holding together a household of eleven plus aunts and uncles in various states of unemployment dropping by

for hand-outs, didn't have the luxury of day-dreaming. And now, she had a hole, the exact size of Mr. Francis, burning in her person.

“Sure. If you think it's okay. I mean, I don't want to intrude. We're all very tired, I'm sure?” He had been so intense, so emotional when he started speaking to the crowd.

“Of course not sir. I mean, yes, you must be tired. You want to go home and rest. No?” Norlan looked sincerely dejected. Francis, for his part, did not want to disappoint Norlan. But more than that, he didn't want to leave Yelba. He couldn't even pause to consider how the chat had gone; he could only think about what Yelba had thought of his speech. Not really of the idea. Of the substance of the speech, but rather of what the speech, and his way of speaking, said about him. Perhaps she really was staring at him. Throughout the whole thing. She was, wasn't she?

“Yes. Mr. Francis. Come,” Yelba managed. Francis and Norlan both seemed surprised at this. Norlan jabbed her a bit with a soft fist in her ribs.

“Good. Good.”

“But first, shouldn't we get some names and addresses of these people? They've got to sign the contracts.” Francis' mind hit overdrive and crashed. He returned to the dependable and known world of business dealings.

“You're not coming back to build until January?”

“No, that's right. But, we need some kind of commitment from these people.”

“You've gotten it.”

“No I mean in writing.”

Yelba was fidgeting with the zipper of her backpack. She didn't seem as confident, as aloof as she did in the car, when her piercing stare seemed to go right through him.

Norlan tried to recapture his attention. "Mr. Francis, we don't sign anything here. Having a stack of fifty papers might mean something to you, but to these people, it means very little. Nothin. It means to them. It is more important to hear what you have said and to say what they have said to you. There is no thing more important than that."

Yelba took her leave to let the men discuss the situation. She took a plastic chair and pulled a little boy from one of the prospective families into her lap. She licked her thumb and proceeded to grind the dirt and sticky sweetness from the corners of his mouth. She kissed him hard on the forehead.

"So no signatures. No es necesario." Though Francis was a bit uncomfortable with this, he wanted to trust Norlan. He wanted to trust them all. All the people who looked to him with such hope. They'd be back. And he knew he could use their land, and they're be no pulling out or changing of minds when the man came back. They had too much to lose. And steady employment to gain. He had the upper hand, but he still felt somehow uneasy about relinquishing. Contracts. Binding legalese. Heretofore, these were the things that comforted him. And now, there was something new comforting him.

"*Yelba. Yelba es bobo. Es muy bobo,*" the little shoeless kid sing-songed and giggled and poked Yelba's cheeks as she blew them out. One side then the other, like a delicate tropical fish. The kid tried in vain to catch up to the air Yelba trapped in either side of her mouth. He smacked her cheeks and Yelba's noise from her mouth made the

little boy giggle even harder. Yelba threw her head back and laughed too. The first sign that Yelba could operate with anything more than the utmost controlled reserve. When her laughter subsided, she stole a glance towards Francis. And he met her eyes. And smiled at her. Her high cheekbones, her bushy black eyebrows, her fulsome mouth, he took them all in. She twirled the little boy's hair between her fingers, until the boy would no longer abide her distraction.

Norlan had to stretch a bit to place a hand on Francis' shoulder. "You understand? They will be here when you get back. They need you. They trust you."

And all at once, in that hand, Francis could feel a surreal power pulsing into him. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was the aftershock, the surging flush he felt, from Yelba. Maybe it was the memory of his conversation with Doc. When it all came down to it, it wasn't the lawyers drawing up the binding contracts; it was the teams of men orchestrating the negotiations that dictated lives. It was the people. The workers and the men who gave them work. All at once, he felt the sweaty, clammy sensation of a fever breaking. When your body is still cold to the touch but you sweat out all the hot. With Norlan's hand on his shoulder and Yelba's giggle in his mind, he let go.

"Sure, Norlan. I see."

"You must trust them. That's how these things work."

"Bueno," said Francis and shivered.

Int. Marbelys' house, 15 October 1977 – The next night

There were close to 100 people at the birthday party that night. He couldn't believe all those people – close to the same amount as was at the church earlier – were all gathered for this little girl's birthday. Neither could he believe that he ate two bowls full of some mixture of egg, rice, chicken, pork intestine and beans. But the thing he found the most difficult to accept was the fact that in the midst of all of this, he had found Yelba. His flower. His joy. His jubilation that could not be contained.

They must have confiscated every table in every home on the entire street. And each was covered in pink and lavender paper. And what looked like hole punches of the same colors all over the center yard. There were several chickens wandering around. And there was Tang. Tang as far as the eye could see. Kids scrambling about with orange mustaches and sugar highs. And in the midst of it. Directing the whole thing. Yelba. She hugged and kissed and held up Marcela. The little girl whose birthday caused all this jubilee.

“Aye, mi hombre guapo. Aye.” A large woman with white stripes in her hair fanned herself and mocked as if she might faint.

“Mr. Francis. Thisismother.” Norlan introduced them as Marbelys engulfed Francis in her strong arms. Though he was close to probably sixteen inches taller than her, Francis couldn't remember this last time he was hugged this tightly. Two small bones in his lower back groaned and then popped under the force.

Norlan had to yell over the blaring of the Monkees playing on the stereo cranked all the way from the kitchen. “Mama, this is Mr. Francis.”

“Mucho gusto.” In that moment, with Yelba at his side, Norlan his translator friend, and their darling mother hugging the snot out of him, he felt he was unworthy of this generous and very delicate gift. He held them all in their hands. He had a flash of understanding. Like when Norlan had placed his hand on his shoulder, he could see that it was already accomplished. His worry over the project dropped away in that instant. He could see that they were all going to be safe. That this was where his life was headed.

Int. The Duumvirate – Day

“And BLAM! Smack dab into the telephone pole?” Haylan stacked her elbows on two plates of saucers and balanced her chin between her palms. She hadn’t realized what she had done until Rasta girl shot her a look.

“Damn. We just got inspected yesterday.”

“Yeah, so the health inspector won’t be back for another month or so. Tops. Stop wiggin.” Haylan wiped off the affected saucers with a rag that from the looks of it couldn’t have been any cleaner than her elbows.

Arri continued. “It all happened much more quietly than that. There wasn’t the pyrotechnics you might expect from a movie scene. Actually, there was a certain amount of grace, as horrid as it sounds, to the truck’s losing traction. It was four o’clock in the morning. No one was out. The streets were wet, I guess, with normal morning humidity, and had this glittery orange glare – the reflection from the street lamps. Then the truck just began this slow slide. Very quiet.”

Arri glanced down the bar to her left, towards Will who had been listening in. He looked back at her and then became inexplicably enamored of his soup.

“Could you see the dude? I mean after the truck hit him?” asked Haylan, apparently failing to notice the subtlety and significance of the interruption in the story.

“No. I couldn’t see the body. I mean I saw it once it was airborne for a brief moment. The man had been on the other side of the truck’s trailer when it jackknifed. So I only caught a glimpse of the body at its highest point over the top of the trailer. At first I couldn’t imagine what kind of bird would fly that low into the city.”

“You thought the body was a bird?”

“I mean you make things up in your mind. Like, there’s no way I just saw what I saw.” Arri bit into her sandwich, and looked at Haylan. Haylan glanced sidelong at Will. Will watched the whole exchange.

It had been a week since Will quit his job, but he couldn’t stop himself from coming here. More importantly, he couldn’t start himself doing anything else. He found that every time he stared at the blank cursor, his thoughts turned to Arri. Before he knew it, his days began to be about only her.

“What were you doing up so early?” Before Will realized he was speaking aloud, it came out. Arri turned to him. As did Haylan.

“Old habit. I used to be an ice skater. I got up early all the time as a kid. I like the idea of beating everybody to the punch. It makes me feel like I get a headstart.”

“Why were you down in the warehouse district?” Again with the questioning. Will was losing all control over his ability to resemble a normal human being.

“Who knows.” She paused and wiped her mouth with her napkin. Arri appeared to be taking it in stride. Enjoying it even. “I live close enough to walk most places. Walk to work. I like to be mobile. But who knows why I was all the way down there. I guess I had more thinking to do than I thought. You ever do that?”

“What?”

“Get somewhere and have no idea how you managed to turn up there?”

“I might not make it a habit if I had a tendency to witness things like that.”

She stared directly into him. This time he didn’t look away.

“You used to be an ice skater?”

“Yeah, she did. She can tell you all about it later, but I want to hear about the rest of the truck story.” Haylan insisted on breaking it up.

“The truck hit a traffic light and flipped on its side, sliding a bit farther – maybe thirty yards – before coming to a stop. Its back doors split open and then all you saw was a mass of foam cups blow out of the splayed trailer. They were bunched together in long stacks and held together by loose plastic. Some of them caught wind and were lifted into the air, in the plastic bags, like miniature hot air balloons.”

“Wow,” Haylan said with the voice of a kindergartener.

“One bag split open and the cups came out of the stacks one by one and floated down the street.”

Will could see how Arri could be extremely convincing inside courtrooms. She was good at telling stories. At making her audience focus on the parts of stories she wanted them to.

“What’s your name?”

Will supposed it was only fair that she be allowed some questions too.

“Will Dante.” He got up to do the whole thing: the shaking of hands, the exchange of meaningful glances. It felt scripted to him, and therefore instantly boring.

“No need.” She waved at him from her two barstools over. Will sat back down.

“Hey, are you that Will Dante that just cracked up at work?”

“I don’t know that I’d call it cracking up.”

“No I admire cracking up. Caution be damned. I wish I could do it more often.”

“I did quit my job.”

“You did screenplay work of some sort?”

“I did. In a former life. How’d you hear all that, Arri?”

“It’s not that big of a city. Same way you knew my name was Arri. I knew you were Will Dante. And the rest? Word gets around when you start hauling newly former lives in trash cans down Shepherd.” She placed her napkin over her sandwich and walked over to Will, shaking his hand.

“It was nice to officially meet you. We should do this again some time. Maybe you could stop following me around and we could just do the regular dinner thing.” She grinned at him and then was gone before Will could even answer.

Ext. Marbelys' house – Night

After the party, when Pedro finally showed up to retrieve Francis and take him to his hotel, apologizing profusely for missing them at the church after the meeting and mumbling to an angry Norlan something about *beisbol* and *cerveza*, Yelba watched as Francis took Marbelys in his arms, squeezed her tight, and kissed her on the forehead. She couldn't get away from Marcela, and she didn't want to, for fear of what she might say, what her emotions might betray to Francis. She feared what they, her emotions, had already accomplished that afternoon on the street in front of the church. Plus, this was Marcela's day. By nightfall, though, this desire to suppress her feelings for Francis could not be overruled by her mind anymore. And she no longer wished to try. Since her father's death, she had not been allowed to display her emotions at all. She had cried for three days straight, along with her mother. They had held each other's hands and wept.

No one knew what was wrong with him. He'd just stopped eating. Stopped wanting to eat. He said he felt as if his bowels had been twisted and squeezed by Satan himself. But that he would not let his children see him in fear. He knew at the beginning of the illness that lasted for eight long weeks, that this was the end of it all. And he didn't want to show his family that he was scared. But Yelba could tell. She would whisper stories to her papa in the middle of the night as he slept in the hammock between the two mango trees that provided the majority of the shade on the family's bit of land. She spent every night sleeping next to him, carrying the bucket into which he relieved himself and emptying it into the hole in the back, so his own smell wouldn't disturb him. She'd whisper to him not to be scared. That He would carry him home. That He would protect him just as her father had protected all of them. And she wouldn't cry for him because

she knew he'd feel it was his fault that she was unhappy. And no one was allowed to be unhappy for long in the Bojorge house. So she stored up eight weeks of tears and let them loose the day he died. Since those three days of crying, she had been completely void of emotions. Two years. And now this. She hardly recognized herself.

As Francis swung open the gate, he turned over his shoulder and waved to her. He leaned over and whispered something to Norlan. And Pedro took them away. In her mind, it was decided at that moment. His stare could not be denied. And she could no longer deny herself.

Int. Marbelys' house – That same night

She did not sleep with her mother that night. She slept out in the dirt yard, on the same rice dryer on this night that had been her bed at her father's side, thinking of those nights when sadness was forbidden to her. She felt something loose its grip on her heart. And that night she dreamed vivid dreams in color. She dreamed of her father. She dreamed of the summers when their family was smaller and younger and he used to take them to the beach on Sundays to fish and play and rest and laugh. She dreamed of floating.

When she would wake in the morning, the sheet was down about her ankles and as she listened in the half-awake, half-asleep world of dawn to the scratching of the rooster and his two hens in the yard, she felt like she did on those nights after the family would spend the day on the beach, and she could feel her bed still tossing and floating across the waves, carrying her off deeper and deeper into the warm blue. It was like she was being sucked straight into the center of the ocean where the horizon met the water.

Int. Marbelys' house, 16 October 1977 – Next morning

As they prepared breakfast and church – the Bojorge's attended church on both Saturday and Sunday – Yelba said the following three things to her mother. She had rehearsed them in her head for the final hour when her anxiety and the butterflies in her belly flapped so incessantly they disturbed her dreams that she woke before the roosters and stared into the sky, unsure if she really was asleep or waking. She was careful to make sure she said them in between a couple of tasks her mother would do, so as not to let them be passed by unforgotten or particularly noted. She was equally careful to never say them directly to Marbelys' face. For you could not lie staring into the eyes of that woman. These were the first three lies she had ever told to her mother: Number 1. She was going to pack some extra food for two of the children at church who she had been keeping an eye on. (Food was kept on serious dibs in the Bojorge household. At eleven córdobas a pound bag of dried beans, and four for rice, in feeding eleven mouths, even the smallest pilfered portion was missed.) Number 2. Apell had asked her to come over to the house today, this Saturday night and spend the evening with her as she would be going to the airport early on Sunday morning and needed help preparing for her trip back home. (This was highly irregular. Not only had she never been asked to spend the night at Apell's *proyecto*, but she had never been made to work on the Sabbath.) Number 3. Norlan had arranged for Pedro to drive her to Apell's (since he had to take the American man back to his hotel) because the buses that would have normally brought her out past Tipitapa to the *proyecto* would not be running on Sunday. This was the weakest part of her plan, because she had not, in fact, talked to Norlan. If Marbelys was quick at detecting lies, Norlan was even faster. She could not tell him because she knew he would

be skeptical, and she couldn't take his disapproval. But he was still her little brother, and she would just jump in the car when Pedro came out and explain later.

Int. Hotel Coloniál, 16 October 1977 – Morning

Francis had been to church more times in those four days than he had been in the last ten years. Marbelys wanted him to come to church tomorrow too, but tomorrow he was scheduled to fly out. She wanted to pray for him. And she said, he must come hear her Yelba sing. That morning, when Francis walked into the lobby, too excited to sleep (and too hot to stay in his muggy hotel room alone one more minute, with its dusty rays of sun beaming relentlessly upon his naked form under the sheet), he thought of the dream he had last night. Francis wasn't sure if he started dreaming in the car last night as Pedro drove him to the hotel, with the wind beating his hair and his thoughts into his head, or if his bed had somehow morphed into the car. But it was a vision of Yelba, lit by a hundred white candles, the sun setting over the mountains, singing something sweet, something like the songs of the birds outside his window that carried him off to the hot sleep of people who fall into deep surprising love teetering on the equator. He only had a day left.

He sat down to a *USA Today* on the table. Because many of Somoza's foreign friends – people who he could convince to buy portions of his beautiful country because they had too much money and he had too much land – could read English, the big hotel in the center of the city stocked this American newspaper. In Nicaragua, there was no such outfit that could deliver that sort of thing to the people who stayed at the hotel. That sort of knowledge was not permitted to Somoza's people in the country, and so Nicaraguan journalists were just not necessary.

A fat old woman who smelled oddly of coffee and motor oil whose support hose had already – though it was early – begun to slip below the too-short hem of her standard uniform, walked up to the table and poured Francis a cup of coffee without even looking

at his face. She did smile, but it was as if she smiled more out of some involuntary twitch than a genuine feeling. On the front page there was a picture of president Jimmy Carter with a boy in Ethiopia whose legs were the size of his fingers. Simultaneously Francis thought of Yelba and the propaganda of the paper. It certainly worked. Somehow it seemed so far away, his home that wasn't more than five hours, seemed centuries ahead of him. He wanted to read the article, but thoughts of the Bojorge's superceded his brain. A couple both wholly dressed in linen sat to his left. The woman's hair severely stretched into a bun. Her eyebrows it seemed were pulled back with the same sharp swoosh of her pinned bangs. They chatted quickly sipping fresh-squeezed orange juice. He wanted to take the paper for his flight home, but in setting his mug of coffee down on the thick rattan place mat, he spilled it over the paper, dousing it in dirt coffee, spotted with some grounds from the bottom of his cup. He watched as the brown liquid steamed and bled like dyer's weed.

At the edge of the spill, where dark encroached the not-so-pristine fibrous grey of the paper's background, Francis read a note about the president's party thrown at the grand palace in Managua. They had just finished elections, it was the reason Francis' trip had been postponed for a day, and the president would be celebrating his birthday and his victory in a soiree of epic proportions. Francis' mind inadvertently leapt to the disturbing image of the guards at the airport who stared from stone faces at the incoming patrons.

Int. Iglesia de la Trinidad, 16 October 1977 – Early afternoon

Francis told Marbelys at the party that he would be glad to attend service with the family. And here he was. Yelba boldly walked up to Francis, whose knees were quite weak, due in part to the humidity – there looked to be a storm on the horizon and the air was wet and full with the impending moisture – and also Yelba’s singing. He watched only her. The last time he had been to church was as a boy, and only then, all he remembered was the a man with an tri-conci hat who shook a silver wand across the masses – sprinkling something wet across onto his hair, like rain. He hadn’t been to church in a long, long time, and never in his life to a Catholic service; he watched her as she knelt and stood and crossed herself. He stood on the row behind her with Norlan who did his best to keep him informed of the general proceedings. (“And now the priest will give a speech. This is when we sleep,” he giggled infectiously under his breath.) But when it came time for communion, Norlan’s entertaining asides had all but disappeared in Francis’ mind, even if words were still passed from his mouth. All he could hear, see, and breathe was Yelba in the row before him. Three times during the service she had moved to the front while four other young girls and an older woman sang the designated hymns. Francis held onto her voice singly.

After service, on the steps of the church, she walked up to him and opened up her backpack. In it were two bananas, some rice, beans, and cheese in a crock, two plates and a blanket. She placed a finger on her lips and zipped up the pack. Francis stared into her. Was this meant for just the two of them? Norlan stepped up from behind, with

another huge pat on Francis' back. Yelba quickly zipped up her pack and put it on her back. The three smiled at each other and walked back to the cinderblock wall and hopped in Pedro's Joy.

It was his fourth and final night in Nicaragua. He was tired and confused walking up to his room in the hotel. They'd gotten in the car, Pedro yammered away as usual, occasionally nudging Francis in the ribs. But there was an unnerving silence from the two in the backseat. When he'd climbed out of the car, passing FDR, he waited a bit longer than he should have saying his adioses to Pedro and Norlan, hoping Yelba's intentions with the bag of goodies would somehow become clear. But he sensed somehow, between the church and the hotel that maybe she had lost her nerve. Maybe he had not shown her enough of a sign. Maybe he'd dreamed up the whole thing, and it wasn't Yelba's intention to rendezvous with Francis anywhere, ever.

Or maybe it was the men, the men in the car he could not detach himself from. To think, when he'd first arrived he was so worried about the language barrier, and so stupefied by the speech and the speed at which it seemed to be delivered at him, he'd glued himself to Norlan. He felt like he was his lifeline. And now, it seemed as though he couldn't get rid of him. Surely he hadn't noticed the stolen glances, the silent yearning they had communicated to each other in the middle of the street, with the thumping of the basketball and the boys and the dogs kicking up dust all around them. Maybe it was all just the dreaming of a young girl. And a man with no experience falling

in love. Dejected, with too much latent adrenaline coursing through his veins, he unlocked his room and slumped onto the bed.

Before his head had reached the pillow, before he even saw her, he knew it was her knocking at the door.

“I would give form to this as I now see it, but envelop it in a blue haze. These two in that moment when they are no longer themselves but only one of thousands of links tying one generation to another generation. People should understand the sanctity of this moment and take off their hats as if they were in church.”

-E. Munch
Impressions from a ballroom, 1889

Ext. Congranja’s corporate building – Day

Will walked through the piazza. Since it was after 2 o’clock he was sure his father had already lunched. A boy sat cross-legged in front of a placard out front where families picnicked in the sun. Will knew it wasn’t something Figueres would have approved of. The building was meant to stand on its own. It didn’t need this piece of brass to explain itself to the world. The families, Figueres would have approved of. The placard, no.

Will wondered what the boy was thinking about the giant building. He held a sandwich in both hands, biting into the center. A plastic baggie that could have belonged to him caught a slight breeze and lifted and bounded along the brick pathway. (His own mother had wrapped his sandwiches in neatly folded wax paper. Could it still be purchased on rolls next to the aluminum foil?) The boy had his hair neatly split down the middle and appeared to be with his grandmother and was, upon further examination, more concerned with the birds bidding for his crumbs than the defiance of gravity and general laws of architecture and engineering that carved his silhouette out against it. The structure looked as though it protruded from the earth itself. It had an inevitable quality; had the thing not come out of the earth in this particular form at this particular time, something underneath would have been completely and dangerously out of balance,

under extreme amounts of pressure. The structure insinuated that underneath the earth there churned in vast river systems large amounts of liquid tensile-metallic fabric superheated, and not molten lava at all. Centuries ago, before humans, some complicated bit of plate tectonic wizardry had produced this visual, hardened representative of the underground world, thrust outward by the internal stress of simply being a planet pulled around in giant elliptical tracks – finally breaking free from its infinite pressure, only to be acted upon by more outside forces: the architects and engineers. Visualizing and carving.

Figueres said the building was meant to strike the viewer as at once, “carnal and modern.” He had chosen the tensile metallic fabric because it was progressive and provocative – conjuring up images of Boeing 777’s and nuclear warheads, but the very primitive shape of the building, not at all like the surrounding skyscrapers jutting out into the sky, blurred the line between the earth and the heavens. Buildings on Fairview were so clotted, in fact, one would be hard pressed to locate the horizon at all. But the architect prevailed. The engineers had made it possible and there it stood, rising into the sky, a single breast. Fleshy and evocative.

Grandma shaded her eyes glinting up to what must have been a curiously intriguing abomination to them. The little kid cocked his head, mimicking the birds and uncrossed his legs, lengthening them toward the building’s base. Figueres had wanted for the building to stand as an experience. He wanted no pictures to be taken. He made the unusual request that there be no press releases regarding the opening of the building. He wanted one’s understanding of the building to be constructed entirely upon the first impression; this meant no pictures published anywhere. After the photoshopped perfectly

staged grandiose photos, the real was always somehow a cheap imitation. People still took pictures of the structure. No professional pictures of the building were allowed, but Figueres couldn't stop the tourists. No visual image of the masterpiece graced the pages of any architecture text or coffee table tome. For the most part, the media had heeded his wishes, probably out of deference to the dead.

The building was meant to house, control, generate, mandate, and monitor the seldom recognized building block of the American community. Congranja was well on its way to monopolizing the world's market for corn. It sold, distributed, bought, marketed, invested, traded, and dealt in anything corn-related, except as a matter of course, the corn itself.

This guy Figueres had stumbled upon the lucky fortune to be paid to design his life's work. The structure that would epitomize all that he felt architecture could do.

When Will looked at the building, with its great hole at the top, he couldn't help but associate it with absence. Some days absence seemed more like sad potentiality. Sometimes the hole spoke to him only of death. Of the end. That comes from somewhere else. It was like Figueres knew the building would somehow be the end of him. Figueres was rumored to have killed himself upon its completion. It was the only proper way to prevent himself from sullyng the One Beautiful Thing he had created. Anything else would be tangential to the erection of this classic, this exercise in contradiction, the ancient and modern birth of his building. Anything else would exist as Post-Congranja. Nothing could be created out of this. True, he existed before the building. But his life did not cause the construction of the building. Will knew it was the exact opposite. This building was the intention of Figueres' life, a priori to his actually

having lived it. It signified all that had ever happened to him, the accumulation of each step, each day, each thing learned. Existing after the fact, he would be the illegitimate child of the creation itself. Will sensed a certain desperation in him.

Will wondered if he had really gone through with it? Had he killed himself? Or had he just dissolved into nameless obscurity, the suicide line only something fabricated at the foot of the building over veggie wraps and Nocarb shakes. It didn't matter. The building was erect. His persona had wiped itself from the rumble of the Collective Consciousness. His existence, or lack thereof, was merely the unnecessary precursor, to the product. The way with Ford and the automobile. If not him, someone else would have figured out how to get from here to there more efficiently. Several ways to skin a cat – to kill the horse and buggy. And who's to say the other guy, world enough and time, wouldn't have done it better. Maybe the Model-T could have been the more fuel-efficient and faster Model-Z. If not Dalí's *Persistence of Memory*, perhaps somebody else's something better. If Michelangelo hadn't done the Sistine Chapel, somebody else might have done something terrible, and Pope Julius II would have had the whole dirty mess painted over and commissioned to somebody else. But what does it matter? It didn't happen that way. We've got the Sistine Chapel. Talent is the supreme tool of the truly civilized man. After that, it's the thing itself. That is all.

Int. Hotel Coloniál, 16 October 1977 – Dusk

Francis was not what you could call a sexual person. He was twenty-six. And a bachelor, and he had long since given up his seed-sowing in his undergraduate days. With the drinking, he swore off sex too. It wasn't really a conscious decision. There just became less and less time, and consequently less and less reason to have sex. Plus, to be quite honest, he had never quite caught on to it. Okay, he wasn't very good at it. It never really amounted to more than some self-conscious moments in the light followed by awkward fumbblings once the lights were off. It wasn't that he was concerned, necessarily, with what he saw as consistently weird and isolating encounters in his life. He had always told himself that it was because of the person he was with. Not because of his sexual inadequacies, but because the girl never amounted to more than a conquest, of sorts. Yes, it was cliché. But it was the truth. He just wanted to get the first, second, third, etc. encounters out of the way, so that he could move forward with the falling in love part. There were days when he had hoped for it. Perhaps he could even remember, if he tried hard enough, nights when he had dreamed of it, but once he had begun working for Doc at Congranja, most of his nights were full of worry and ambition, the only drug left in his life. Ambition. Somehow, things were changing. Drastically. And so for the first time in many years, staring at this angel before him, just outside his hotel door, in arm's reach, he felt the hotness that started somewhere deep in his chest flare and take shape in his flesh. And he was not ashamed because the source of this was present in the room with him, in the flesh. He was not nervous, as he had been before, for he loved Yelba and knew that whatever happened tonight, he knew he would be with her from now until the end.

He wasn't sure what to do with her, now that she was here. Smiling, he took her in his arms and buried his face in her dark curls, so shiny he felt he could take them in his mouth just like the rest of her body he would taste tonight. The lovely scent of the church's candles clinged there and he imagined her there again singing with the rest of the girls in the choir and allowed both the memory of her before God and her before him now fuse in his mind.

As soon as he let go of her, she took a step back, embarrassed. It was obvious that the boldness that had allowed her to orchestrate this meeting had evaporated. It was only just enough to get her to his door. And now she was completely his. Standing there in her white shirt, appliquéd with white flowers and sleeves that puckered at her demure shoulders, she looked just like the one the girl with the long black braid in the World Book pages. He wondered if she had worn it just for his benefit, since he had not seen anyone else in the church with what the book explained as the "traditional" dress. He took the strings of the bow that tied the collar closed in both his hands and tugged at them. He pulled one side across to reveal her round shoulder. He then held her face between his hands and gently pulled her forehead to his lips. Much later, after they had been married several years, she would recount the moment for him, and he would be shocked that this had been their first kiss. She tilted her head to his shoulder and seemed to relax into his arms.

She took his hand and led him down the hall and out into the cavernous lobby. He could tell she was struck by the grandness of the large room, with its water fountain in the center and bountiful flower arrangements the size of entire tables. Here was where the U.S. Ambassador stayed. Any foreign diplomat could be welcomed here. It

displayed a richness and excess not to be seen anywhere else in Nicaragua, besides the presidential palace. All at once, he felt uncomfortable being associated with this place in her mind.

She led him outside. As they emerged from the humid lobby, out into the circle, a place that had become for Francis familiar to him in the last three days, a butterfly circled briefly around Yelba's hair. She stepped up to a motorcycle parked in the drive. She patted the seat and grinned. A grin he'd not yet seen on her, but recognized it as signature Norlan. He guessed she just assumed everyone knew how to ride a motorcycle, and felt ashamed that he he'd have to let her know he didn't. He could have guessed, but with the traffic in Nica – and besides, where were they going?

Before his mind spiraled too far, Yelba had hopped on the front of the bike waiting for Francis. He wouldn't have to decide.

Int. Will's townhouse – Morning

It was a week and a day since he'd quit his job, and he felt like a stranger in his own house. He toiled around the morning, thinking of things to do. More intricate things to make for breakfast. A closet he hadn't yet cleaned. A new way to make his coffee. Cuban. Vietnamese. It felt good. There was a finality to his action of last week that created all kinds of possibilities. And the only way to move was forward. He terminated his lease in the office building on the same day, just to make sure he had a clean break of it. He had originally leased the office inside the old printing press's building – one of the twin buildings that had survived demolition – because he had told himself that he couldn't work at home. Too many distractions. He liked the idea of getting up, gathering his things, and going somewhere where there was a bustle of people. Seemingly important men and women doing seemingly important things, in important fashions. The façade was inspiring.

But now he had quit, and he couldn't shake the interminable quiet of this morning. He read the paper to postpone having to actually do something. It had been a long time since he had read the whole newspaper.

He took a sip of coffee he'd poured from his French press and began on the first page.

The driver never saw the man, it said. He was crossing the street – one of the busier streets of downtown that had been expanded to allow for heavier traffic that gave delivery trucks easier access to the alleys of the large businesses on the outskirts of town.

The city's grid was surrounded by an older warehouse district that was still thriving, though their decrepit exteriors told an entirely different story. The paper said he

was a Mexican en route to work. Maybe illegal, maybe legal but very poor. Those were the only types that worked the night shift in the coffee plant. Will knew that from his observations.

He was a happy man, by all accounts from his colleagues.

He thought it telling that the newspaper reporter didn't seek out his family for snippets regarding how the man lived – the only thing it mentioned was that he had been survived by two children and a wife. The reporter had settled on interviewing the people who worked by his side in the plant.

He heard the story from Arri as well as the nightly news. And now with the version from the paper, the accident had taken on Rashomonian proportions.

Traveling at what authorities believed to be the speed limit, the tractor-trailer full of styrofoam cups was heading eastbound when it struck and instantly killed Javier Moreno Torres early Wednesday morning. Charges will not be filed against the driver.

He had gone to lunch yesterday, followed Arri there. At the end of their exchange, as she was heading out the door with her leather satchel, she looked down at the threshold of the door, the tinkle of the bells still echoing in his mind, and mumbled something about this being all their was. Will hadn't known if she was talking about the door or something bigger. But for a moment, he did feel less important, less significant, and lost the nerve to follow her out the door. When she was on the outside, she looked at him again, through the glass. There was not a smile, but something else. Something mournful and yet steely, like she was preparing for something in earnest, some race, some event that she had been waiting for. There was expectation in that look.

She hadn't said goodbye.

Will read about the cycle of films they'd be showing at the New Aurora Picture Show of Chaplin. Though he wanted to start doing something, writing mainly, his new freedom had intimidated him into lethargy. While he had been working, he had started several scripts on his own, but never had the time, or really the energy to complete them. He didn't know where to begin. Perhaps Chaplin could help him get started.

In black and white, Will imagined the cups pulling from their stacks, one by one, trapping wind and taking flight. It was oddly heartening and at the same time equally pathetic that this was the only inspiration he could muster.

Int. The Theloniuss Monkey – Sometime near midnight

“Is it a pentagon that’s somehow the devil’s sign?” Dak spoke to no one in particular.

“A pentagon, hexagon, something with six sides, right? Or some upsidedown star?”

“A pentagram? That what you mean?”

“Right. That’s it, a pentagram. Like these here five ice cubes.” Was he slamming them that hard? Bam. The eight-sided octagonal shape of the cup fucked with his alcohol-absorbent brain as he lined it up with two of the horizontal not altogether straight grains in the lumber of the table. Not to mention the droll of that goddamned happy-assed anchor the bartender’s got on that screen. She’s got no clue what the fuck she’s blurring at the edges. Is this pine? He couldn’t believe he had said to her ‘Dak’s the name.’ He tested it out loud to see if it sounded as dumb to his ears as it did to his mind.

“Dak’s the name.”

Goddamn. Who was he trying to be? Fucking James Mason? Who the hell says that? She looked so cute. Didn’t want to fuck it up. Careful. He had tried so hard to put some muscle into that tongue. And to act like he was listening and not thinking about thinking about listening. Fuck. “What was her name?”

“But she knows yours.” The drummer was mocking Dak now. “ ‘Name’s Dak.’ ”

“Fuck you.” If that’s what he said then it might be okay; that’s not so bad. Better en ‘Dak’s the name.’ Almost cool.

“You’re some kinda barred, bro.”

Dak rubbed at his temples where the skin there met his hairline.

“How the hell you get through these sets, shit, Dak.” He walked off towards the bathroom with that fucking drummer saunter – that high-hat syncopated slide in his step. Dak hated that guy Leland for his talent. He was good, bordered on being better than Dak. And this had always been a point of contention between them. And Leland was younger. This pissed him off even more. But, like Miles, he’d learned to surround himself with fresh talent, though he hated it, so that he’d still be plugged into what’s really going on out there. What the music people like to hear. He fucking loved experimenting. With drugs. With love. With music. And if that meant he had to put up with monkey fucks like Leland, well, then fuck it, he would. *The Thelonius Monkey* had never been so crowded, had never done such business since they’d started playing there. And as much as he loathed to admit it, Leland was almost as big a draw as Dak was, smug bastard.

BAM. The bartender banged the set mounted in the corner of the bar uptop where nobody could see it anyway. Static lines. Horizontal again. Corn. Then lines again. Yellow and green, then gray and black. Could somebody please explain this corn crisis? He kept seeing these pictures. Heard them say something about it but didn’t really know what’s going on. “What’s that all about?” Dak managed to get out to the guy on the other side of him, and pretty clearly at that.

The guy next to him was little-ish. Smaller than Dak, for sure. But Dak couldn’t quite make out any of his facial features. Just that he had dark hair and a pretty severe widow’s peak. Like Dracula.

“So, yeah. There’s this corn and they’re all up in arms about it because there’s this sterilization process they’re all going through. Like little baby corn abortions.”

“Corn abortions?” Dak was fucked, but not that fucked.

“No I’m serious. Think about it. Congranja. The world’s provider of soft drinks, beef feed, chicken feed, syrups, oh, and No Corn. Nope. No corn. As we know it. The stuff on the cob. The little yellow niblets on the... with the husk and growing out of the ground. Stalks about yeah high.” This guy was either drunk too, or Dak was really barred.

Congranja, the world’s leading producer of corn, after last year’s disastrous explosion at a processing plant in Nicaragua that killed forty-two people, is fighting its way back up the stock charts. The company was forced to pay three billion dollars in damages in an unprecedented suit filed by the Nicaraguan government against the company under the new liberal party popular president, Lisber Chamorro.

Dak was getting the news and then this guy at the same time. His mind felt like a jangle of disconnected car parts. Steel, heavy, and entirely unmanageable.

“Okay, so, the killing of unborn corn fetuses. Before they ever have a chance to grow up. To live. To feel the Oklahoma winds come sweeping down the plains. They cut the stalk. Well, no, not exactly. They stop life before it gets to that point. Before they even have a chance to germinate. The seeds, the little shucks at the end of their corny days, sent out into the world in a last ditch effort at sexual corn ecstasy, fall on fallow ground. Well, not really that either. The ground’s not fallow. It’s the seed. All the papa corns are impotent. They’ve been genetically modified that way.”

The company has produced a technology, a type of seed for corn, they term, “suicide seeds.” Multinational food companies, as well as stockholders, could stand to profit big from this development as it would mean an increase in sales some in the

industry estimate at upwards of 63%. Nicaraguans, angry over an industry that they say has done more to ruin their country than provide much needed...

She continued rattling on about the giant corporation. Dak wasn't listening. Neither was this guy next to him. Only the neurotic barkeep seemed to pay any attention to the set. Stan kept the TV on the news pretty much all the time. He felt justified because The Monkey wasn't a sports bar. It was a jazz bar. Nobody came to watch the TV. And since he had to be here "all fucking day serving assholes like you," he'd say, never missing an opportunity to curse the most loyal of Monkey clientele, he'd choose the channel.

"What do you care so much about the corn?" Dak managed in an effort to get a bit more sober before his last set.

"What do you care? You're the one who asked first."

"I was just trying to make conversation."

"Good. So I was just telling you because you asked about something I actually know about. What are you high on anyway? Can't just be the gin in that glass."

Leland returned from the bathroom to retrieve Dak.

They played their final set of the evening. The little man sat near the front and watched the entire show. Not getting up. Not tapping his foot. Not doing anything. All Dak could think about was rows of corn and suicide seeds.

Ext. Near Mombacho, 16 October 1977 – Night

Yelba wasn't what Francis would call a good motorcycle driver, but he enjoyed the odd edginess, the thrill. The ride afforded him the perfect balance: the excuse of holding Yelba tight without the weight of the impossibility of their conversation. He squeezed her hips, tiny but surprisingly substantial. All roads, or at least all of the roads he had been on in Managua, led to or from the airport, and since the sun was beginning its descent behind them, they were clearly not headed in its direction. They pulled onto a gravel path that immediately began a steep climb. He wondered what the men of this country thought of a woman driving a motorcycle, much less a woman driving a motorcycle with a white man clinging to her backside. They passed a green sign with lettering in Spanish.

As if on cue, Yelba shouted, "Este es Vulcán Mombacho."

With the steep grade of the road, the motorcycle strained a bit harder to bear the weight of both bodies up the side of the still active volcano. Francis' back and butt began to ache from the bike's jarring. Yelba pulled over and dragged the bike close to a little dwelling made of cardboard boxes and some broken bits of lumber. Yelba shouted something to the woman who lived there, and the woman yelled something back from the inside. The voice sounded hardened and old. Yelba parked the bike behind her house and again took Francis' hand. Wherever they were going, they'd finish the rest of the journey on foot. Though it was getting dark, the air was as hot and wet as it had been in the swell of midday.

They mashed their way through ground that hadn't been trod in a while. Before long they found a makeshift set of stairs that rose up into the fog. Somewhere between

the main road and their trip on the bike up into Nica's clouds, night had fallen. Francis' heart thumped for the exertion and the presence of this woman. She stumbled when one of the branches used as a stepping stone had dislodged. He reached out for her, happy that she was again willing to be held. She giggled like Norlan had the first day he had met him.

"We are almost here." Francis thought the misuse of 'here' made sense. They *were* almost here. In the present. Time had stopped and started, rendered meaningless. He found himself thinking that when they reached the top, they would meet themselves there, already. Here.

Francis had visited many of the States' popular attractions growing up. The Grand Canyon, Mt. St. Helens, even the Alamo. But there was something about the conceit you had to make as a shameless tourist that somehow lessened the power and beauty of the thing being viewed. But reaching the summit of Mombacho was unlike any of those tiresome trips he had made as a kid. There were no rails for safety. No signs regaling the history of the thing, the people who had fought there, the cultural significance of the place. It wasn't at all about the thing itself. It was about the moment. Their moment here. It was about how all the years that had gone before were unlike any of the ones that would surely come. Because of – what? The fog, the night? It was like a scene from film noir, where the fog would have been man-made. He instantly chided himself for the association. This was real. Wet, hot-cold, and undeniably true.

Mombacho was part of a group of three volcanoes, and from their vantage point, they could see into the chasmal hole of its mouth. Inside there were only gases and soft acrid-sweet steam, billowing gently into pillows.

Yelba pulled off her pack and laid out the blanket and meal of plantains, beans, and some sweet rolls made sticky by dribbles of honey. It was as if they were the only two people on a primordial planet, speaking the only language available to two people who cannot speak, who have no reason to speak.

They had to say nothing.

“Francis.”

He kissed her. Then they folded to the ground. She very meticulously set aside the food. For once, he was living out something for which he had not made any plans at all. And it felt right to him. She felt like everything and nothing in his arms.

She lay back against the wet ground, on the blanket she'd brought for their picnic in the clouds. He perched on his elbow, tracing her profile against the strange ghost glare of the volcano's edge. All around them, illuminated steam revealed swirling and delicate winds.

THE FALL OF A SPARROW

by

Will Dante

FADE IN:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - DAY (BLACK AND WHITE)

A dizzying view of a virtually cloudless sky on an ice crisp day. Far off, the horizon dives into the water almost rendering the two indistinguishable. We see clear water lapping against snow-white ankles. The ankles are shivering so that tiny ripples swim away and blend into the water. We see toes digging into the wet sand, desperately trying to hang on to the elusive earth. More tiny ripples. Something is being dropped onto the surface of the water. They are tiny and brown. They bob and float like little boats across the wakes of the shivering ripples. They look like seeds. No. They're pits. Cherry pits. A cherry falls into the water. And back up to the sky.

BOY

Can we share your cherries?

A young BOY, wearing a satchel on his back and holding a bucket, is standing back at the shore next to a bundled up white sheet and a bag of cherries. These belong to ANNA, a girl in her mid-twenties who has been standing in the water and up until now has believed that she was alone. After all, what is a little boy doing on the beach, alone at daybreak?

ANNA

Um . . . sure. I guess. I mean, do your parents know where you are?

BOY

Yes. My Dad. He trusts me. He sent me, actually.

Anna leaves the water and heads toward the little boy on the shore.

ANNA

Sent you? This early? To do what?

BOY

I collect seashells. What are you doing out here? Do you collect seashells, too?

ANNA

No. I am collecting my life.
(then self-
consciously)
I guess.

BOY

Oh.

We notice a bucket full of a colorful array of seashells. You wonder where he managed to find all these exotic shells on what appears to be a rather colorless coast.

BOY (CONT.)

I like to organize them by color. Let's sit down.

The Boy impatiently stares at Anna who is not quite sure if she wants to sit down or not.

BOY (CONT.)

Come o-o-o-n-n-n. It'll be fun.

ANNA

You certainly are insistent.

BOY

Yes I am. Now sit down.

Anna and the Boy sit down in the sand. The Boy dumps his collection in the middle of her outstretched legs.

BOY (CONT.)

You do this too.

Anna and her new friend sit across from each other with their feet, spread apart, touching one another, forming a diamond-shaped space in which they examine the shells.

ANNA

Wow. Did you find all these by
yourself?

BOY

Sometimes my Dad helps me.
Sometimes I need to do it
myself.

The gentle serenity of the birthing Spring Day is shattered
by a piercing clap of thunder.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. ANNA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (COLOR)

ANNA, a girl of eight, sits close to her bearded DAD on a
plaid corduroy recliner, both clad in their pajamas.

DAD

Scared, punkin?

ANNA

No. I like thunderstorms. They
feel like my flannel blanket.

She says one thing, but her body language reveals another.

DAD

(spelling it out)

Should we make some P-O-P-C-O-R-
N?

ANNA

P-O-P-C-O-R-N? Yes. Yes. Yes.

They sing and spell this word with the Friday night aura of
ritual. Dad lets the recliner down and Anna runs toward
the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The sounds of the storm continue to rage and beat at the kitchen windows. Dad and Anna move expertly around the kitchen gathering the materials needed for the ritual popcorn popping. Dad's adept hand plugs in the popper's cord. Anna pulls out a big glass bowl, when a loud clap of thunder is heard and . . . the lights go out. We hear Anna drop the big glass bowl. It falls to the ground with a crash.

ANNA

Daddy?

DAD

It's ok, punkin. Don't move.
I'm right here.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - CONTINUOUS (BLACK AND WHITE)

Anna has collected all of her shells into separate piles according to their colors.

ANNA (V.O.)

I came here to walk into the
ocean and not come back.

BOY

My Dad says that all of these
shells have other halves that
are exactly the same. And when
they are together they are
somebody's world, but when
they're apart they are lonely.
I'm going to find all their
matching parts, so they won't be
sad.

ANNA (V.O.)

But then I met the boy who
wanted to share my cherries.
The boy who was so fascinated
with seashells . . .

ANNA

Your dad sounds very clever. Do you have a mom?

BOY

It's pretty much just me and Dad. He's very smart.

ANNA

Sounds like it.

BOY

Do *your* mom and dad know you're out here?

Ext./Int. New Aurora Picture Show – Day

The *New Aurora Picture Show* had been renovated with the downtown revitalization project that had been continuously in operation for over thirty years now. Will's father had been integral in its establishment, and the initiative was so hip, so trendy that this district of downtown, though it had been revitalized and re-re-vitalized, hung on the name because they were afraid if they let go, for even a moment, their own trendy-ness would somehow grow old and out-dated like the blinking Maxwell house sign that loomed over the city. *Aurora's* prefixual sign "New" still teetered up there precariously on old rusty nails, though the newness had fallen off the building years ago.

Will rounded the corner, and just under the marquis heralding the week-long Chaplin festival that had been digitally restored, he rubbed his palm against the building's rough edifice, absorbing the familiar warmth of the sun-soaked bricks.

"The Armed Forces Special Weapons Project presents" flashed on the screen.

Soundtrack of a small brass section heralding a few bars of nondescript but decidedly patriotic bars followed by an ominous drum line. A wasteland of destruction flickered black and white, somehow morbid in its desolation. An overhead shot panned left.

Nothing but a grassy plain in view, its expanse so flat, it hurt your eyes. The frame froze.

Movement again. Panned left. No sign of wildlife or even vegetation. And then a voice – instantly familiar, authoritative and yet unknowable in any specific way: "On the right, a well-manicured house. On the left, a shanty of a house that has been sadly unkempt.

When Communist nuclear warfare visits these homesteads, one house will be prepared.

And one will not. Witness how each house withstands the aftershocks of nuclear blasts.” Sister, in the house on the right, prepared by bringing her plastic doll with strawberry hair into the house. Daddy cut the grass. Mommy swept the porch and beat a rug on the white lattice work of the patio. Brother brought in his widdie twicycle.

“Of course, the first and best defense against nuclear attacks is... to be somewhere else. But if you are sufficiently far away... you will need to prepare yourselves in other ways against the alpha and beta particles and gamma rays of the after effects.” The nuclear family smiled into the camera; Sister’s headgear glinted diamonds of light. “Fear of radiation is widespread. It is a fear fanned by misunderstanding. Radioactivity is dangerous. But to say it is deadly – period – is as misleading as giving a flat answer to the question how high is up.” The boy on the tricycle nodded enthusiastically.

Black. Title card with animated pie charts. 85% of the pie marked “Worry.” Fifteen percent of the pie: “Deaths.” “If you must worry, concentrate on the things you can control on the surface.”

The family on the left. Hopelessly unkempt. Mommy in her ragged smock. No sign of papa. Flotsam strewn all across the yard as though the film were in fact about tornadoes and not about nuclear fallout. Broken pieces of lattice-work exposed an emptiness under the stoop. Brother played in the side yard, poking a stick at a frog in a mud puddle.

Black.

Somewhere far away from the houses: nuclear attack. A familiar fireball, followed by the mushroom cloud, an image, Will thought, that could not possibly have the same effect on people now as it had in the 1950's.

Blinding white fireball. We panned right to follow the heat.

Black.

The screen split by the two houses. The house on the left incinerated and glowed hot orange before disintegrating into ash in a way that was almost cartoonish. The other house, on the right, shook and cowered, singed the edges like a bit of toast left too long in the broiler, but didn't burst into flames. "Consider the flash heat of the after-explosion that changes the complexion of everything that it strikes."

The Family on the Right survived, though they looked a little worse for the wear. No one's for sure where they had been during the attack. "Because," the announcer said, "they have prepared for the things they could: a new coat of paint and tidying up of the yard." They were apparently spared the fallout. "Pop may need a toupee after this experience, but they remain sane and happy because they prepared for things on the surface. Pretty soon, all of Pop's hair will grow back into place as thick as before. A small price to pay, don't you think?" Panned to Family on the left. All that remained was a burned, barely recognizable, pair of overalls in the yard.

All around him, people gasped and laughed during the film, happy though uncomfortable, it seemed. Despite the desolation, Will couldn't help but be somehow warmed by the film's nostalgia, by its dumb hope.

Will's shoes were where they always were, firmly positioned on the floor under his chair. His legs contorted into half-lotus, the only way he could ever really view a film

– from the film’s opening credits to the wap-thwap he imagined at the film’s end, though he was almost never permitted that near ecstatic pleasure as everything was digital.

In the dark, a warm shape moved into the seat next to him.

Last week it had been the matinee of Buñuel digitally restored. This week *New Aurora* was showing newsreels in tandem with Chaplin’s films from his early silents. Tonight’s feature was *City Lights*. They’d also show some old reels of his very first screen tests to be viewed during the after-party for the gathering of esthetes, quasis, closet film buffs, ambitious housewives to drink and converse, with their champagne (though nothing whatsoever could be done of the ubiquitous popcorn-y stench).

Will moved his eyes from the stunning blind girl – Virginia Cherrill – on-screen in all her pin-curled glory to see who came in late next to him. Arri. He remembered she had mentioned she loved Charlie Chaplin in one of her *Duumvirate* diatribes, but he was still somewhat surprised to see her here during the week. He thought for sure that if she was going to make an impression on the people who would care whether or not she was there, she’d have gone to the after-party where people mingled and chatted and made approving notes of one another – not to the actual film itself.

It wasn’t so much that either one of them made any sort of move towards the other. They just kept showing up in the same places.

Without asking. She sat down in the seat right next to him.

Of course, they did attend the party afterwards, but left quickly, warmed by the champagne and company. Will was skeptical of the “official” beginning of these types of things. He liked things to be a bit more organic. And Arri seemed to be moving in the same direction. They emerged half-blinking, half-squinting into the hotness of the afternoon. Will watched as their steps seemed to synchronize weirdly, uncontrolled by anything either of them were doing.

“I have to admit. I’ve begun not being weirded out by your following me.” She seemed to be testing the waters.

“Me following you? You showed up at my movie house, in the middle of the day. And I’m not following you. Exactly.”

“Your movie house? And I came on purpose. To see if you might be here. This is the sort of gig where people who – in their former lives at least – did screenplay work might show up. So I came on purpose. And I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“Fine. Then I’ve been following you.”

“Fine.”

“And I’m beginning to believe in it more than I believe in lots of other things.”

“ ‘It’ being defined as what exactly?”

“Our continued path-crossing.”

“I guess I believe in it too.”

A few more steps. Going nowhere and everywhere all at the same time. Should he?

“I’ve enjoyed. Wait.” She seemed okay with his strange affinity for disconnected and abrupt dialogue. She was patient with him. And he wanted to thank her for it. And there was not really any good reason for it.

“I was going to say I love...watching you. But now, I realize that could be pretty insulting. And vaguely weird.”

And that was the beginning. As official as it got.

They followed their feet dutifully. Neither was leading. They were happy to just move through the city. Going where their feet would take them. Hanging onto each other by the thinnest of silk spider webs, glistening with suspended animation. Arri walked on the sidewalk closest to the street and the passing cars. Will on the side closest to the buildings, every now and then he’d put his free hand out to touch the hard steel, the granite edifice, or the ugly scratchy brick of the building’s bases, attempting to ground himself. To remind himself that this was something sturdy and dependable and hard. His finger pads registered the texture of all that didn’t move, though he had read that on the inside all these tall behemoths are actually designed to acquiesce to the forces of wind and nature. With grace and resolution.

They rounded a corner and ran into a jogger that he recognized from the building where Will lived. She ran with a sleek blue-grey Wiemaraner whose leash Arri had to hurdle. And for this, she was forced to let go of Will.

“Jesus Christ.” They giggled among the woman’s heaving and copious apologies. The dog licked Arri’s hand. The spell was broken. “Good God lady, my dog weighs more than you do.” Arri liked this Will could tell. Being complemented by other women, without the women really even intending a complement. Not that she needed it.

Arri blushed. He had seen it before, but only rarely. The pink of her impossibly pink cheeks getting pinker. Her hair's strawberry being overshadowed by the brilliance of the limitless blood of her crab-apple cheeks. It was, quite wholly, Will's undoing. Her cheekbones promised innocence, but her mouth, seldom self-conscious, proved otherwise.

This was one of those rare moments, when she was caught off guard. Only just now, he was thinking, perhaps this wasn't a function of others' complementing her. Maybe this blushing came from a moment every now and then when Arri had, unbeknownst to Will, noticed him taking note of her.

Ext. Mombacho, 16 October 1977 – Continuous

After they had tasted the sweet rolls, a force that he never could have predicted took hold of Francis. Against the backdrop of the very firmaments themselves, he knelt before Yelba, dropped to one knee and asked this girl, whose age he didn't know, who couldn't understand the language he was speaking, if she would marry him.

Somehow she understood. Tears rolled down her cheeks, as if the words themselves had pulled them from her eyes. She then knelt on both knees and kissed him. "Sí" was the only sound she made for the rest of the night, except for the quiet heaving her sobs made after they had made love. He felt a burning wetness on his cheeks, something that had not been there in a long long time.

Early Sunday morning, they woke and had a small ceremony before the priest that had baptized each and every last member of the Bojorge children. They were married at nine in the morning. At 11:07, they boarded a plane and Francis took his new wife away from Nicaragua.

Int. Will's townhouse - Night

One of the things Will had taken to doing when Arri and he were together was to cook. He had never been much of a cook before, and because Arri was a runner, they ate pasta. And lots of it. She was unphased by the surge of anti-carbitism in the early nineties. Something about the scare tactics of the meat industry convincing the world that carbohydrates and thus energy was a bad thing put her off, she said. They had begun to share most evenings together, and thus, Will began to learn these things about how Arri's mind worked – particularly with regard to food.

“So we should all just sit around eating beef and growing larger and more uninspired and unambitious with each passing moment?” She had just come in from one of her runs and pulled off the long-sleeved spandex shirt she always wore when she ran.

“Thus the pasta every day?”

“Pasta or die.” She smoothed her eyebrows with both index fingers and then wiped the sweat onto her jogging pants. And there she stood in her tank top, pants, and sock feet. It never failed, as soon as Arri's feet hit the indoors of any kind, her shoes came off.

“What's with the no shoes thing?”

“What?”

“You're never in the house more than two seconds before your shoes come off.”

“I can't stand the confinement. It was probably the skates. It killed my feet.

Something about tight spaces that make my toes angry. These days I like to be nice to my body parts.” She reached into his cabinet, picking the right door, by now, on the first

try and pulled down a glass. Will noticed her arms as they cut graceful lines through the early evening's geometry of auburn sunbeams.

She drank down a glass of water with little ice, as usual, and Will cooked the putanesca.

"Dak's playing at *The Thelonius Monkey* tonight." She spoke as if Will should know who Dak was, which was pretty much how Arri introduced everyone into conversation. With her brother, Thomas, she had done the same thing. Her parents, who she always referred to by their first names, Evelyn and Paddy, and now Dak.

"Who is Dak and what is he playing?" Will chopped the selection of olives. He had finished with the kalamatas and now set to work on the nicoises.

"Haven't you been to the *Monkey* before?"

"That jazz club?"

"Yep. The one on Shepherd."

"Right." Vinegar and Arri's smell fresh from her jog mingled in the air.

"So who's Dak?"

"He plays bass there every Thursday night. One of the city's best-kept secrets. You should come. It'd be good material."

"I don't go everywhere pimping the world for material."

"I wasn't saying you did. Don't get all defensive." She plucked an olive from the plastic containers from the co-op and sucked the pimento out of the center. "Man, Will."

"Does he have the whole band?"

“Drummer, a cornetist and a really lame singer. They’re better when she’s not there. I hear she’s been out for the last couple of weeks. Maybe Dak’s come to his senses and kicked her out.”

“What’s wrong with her.”

“She pretty much just sucks. But the rest of the guys are really really good.”

“So why they keep her hanging on?”

“She’s Dak’s sister.”

“Ahh. Dang. Don’t believe I’d have gotten myself into that situation.”

“Don’t believe he had much of a choice. He loves her too much to kick her out, despite the fact that the drummer has been rallying for her removal for years.”

“Sounds like small-time cronyism to me.”

“No, I think he loves her so much he can’t stand to see her hurting. Plus, it’s better than the alternative.” Will reduced the sauce with some red wine. His glasses fogged in the steam. Arri appeared blurry to him through the condensation.

“I think the bassist’s planning an overthrow. It could get ugly.”

“How’d you come to know so much about them and the coup d’etat anyway?”

“Dak and I went on a couple of dates a while back.” Will knew Arri would be watching him now. And was happy for the safety the heat in the kitchen afforded him. He was a little surprised at how instantaneously this irritated reaction came over him. But still was confident he would pass this test, if she was in fact administering one. He couldn’t be sure. Arri could just as easily be the girl on whom that sort of game-playing was lost.

“I’ve never dated a musician before.” He refused to bite.

“It never really took, which is probably a good thing as I stopped being able to keep up with the drinking. And the family.”

“Family?”

“Dak was pretty close with his sister, obviously, but also with his father. He’s got Alzheimer’s, so Dak ends up splitting the duties of taking care of his father with his own life at the club and the bus-driving. Taxing really.”

“Sounds noble actually.” He wondered if that had sounded sarcastic, for he actually did feel impressed, and even mildly envious. The water on the gas cooktop had begun the perfect slow boil, a quiet, sustained roiling. Will emptied angel hair pasta into the pot. And glanced at the clock. Only three minutes and into the strainer. He liked it al dente. Still firm with none of the pasta slime he’d grown to avoid in all restaurants around town. The only way to avoid it completely was not to order it.

“No oil, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Not even a drop. Must have been watching the same episode on the Food channel I did.”

“Nope, my father, actually. He was a mad pasta cook. Didn’t teach me a damn thing else, but was a pro when it came to perfect pasta. No matter how good the sauce, he insisted it was how you cooked the pasta that could make or break the whole dish. No oil. Nothing in the pot with the water. Just the pasta. If you prepare the sauce and the final dish correctly, the pasta won’t stick.” He milled white pepper into the sauce, and dabbed his pinky in it, quick like he was shaking out a match. “So do you want to go tonight?”

“Yeah. Let’s.” She finished off the last of her water, swallowing the last nearly melted ice cube. “I’m going to hop in the bath.”

She turned the corner to the stairs, and Will heard her crunching the ice, a sound his mother had detested growing up.

Will pulled the sauce off the heat and then dipped the pasta out of the boiling water with a shake and put it in two pasta bowls. He then dropped a spoonful of the sauce on the angel hair, and set both the bowls of whore’s pasta on the table. So much for perfect pasta. He headed for the stairs.

When he opened the bathroom door, she had looked surprised at first. And he had been nervous. But when he slipped in behind her in the tub, wrapping his forearms around her shoulders and holding his wrists there, the muscles in her back began to relax into his. They would not make love that night. Will knew there would be time enough for that. He just held onto her and was hot in the water and warmed even more by their not having to say anything at all. Her shoulders dropped an inch as he swept her hair up in one hand and put a small kiss on the tiny cleft behind her earlobe. She sighed softly, with a slight hum, in a way that reminded him at once of a very old woman and a small little girl.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. ANNA'S BACKYARD - DAY (COLOR)

Anna, age seven, is seated in a circle of 9 or 10 other girls clad in their Girl Scout brownie sashes. The TROOP MOTHER moves about the circle with this week's SNACK DISTRIBUTOR passing out and painstakingly assuring the equal portions of peanut-butter crackers and lemonade for everyone.

SNACK DISTRIBUTOR

It is now time to recite the
Girl Scout Promise. On my honor
. . .

GIRLS

(in unison)

I will try to serve God, and my
country, to help people at all
times, and to live by the Girl
Scout Law.

TROOP LEADER

Good. Ok. Alrighty. Now.
Today, we're talking about jobs
. . . what jobs can women do?
Can you name some? Anna?

ANNA

My mom is an R.N. That means
"Registered Nurse." She works
in Labor and Delivery. She
works the three to eleven shift.
And she says that all those
doctors go to school to learn is
how to teach the nurses to do
their jobs for them.

TROOP LEADER

Um. Ok. Sheri? What does your
mommy do?

SHERI

She's a housewife.

ANNA (V.O.)

It's amazing how much little girls want to be so much like their mothers. And how quickly and imperceptibly that all changes.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Anna is looking straight up at the ceiling. She begins to snuffle. Slowly her sniffing grows into tears that well as crystals in her eyes. Voices can be heard along with a TV outside her room. The tears spill out the corner of the pools and into her ears. She sits up. Her sniffing has progressed into full-blown sobbing.

ANNA (V.O.)

I remember this time. It's a little foggy in my memory but the feeling itself is still as sharp as the cold. I think I was seven or eight. And I don't know why or how, but I just started crying. I just tried really hard to see if I could do it. And I did. So I lay there crying and got louder and louder, I actually began feeling it. The sadness and pain began to well and boil inside me.

Anna stands up and walks, still crying, into the TV room.

INT. TV ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Mom is sitting on the couch watching TV. Anna stands right in front of Mom, spreading her knees apart with her tiny hands to get closer.

MOM

What's wrong?

ANNA (V.O.)

And what I said just came out.
I didn't plan it. I just
blurted it out.

ANNA

You don't love me.

Mom pulls back and slaps Anna hard. Anna runs back into her room, sobbing.

INT. ANNA'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Anna sinks under the covers. Her crying slowly subsides as she falls asleep.

ANNA (V.O.)

The absolutely crazy thing was
that I knew, even then, neither
of us meant it. Oh, I cried
myself to sleep that night I'm
sure. But I never thought they
didn't love me. That was just
melodrama.

INT. KITCHEN - NEXT MORNING

Anna sits in her pajamas at the breakfast bar. She watches a little TV on the counter and eats a bowl of chocolate ice cream, although it doesn't appear that much of it is actually making it into her mouth.

ANNA (V.O. CONT.)

I probably got up the next morning and had ice cream and Scooby Doo for breakfast and was perfectly content. To this day, I cannot remember a single time, other than that, either of my parents ever hit me. I don't think my mom remembers that time ... or maybe she does. But I remember it as one of those occasions of pure un-adulterated emotion. Nothing complex . . . nothing clouding the feeling. It was truth, in its highest, most rare, form. Raw. Had I only known then that that was one of precious few, I might have somehow chronicled it better, but that's the funny thing about truth. It seldom visits, and when it does, it never stays the night.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - CONTINUOUS (BLACK AND WHITE)

The little Boy is still busily categorizing his seashells into piles that have absolute significance to an eight-year-old. He stops as if something has bitten him.

BOY

I've been thinking.

ANNA

Oh?

BOY

How do you collect a life?
That's what you said, right? I
came to collect seashells, and
you came. . .

ANNA

I came out here to see if I could find my other half, like your dad says, so I won't be so lonely.

BOY

Do you need a boyfriend? I have three girlfriends.

ANNA

No. No. I need something a little bit different. It's like this shell. It had two sides, right?

BOY

Yeah.

ANNA

What's inside the two shells when they're together?

BOY

O-o-o-h-h-h ye-a-a-ah . . . one time I saw it. It's this grey gooey stuff. I tried to pry it open to see more, but the shell broke. Dad said the thing inside would die.

ANNA

Well, I don't want to be that grey meaty stuff in the middle. I just want to have the colorful, bright shell.

BOY

But, Dad says that the meaty stuff in the middle is the part that's alive.

Int. Francis' and Yelba's home, 1981 – Day

It was their first fight and she surprised him. Francis had not known Yelba was capable of such volume. When she was yelling at him, she seemed much larger than her small five-foot frame. She started going on and on in Spanish and that's when Francis lost it too, and yelled back.

He guessed they were still learning. Each other. Learning to love each other. Maybe it was because she still hadn't been able to get pregnant. It saddened him too. They had been here already four years and all had been going exactly as he had hoped, except they couldn't conceive. It seemed to be taking its toll on Yelba more, though.

He looked at the familiar picture he had had enlarged, touched up, and framed for Yelba on their first anniversary. She had cried and cried. She had worried that the other picture, the original, had been destroyed in the process of enlargement. It took Francis several minutes to calm her down, to show her that the original was still intact in the drawer of her nightstand, where it had always been kept. He thought about the French émigré who had helped them get married, get them to the airport. Apell. She had sneaked the snapshot of them into the one bag she had taken with her out of Nicaragua. Francis guessed she had been worried about losing the note on the back of the photo. There was a child-like cartoon of a dog that seemed odd coming from the woman. But some things didn't warrant investigation.

It was a black and white. Francis had mounted it on an acid-free ecru in a mahogany frame. Apell had a lovely talent for photography; Francis wondered if she had been trained. In the photo, Apell had sat on the single stair that led to her front door, next to a young Yelba. A teenager with gawky legs, oddly short torso and piercing eyes.

Yelba looked sullen, legs crossed at her ankles. Both of them were barefoot, their feet covered in dirt. Their hands too. Yelba's was balled into a fist that her head rested on. Apell rested her hand over Yelba's shoulders. Both stared straight ahead, blank-faced.

Francis' wife was now downstairs. Probably crying. And he wondered, all of a sudden, if Yelba had ended up in the same place that he had. He knew they would be okay. That this wasn't the end of things, that they were just having a spat. It would blow over. Couples fought and then got over things. What did she think down there? He wasn't prepared for the second-guessing.

Francis had no way of knowing, but it was going to be the last fight they would have. They had only loved passionately. They hadn't fought. She had always acquiesced. And still, it had never approached anything remotely close to what had just gone on.

He took the stairs two at a time on the way down. Thinking about the sullen teenager he had plucked from her life. He refused to regret any of the things he had given her, any of the things that he had been able to provide for her, but was intensely sorry for all the things he couldn't fix.

"Yelba. I'm sorry my bird. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I wish we could bring him back to the States. I really do."

"I know," she said. It's all she said.

"You have to know that I wish he could be here too." Why hadn't he just said that earlier? Why couldn't he tell her that it was one of the biggest mistakes he felt like he had ever made? He knew it, without really knowing why. "We should have just

brought him with us when we left.” And now he was no longer talking to her at all. “But how was I to know that all that was going to happen? Yelba. Please.”

“I know.” She looked just as the picture. Registering nothing. Emanating nothing.

“Please say something else.”

The statue of his wife was broken only by the slightest movement of her eyes from some unidentified spot on the wall and into his eyes. And then back.

“Who knows what will happen with this rebellion. When it’s done. When it finishes. As soon as humanly possible, Yelba, please know I’ll be the first in there to get him. To bring him here. It’s just too dangerous right now. It’d be too dangerous for you, for me. It’d be too dangerous for Marbelys.”

Her eyes remained unmoving, dead.

“It’s safer for him to stay under the radar. As long as he works for Congranja, you can know he won’t have to enlist. He won’t have to join the Sandinistas.”

“Do not say those words. No more, Francis. No more, my bird.”

It felt good to be called that. Even if she had still not moved.

“It will be okay, bird. Leave it be. We’ll get to him as soon as we can.”

But she wasn’t listening.

The next morning, they awoke as if it had never happened. Francis was relieved. They understood each other again.

Int. The Thelonius Monkey – That night

“He was violently angry. He yelled into the tollbooth, and it scared me. I’ve seen yelling before. Rage. But not the primordial rage that came from that man.”

They had come to *The Thelonius Monkey* to see Dak’s band, sans lead vocal, play. Will was glad the vocalist wasn’t there, because the music was lovely already, without the intrusion of a human voice that couldn’t possibly make their sound more complete. He’d heard them before, but it was different now somehow, with Arri.

“Arri, you’re like one of those plays, Chekhov maybe, or Synge, where all the action, all the big stuff happens just outside your window. And we’re all merely players, gathered by the window’s sill, watching it unfold, with you right there.”

“That’s how it is for all of us.”

“What do you mean? We all see daily occurrences of men in tollbooths losing their minds and becoming so angry they have to be detained? Or a jackknifed truck and the Styrofoam cups? Is it possible that these types of things follow you? You always seem to see life play itself out in huge scenes that are impossible in the real world. I mean for the rest of us.”

“You see it too, Will. In fact, all of the turnpike would have seen it this way. Not just me. He was like a man clinging to the last small vestige of a rocked boat, a buoy. A fish pulled from the water, angry at the world, for not letting him have his way, but knowing things were going to end poorly.”

“Poorly indeed. So when the cops got there, what happened?”

“They took the poor old man off in cuffs.”

Together they watched the end of the set, and listened. Arri had ordered a pomegranate martini, the latest thing, and Will had a cognac. Something about ordering a cognac and setting a cigar next to it for later, made him feel older and wiser. He couldn't say why, with any sort of certainty. But he did like the feeling.

The band finished with one of their sets, and the bartender reached up to turn the TV up louder in the interim. Will half-listened to Arri, more engaged in the din of the TV and the band's abandoning their instruments. Dak leaned his bass against the wall, and maybe even glanced in their general direction. Towards Arri? Will couldn't be sure. He caught himself wondering at the nature of their previous relationship. He played out the sweetness of their soak in the tub of earlier this evening, and found himself seeing their bodies – Arri's with Dak in the water – instead of his own.

He distracted his mind with the TV. On the screen there was an advertisement for a bottled water company. "There is nothing like the taste and cleanliness of fresh spring water. Nothing like it." And he thought about their marketing ploy here. The clever play on words. There really *is* nothing quite like water. If there was something else that tasted like spring water, but wasn't, we wouldn't like it. But now we sell the nothing by the caseload to all kinds of people.

"Arri, check this out—"

But Arri wasn't listening. Dak had come to the table.

"Will, honey." Arri hadn't called Will anything other than Will since they had met each other. "This is Dak. Dak, Will."

"Pleased to meet you, Dak. Hell of a sound you guys have." He had met this man before. He wondered if Dak remembered.

“Why thank you very much.”

Pleasantries exchanged, then nervous glances, gears cranking. Will wasn't one to alleviate discomfort in these types of situations by coming up with the next thing, or even by participating in the conventional way. Technically it would have been Dak's turn to ask some kind of question. But didn't look like Dak was going to save them either. Maybe Dak did recognize him from the other night.

“What were you saying before Dak came up Will?” She deflected.

“Just commenting on the unparalleled marketing of everything. Even the nothingness of water is a selling point.”

“For sure, man. No lie.” Dak's eyes had glazed over to the point that they looked a little foggy.

Under the table, Arri grabbed Will's leg and squeezed. And then proceeded to not look at Will above the table.

Then Dak, “What do you do Will?”

“I used to. No, I now, I mean I write. Screenplays.”

“Oh, really?”

“He worked on the last thing with DeNiro, and one that Jarmusch directed,” Arri added.

“Nice.”

“It's not as impressive as it sounds. I didn't actually work with them. I just clean up after them.”

“Right on.”

“I want Will to meet Leland. Where'd he head off to?” Arri asked.

“You know Leland. He’s off already. That was the last set, and he’s gone. I’d like to head outta here myself, if it wasn’t for waiting on my damned sister – whom, lest you get the wrong idea, Will – I love dearly. She just pisses me off constant. Constant. Got no time to do anything else, no girlfriends, no practice as I’m always so pissed at Amelia.” Dak caught a glance at Arri. Arri seemed oblivious.

“Can’t be healthy.” Healthy? Why had he chosen healthy?

“I don’t know about healthy, but I do know she’s gonna push me over the edge and she knows it.” Dak rubbed the bridge of his nose with the back of his hand and closed his eyes, almost as if in prayer. “She sings for us – when, apparently, she’s up for it.”

“You should let her go, D. There’s no sense in carrying it on if it’s not working. You guys have some serious raw talent. Serious. And she’s just getting in the way of that if she’s not as committed as the rest of you are.”

“Thanks for your advice senior counsel, but it’s not like we’re going anywhere fast. With or without Amelia.”

The conversation had left Will long ago.

“Well, maybe you guys would move ahead, move out of this place at least, if you would take yourselves seriously, and do some marketing. Take some hints from the water bottlers. ‘There is nothing like you. Nothing.’”

Dak didn’t say anything. He took another long pull from a glass of something on the rocks.

“See, Will. This is the reason Dak and I never could have made it.” Dak looked into the bottom of the tumbler and closed his eyes again. “No sense of ambition, direction. He’s just too damn happy. Too fucking happy.”

A smile crept across Dak’s lips, and then left as though it had never come.

Will didn’t quite understand the transparency. Was Arri being genuine? Was she honestly that transparent? What did she want from Will?

“She’s the real thing, Will.” Dak looked at Arri, tapped his empty tumbler on the table twice, looked at Arri one more time, then walked out, a wisp of smoke dissipating in the air behind him.

Arri rolled her eyes and smiled. “You have to love that guy. Despite all the shit. I mean, what he does for this place. This city. Just by being in it.”

Arri was beginning to sound a bit like the TV. Always absolutes. And assertions. And thin veils. Through which you could see everything.

*Tuesday, the day before the day
before I meet the man who will say
yes (or no).*

All I want:

*I want for small bridges in lonely places. I want for sweet wineries in the hollows behind
my granddaddy's casa, in the world's delicate settings. I want for my buildings, my
spaces to move sensibilities. I want not to become a predator on the landscape. I want
work that gives dignity and human scale to hectored scapes.*

Even in the most hectic circumstances, there is the possibility for emotion and poetry.

Int. Congranja's basement – Lunchtime

Though he no longer had a schedule that included, a lunch break, per se – there not being much to break from – Will carried on with his lunch break schedule just the same. On days when he didn't go to *The Duumvirate*, Will ducked into the Congranja building to read the journal and chat with Rufus.

Will would sneak into the basement of the Congranja building with a bowl of fried rice and hot and sour soup from Egg Roll's – where he hadn't yet figured out what it was that the Egg Roll possessed. He allowed himself only an entry a day. More than that, he felt was too much. Only a bit at a time. It was as if he was getting to know Figueres, as if he were still alive. They might sit on a patio somewhere, watching the sad demolition of an old building, a bit of history. He allowed himself the fantasy that maybe they'd just run into each other at the building site the next day – were it not already large, finished, and looming. Will with an apple. Figueres a Styrofoam cup of cheap coffee. He reconstructed how it might be to slowly come to understand a person in the flesh. He read the date of the next entry, and gave himself that much time until he would read again. If the entry was two days later, then, he'd read it in two days.

Rufus shuffled into the control room in the basement where they usually had their lunchtime chats. Rufus was Congranja's security guard/tour guide. He had great shocks of white in his hair that he said had just appeared one morning in his bathroom mirror. One day he went to bed with hair as black as Dan Rather's, the next morning, a Dalmatian. He was one of those men who could have been fifty-five just as sure as he was seventy.

“How goes it Mon Capitan?” Rufus sipped what was most certainly cold coffee out of a thermos and looked a little more rumped than usual.

“Not bad for being unemployed. You?”

Rufus squeaked the old swivel stool he sat on, turning towards Will.

“The volunteer manager is at it again.” Rufus had been the subject of a sketch Will had done for Seinfeld’s “final” tour back when Will first started: the security guard slash tour guide who only spoke in non sequiters. And had a spotted head.

“Volunteer manager?”

“Your father has seen to it that in an effort to cut down on company spending, he interns young men and women fresh out of college. So overseeing us menial staff, we got some volunteer manager. And if you think about it, the president of the country is just about like the head of the church.”

“Any kiddie-tours today?” One time Will had watched on the screens here in the basement as Rufus led a group of awe-struck third graders around the cavernous building shuffling in his rolled up shirt-sleeves, khakis and brass badge.

“That key work okay for you?”

“Sure enough.” Rufus cut a key for Will years ago, just after the building was finished, so that if Rufus wasn’t in the basement when Will dropped by for their lunch visits, he could let himself in the back door in the alley, where they received shipments. In fact, this was the only way Will had ever stepped into his father’s building. The back door. For Rufus. And the journal. Rufus had repeatedly asked him this, and other questions, for the years he’d known him.

“Will, I got this dog at home. And he don’t come to me. First dog I ever known to not come when you teach it to come. And, well, it’s just breaking me heart.” He twisted the lid/cup back onto the thermos and pulled out his wallet. He pulled out a picture of a small cowering mutt. “What do you do with a dog that won’t come?” Will knew the question was mainly rhetorical, and sat still basking in the glow that was Rufus’ glorious oddness.

“Where’d you get this dog Rufus?”

“I found him. Well, no, that’s not exactly true. You see I have this crazy neighbor. And he’s got a lots of animals. And we share a little bit of property ‘tween the two of us. And he had all these strays running around and they come up on my porch cuz I had laid out some dog food for them.” The swivel stool squeaked again as Rufus gathered his things. “Well then the buyin’ of the dog food got kinda expensive because there were just so many of ‘em. So I had to start scarin’ ‘em off with some M-80’s and cherry bombs I had left over from July the fourth. But this little guy, he stayed around. So I decided he’d be mine. I can afford dog food for him, you know.”

“Right. Sure.”

“Tomorrow I’m sure I’ll know what I’m waiting for, but today, I’ve got my miles to go before I sleep. Miles to go before I sleep.” He hopped off the stool and walked out the door, in shoes much older – and more polished – than Will.

*Dormite, niño; no llores chiquito,
vendrán angelitos las sombras de noche.
Rayitos de luna, rayitos de plata
Alumbran mi niño que está en la cuna.*

*Rayitos del sol el cielo azul
Dejan dormir y empieza vivir.
Dormite, niño, con ojos diamantes
Estrellas brillantes florido el cielo.*

-- Latin American lullaby

Int. Francis' and Yelba's home, 1989 – Before school

Francis, for as far back as he could remember, had never been proven wrong. Even as a kid, his parents were always careful to phrase his mistakes in ways that made it seem like those mistakes were not his, but somehow the fault of the universe. It was always in the passive voice, no subject performing any action, just a mistake having been made. “The milk is spilled.” “The room was dirty.”

After their marriage, Francis and Yelba lived together happily for seven years, then had Will, a bumbling happy kid with coal eyebrows and even darker eyes. Despite Yelba's brief bouts of melancholy prior to having Will, it appeared to Francis that it had all gone away now that Will had come into their lives. They lived easily, as easily, Francis thought, as they had met, touched, and loved with only the volcano to witness them kiss. Francis never thought it could have worked out for him this way, always pictured himself screwing it up with love, that he'd either be a bachelor all his life, or hopelessly unsatisfied always. Being a perfectionist, a trait passed on in his genetic material from his own father, made it very difficult to get along with himself on most days, let alone other people. But with Yelba, he had been proven wrong.

For the most part, Francis wanted not, in anyway to interfere with Yelba's joy in Will.

On this particular morning, Yelba had woken up ill, some kind of stomach virus. And for a moment, he thought it disconcerting that she asked Francis to walk him to school. It disrupted the morning routine to be sure, but he looked forward to the time with his son, walking in the bright November light.

Will came bounding down the stairs in blue jeans, a grey sweatshirt and a pink ski hat with ear flaps. (It was Yelba's idea to always let him dress himself so that he could establish his own person, early.) And despite the hat's pinkness, he had to admire its jaunty angle and Will's unabashedness in the wearing of it.

Francis pulled all the materials out of the refrigerator for his daily breakfast preparation. Eggs, cheese, two strips of bacon, orange juice, and the pitaya juice Yelba still drank, which Will had come to love too. Francis still, as hard as he tried, could not abide the sweetness.

“Where's mama?”

“She's not feeling good. I'm going to take you to school today.”

Will said nothing and climbed his way up onto the one of the big leather-backed barstools. They had thought the modern furniture, with all its sharp edges and precarious heights, would have to go when Will started walking, but that was over a year and a half ago, and he had made short work of learning to navigate. He stared at the empty plate and fiddled with his special fork he'd brought home from school that week – he had decorated it himself with shell macaroni. He stabbed imaginary food on his plate, and then ate it.

Francis poured Will some of the hot pink juice. “It matches your hat L.G.”

“Yeah. In school we're learning how to eat and be neat!”

“Oh yeah? So that's how you do it?”

Will unfolded a napkin and dabbed at the corners of his mouth.

“Will that be okay?”

“Huh?”

“If I take you to school?”

“Guess so.” He continued shoveling the imaginary food into his mouth.

“If you don’t slow down, you’re not going to have room for your real food. How do you want your eggs? Scrambled, with cheese.”

“No eggs. My teacher says chickens have very very sad lives so we can have eggs. Can I just have a nana?”

He had attended preschool at a racially mixed (Yelba called it multi-colored) progressive public school, where the kids, over the Thanksgiving holidays had learned to make drawings of turkeys by tracing their hands. They had also watched a nature film about turkeys in the wild.

Francis wanted to start Will in private school next year. He had yet to figure out how to broach the subject delicately. Francis stirred his eggs, thinking about the hippy school to which he had been sending their child. Yelba liked it, but he wasn’t so sure. He wanted Will to have an open mind, to be able to make his own decisions, and he wasn’t sure this reactionary type of schooling was the best thing for him.

When he turned around to put some eggs on Will’s plate, though he knew he wouldn’t eat them, he saw the back of Will, banana in hand, running into say goodbye to his mama.

Turned out, Francis wouldn’t eat any eggs either.

When Francis had purchased the lot to build Congranja, it was the site of an old newspaper press, Martin Printing. The company was housed in two buildings –

completely identical, tall and narrow old relics of a by-gone era – and they occupied the entirety of the city block. Francis had been walking past the site every day for several days, anxiously watching its deconstruction. Francis held Will’s hand as they walked by the site that was on the way to Will’s school.

“This isn’t the way you and mommy come, is it?”

“Nope. Why are we going a different way?”

“I wanted you to see where they’re building my new office.”

The Martin Press was still under demolition; construction of Congranja was not slated to begin for another six months. Negotiating the divide between the engineers and the, for his money, crazy architect on which Yelba had insisted, had proven more difficult than they had suspected. But he was willing to wait. If it all went well, it would be the biggest, grandest, most innovative building the city had seen – a low bump of an anachronism that would quiet the calls of the vertiginous shafts that flanked it.

The silhouette of an ominous wrecking ball loomed over the workers that were silently growing in numbers, day-to-day, week-to-week. The day of judgment for the old press had come. The giant earthmovers rose against the cityscape, culling the waste of yesterday’s buildings and performed another task, even more formidable than removing the old press. They had made the normally unflappable Will, still and speechless. He was transfixed.

Swinging in an apish way, the heaving ball swept across the horizon and into the old building. Will watched as it knocked out the building’s walls. The wrecker moved from one story to the next, until the building was just a cavernous maw.

The only competition Francis had had to contend with in securing the site was a company that had petitioned the buildings remain historic markers. They wanted to remodel the old printing press and turn it into lofts. The petition was quickly thrown out due to the expenses required to convert the echo-chambers formerly witness to so much cranking and swooshing of machine on paper to accommodate the new necessary sounds of flushing and washing and the business of daily life.

Two cranes moved onto the scene. Together, they performed the extraction. In a strange duet, the cranes heaved the giant corpus of the now-useless machine, the press itself now an aged molar, from the hole. The building had been erected around the monolithic press. They were going to be late. Francis watched as Will grimaced at the toppling. Francis took him by the shoulder and led him to school.

Int. Francis' office – That day

Francis would later recall that as the last moment he would touch Will before he heard about the incident at the school. There had been a shooting. He heard about it on the radio in his office that morning, and his hand, where he had touched Will on the shoulder, tingled. For a moment he had lost all peripheral vision, and could scarcely focus enough to hear the rest of the report. His legs went numb. He sat down. Screamed for Mary.

One little boy, authorities say, a latino from the upper east side, came to Brilliant Tikes school believing the gun to be a toy. He pulled the pistol from his backpack and shot another little boy at point blank range, directly in the face. Parents are requested to

come pick up their children. The parents of the two boys involved have already been notified, and all have been taken into custody.

Francis gripped the back of his chair, unable to move. Mary dialed home.

Thursday, the first board meeting.

I was concerned about what to wear.

I could feel the money oozing out of the fat men's pockets. The man who'd done the research to find me, he'd seen my work in Spain, he said, on a trip he'd taken with his new wife. I liked hearing this story. They had just come from seeing the Spanish arch on the Corrib, a marvel of 16th century architecture. He said his wife had seen my bridge there. I was only 22 when I built it. And it was enough to catch her eye. A saint to be married to him. But, she, dear tiny thing, said she must know what mind had created it. The man said it in the room full of men. Unashamed of such flattery. He said his wife, Yelba, had always been passionate about talent. So obvious, she had mentioned, that the man who made this bridge had a gift. And she had asked the man, Francis, right then and there to see if the creator of that bridge would come to their house in the city some time, because she would love to make him coffee and learn what he knew. The men in the room chuckled. And yes it did seem an improbable thing to ask for. But I liked her for asking. I liked her for not caring for such things as probabilities.

I told the deaf ears of those men. I recited for them what I knew to be true. That the very object of buildings is to provide a framework for people's lives. That the rooms in our houses and the relation between them, must be determined by the way we will live in them and move through them.

Int. Congranja's basement – Continuous

Seeing his mother's name on the page made Will feel a little broken. Surprisingly. He'd left all those things about his mother in the back of the closet when he'd moved out of the already empty house at eighteen. They were back there on the left with his Depeche Mode albums and Star Wars action figures in the Darth Vader carry-all. Like the journal entries, Will had given himself a quota with memories of his mother. It was always sort of a conscious thing. Occasionally, he'd hear a smattering of Spanish, often here in the basement, if he came at night when the custodial staff had finished dumping trash cans and buffing floors. He'd hear them yammer away in Spanish. It was a tongue he couldn't speak well but felt comforted by all the same. He was able to feel her, without thinking about her.

He liked their trills and lisps and breathy assonance. Though Will grew up speaking English, Spanish was in his blood. Under the greenish glow of the secretary lamp, listening to the voices in the break room on the other side of the wall, Will felt a familiar tugging in the back of his throat.

*Friday, Nicaraguan
coffee.*

One other thing I am remembering. Francis told her he would. She made him promise, he said. "You come over, and she'll make you the best damn coffee you've ever had. Nicaraguan coffee. Sweeter than anything you've ever tasted." That's what he said to me. And I remember thinking the air was heavy with this woman's presence. So heavy, in fact, I could feel the other men sitting around the table grow uncomfortable. She had a hand in my fate. My building being commissioned by one of the richest men in the world. I've done the dates. I figure I am the same age as his wife.

And he. He is not as hard as he once seemed, in his suit and tie. I am growing, in the very smallest way, to like him.

Will's initial reaction: he wanted to tell him not to do it. He wanted to reach back in time and pull Figueres by the collar and shake him. Don't do it. Don't weigh the good against the bad.

But, this building, once erected, was something else. Somehow it was bigger than just this plot of land. The sketches predicted something completely new. Something fresh. A community event. No one Will had ever met had commanded his attention, had captivated him so inexplicably as the man to whom this journal belonged. And yet he had never really met him. Never face-to-face. And probably never would.

But, if he could, if the rumors were wrong, he would explain to Figueres the thing about his father that it had taken him twenty-six years to figure out. You're sucked into

the things he says. The man himself – his father – had spent the entirety of his life trying to convince himself of his own goodness, his own virtue. The harder he tried not to convince people, the easier he found it. This was something Will knew intuitively about his father ipso facto of his being Francis' son.

All at once, he felt for his mother. But for Figueres too, this man who had done something lasting, something important. And then faded. The thing he created was bigger than he was. He couldn't quite explain why or how this strange connection had been made. There was too much he couldn't figure out. Figueres. His disappearance. His association with his father. Figueres' obvious affection for his mother. An affection he had never seen in his father for his mother. He packed the journal up and left a note for Rufus.

Maybe the dog won't come because it can't hear you.

Int. Francis' and Yelba's home, 1984 – Day

Each time she flipped the book's pages, Yelba found she remembered some other bit of wisdom her mother had given her.

“Yelba. Remember the fool Pedro. Pedro gave to his kid the wrong name and both have been paying for it always. Too many vowels, too many sounds for the son of a taxi driver to live up to. Too many expectations.”

She flipped another page. Francis had not been home before seven o'clock for several weeks now. But she couldn't help making his dinner at the same time every day. Six o'clock. This is when the sun went down at home. When the men returned from the fields. When her mother would feed the children out in the dirt yard in their plastic bowls. Cooled rice and beans. Maybe a raw plantain. Rice milk. Bed. Then the leftovers for the rest. Despite the seven years, Yelba couldn't rid herself of the ritual, and she looked forward to her own little person who could be a constant. Who could learn these rituals. Justify them.

She thought of the men in the fields, and of Norlan. Norlan was never meant to be a fieldworker. He was hired, as Francis had originally intended, to be the happy greeter. But after the plant had been built, after the rates of production had been established, there were certain levels that had to be maintained, he told her. So, Norlan began working in the fields, harvesting, as well as meeting and introducing the various foreign investors that would come to visit. The hand-shaking had grown slim, and his physical labor had grown more important than how he was handling potential investors. So, he went to the fields with people like Santiago, whom Yelba liked (after all, he was their cousin), but whose head was always in the clouds. She had secretly felt that Santiago was always

filling Norlan's head with false ideas about how the world functioned. That everything was always about pleasure. About girls and drinking. Even if it was true that she herself had fallen into the trap of hopeful thinking, by her following some crazy American, she never for once thought that Norlan had those inclinations to make unsound decisions.

Norlan was stuck working the ground somewhere without her. That was the thing about Norlan and Yelba. Though Norlan was six years younger than Yelba (though Norlan's placenta was one of the ones Yelba had buried, along with all the others) Yelba felt an uneasy desire to have the remainder – the leftover of Norlan – close to her.

When she made the decision to leave Nica, it was hard to leave Marbelys and the rest of the family, but it had been hardest to leave Norlan.

There was an electric-insect buzz and satisfying click before the light over the kitchen table burned out. It had been threatening to go for a couple of days. It reminded her of the sketchy electricity they had wired into the church in the days just before she left Tipitapa.

Todd. Thomas. Taunya. She went to the kitchen for the stepladder and bulb. No. She knew it was not a girl that was growing restless inside her, nearing the end. A boy kicked against her, wanting the light.

She stooped underneath the sink, gripping the counter for support, as if she could squeeze something from granite. Under here was where all the water she used for rinsing dirty vegetables and hands got whisked away down several stories and out to somewhere else. When she first moved here, she had looked under for the bucket where it all went. To re-use for the clothes, or God, for something. But it was just a tangled collection of pipes and an old bottle of electric-orange liquid soap that was just as foreign to her as the

shiny counters in which she could see her own reflection. She had since stocked the cabinet with more and more cleaning supplies. And the light bulbs she had been so fascinated with Before. When she stood up, the baby had shifted and situated his tiny head directly on her bladder, a sharp pain she was surprised by in the beginning, but by which she had now learned to be comforted. He was well. She patted her belly absent-mindedly as she dragged the stepstool through the kitchen, in and out of geometric divisions of sunlight on the floors.

Timothy. One window. Travis. The next. Trent. The last window.

All so plain. So white.

She was momentarily distracted from the task and stopped to open the chapel-like, narrow windows. They weren't stained glass, there was no color, but the glass in each large pane was divided into tiny plates of broken glass in irregular shapes that cut brilliant prisms of light into the floor. The hint of a breeze stirred the edge of the book of names on the table, flipping it for her. When she considered the joyous weight of the baby on her bladder and the corresponding weight on her mind in choosing a name, Yelba remembered Marbelys' admonishment concerning Santiago. Whenever the kid did something wrong, which was often, Marbelys would wearily shake her head explaining that Pedro bore as much of the blame for the feckless kid as the kid himself. He never grew into all his vowels, into his long pretentious name. Pedro had not considered the importance of the name as Marbelys had done with Yelba and the rest of her children. The roundness, the frankness of Yelba's name reflected what Marbelys knew she would need in her oldest child. Someone to take care of the family, share in the work. No room for things frivolous.

And there was something different about it. It sounded nothing like the names that had been so popular in Nicaragua. Christina, Martín, José; these names had no longevity in them. They were chosen too easily, too carelessly. Yelba meant “light” in the language of the people who first grew the country. Not the transplants.

Yule. No.

She read her own name. She felt Francis only liked it for the sound of it.

Zach. Zeke. Zula.

She had come to the end, and none of it seemed right. She closed the book and slid the table out of the way to set up the stepladder. Heights had always made her a little uneasy, since she’d never been in any building over two stories. Even the hotel where she had picked up Francis that day so many years ago, even that building, in the heart of downtown Managua was two stories. It was wide and imposing, but not tall. The only tallness she knew was the towering heights of the volcanoes. And she didn’t trust that either.

The stepladder and the twentieth story and the pregnancy, it all made her a little nervous. And she was out in the middle of the kitchen, without anything for support. She busied her reeling mind with more baby names.

She had considered naming the baby after her brother, Norlan. But couldn’t.

She wished she could sit across the table from her mother and cry with her. She knew what her mother would say. Her mother would say there was already too much labor in it. Her own mother would say to her that she must be careful. She would say you must not be a slave, or the baby will be too much work for you forever. It must come

naturally. And quickly. Like love. When you know it is right. It is right. End of question.

She pushed her mother out of her mind. And carefully considered what she had learned. Each word she learned was a locket of mystery. At first she felt isolated by all the possible ways you could put a word together, at least in pronouncing it. She knew her writing was always horribly mangled, but she loved the challenge of speaking the sounds.

As she got better, she learned to love being on the inside of all the words' secrets. Each word she learned and memorized was a step closer to learning the secrets of the country, of this place, even of Francis.

The yearly Christmas party for Congranja meant being sized up by Francis's employees under the guise of complementing her progress with the language, which basically meant fending off drunken advances. And in a short time, she had learned impeccable English from a tutor Francis had hired for her. She gradually learned to drop the exaggerated esses where the softer less caustic zees hid. A clear ewe instead of joo. Wahz instead of whuss. In Spanish, each vowel had its own dependable sound. Nice, she supposed, for new learners, but boring for the people who already knew it. She was much more interested in learning all the sounds an *a* could make in English. And the crossover of words. For her baby, she wanted something that had a double meaning. One of those words that was strong and powerful, but also meant something else too. What were these called, in English? Homonyms?

She unscrewed the light bulb, shook it next to her ear, as Francis had taught her to do to check that it had indeed burned out. She heard the tinny confirmation that the filament had snapped. Then reached over her head to screw in the new bulb but was

startled by the buzzer from the lobby. She teetered and stumbled off the ladder. She caught herself before doing any real damage except she had squeezed the bad bulb in one hand, smashing bits of impossibly thin glass into her palm, and the good bulb hit the floor with a soothing whisper that surprised her.

She looked at the blood mixing with glass that sparkled the sunlight back to her. She began to cry. But not because she hurt. She walked to the sink. Rinsed her hand. Did the best she could do bandaging it up with a kitchen towel, and went about sweeping up the rest of the mess, before calling down to the lobby to find out who had stopped by.

Monday, Second thoughts?

*I think, I don't know, but I think, I want to believe that this man's telling me the truth.
I'm skeptical. But what do you do? In order to build the thing that I've been made to
build, to see the thing I've been seeing in my dreams, in removed relief, take form,
become almost flesh, am I to —— ? Is it too much to think that the world deserves this?
Artistic freedom. Liberation from financial burden. No sparing expenses. That's what
he told me. I am a hummingbird. Every bolt, sill, soffit. The agora. They pulse in my
veins.*

I've never been in love. Never had any reason to be. But this must be it.

Yes, Figueres, yes.

Int. Will's townhouse – Morning

It was Saturday. They had already had their coffee together – he'd felt as easy and unimposing as he ever had in his own apartment. She had inserted herself into his life.

“Will, come with me to walk the puppy?” She poked her head over the railing on the second floor. “Please?”

Hmmm. Her hair was frazzled and he could just make out the tiny green v of her panties peeking out from the bottom of her, no his, shirt. The industrial turnstile-fan clanked a coolish breeze through the upper half of the loft and just billowed the bottom of the shirt, revealing the cups of her breasts.

He shivered, the residual effects of unparalleled pleasure, thinking of the taste of her breasts in his mouth and the firm roundness in his hands. “Alright.”

She cooed at him. And then the dog.

Arri asked Will if she could bring her new puppy to the house. That was two weeks ago and the slobbering ball-o-fur had been sleeping on his down duvet every night since. Will could sense Arri was sort of pissed about the nickname he'd taken to calling it, punter-dog. It was the exact size and shape of a football, but it was nicer than the alternative: blender-dog.

Outside the air breathed October. To find a bit of grass for the dog, they headed to the alleys behind the building of industrial lofts. Arri held on to Will's untucked shirttail. She was always hanging onto him, fingering the cloth in her fist. Normally it would have irritated Will, but he grew to like her strange habits of display.

“Did you ever do that ‘step on a crack’ thing growing up?” Arri asked

The concrete underneath their feet was broken and old in some places, worn-over by too many trucks delivering their goods to the other storefronts that shared the same city alley. In some places, it was pulverized. Arri stepped gingerly among the broken bits. Kicking a few upturned rocks here and there. The dog trailed behind, the whipping of its frantic, absurdly-long tail brushing his leg and then hers, his and then hers.

“My mother was entirely too literal for that.”

“Too literal?”

“Too literal and superstitious.”

“You don’t strike me as the least bit superstitious.”

“Nope, I didn’t get any of those genes from her.”

“What did you get from her?”

“I don’t know. Maybe some hope in things you can’t see.”

“Like God?”

“No. Not God. I got those genes from my father.”

They paused while the dog found a small outcropping of weeds. There where the edge of the concrete met the foundation of the building, someone had carved his name, probably thirty years ago, in the wet mixture of gravel and cement. Jesús Guillermo.

Arri noticed it first. “Jesús Guillermo. 06-13-66. Awesome.”

“Great name.”

“What if Jesus’ last name really was Guillermo?”

“Like, *Jesus* Jesus?” That’d be a great sketch, Will thought. “People’d curse Jesus H. Guillermo instead of H. Christ.”

“That’s what the dog’s name is. Jesús H. Guillermo.” She’d been trying on different names for the dog ever since she’d found him whining in a dumpster next to *The Duumvirate*. Arri threw her head back in laughter. The muscles beneath her neck spasmed. A red tendril trapped by a quick breeze cut across the pink flesh just there. Her hair was a mess of lovely abandon. It was all he could do not to disappear his hand into it. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. Not in the daylight.

“So will he go by his last name or just Jesús?”

“Jesús, of course. C’mon Jesús. Let’s get some breakfast. Want to?”

“Are you talking to me or the dog?”

“Both. There’s a place at the end of Shepherd just before the bridge that has a great breakfast menu and a sweet little patio.”

“Right now? I haven’t even showered.”

“What? Afraid they’ll smell the sex on you.”

“No. I’m afraid they’ll smell the sex on you.”

“I’m not afraid. But I am hungry. Ravished.” Signature Arri.

They made their way to the café, Jesús merrily leading the way, chatting about the marred alleyway, while Will avoided all the cracks.

Will hadn’t noticed this place, though he’d been to *The Thelonus Monkey* about a thousand times now, which was just across the street. The place had an unassuming façade of a shotgun-style New Orleans bistro with a narrow entry and so was easy to miss.

Arri jumped over the railing of the patio and threaded the leash through so the puppy could sit on the inside under their feet. Will opted for the front entrance and was

led through French doors that, though grimy, had personality. The host led Will to the table and Arri waved brightly, her nipples hard through Will's slept-in undershirt.

"Can you get our new puppy Jesús a little mug of water?"

"Sure thing. Anything for you Madam Arri... and Jesus is it?"

He gave a slight bow, imitating the gestures of a maitre 'd at a restaurant with about four times as many stars as this one had. Will cringed a little at the familiarity. That the waiter recognized her and not him.

"Do you ever cook anything at home?" he asked.

"Ask me if I even own silverware?"

"How come I've never been to your house?"

"You could just get a Crate and Barrel catalogue and pretend."

"So am I officially not invited?" When he opened the menu, a bit of something sticky made the familiar *schlecting* noise of plastic on plastic.

"It's not that you're not invited. You are, if you like. But it's nothing special. It's just a bunch of shit I bought to take up space I can't stand to see empty."

"What can I get for you?" Simon Waiter asked.

"I think I'll do the eggs Florentine. But do you mind putting that on a whole wheat bagel?"

"I'll have a stack of pancakes and a side of oatmeal. Please." Will added the please a little too abrasively he thought and wished he could take it back.

"Will you have something to drink?"

"Coffee. Black."

"Coffee with sugar."

"Did you have dogs in your house growing up?" Arri had changed the subject.

“No we never did.”

“I’ll be right back with your drinks. Hello Jesus.” Simon Waiter had been pronouncing it Gee-zus instead of using Will and Arri’s Hey-seus. “Are mommy and daddy ignoring you, Jesus, you dear precious thing? Are they, huh? Come to me.” Jesus raised his head and stumbled his way over the table’s legs, tripping as he approached the kneeling waiter.

“You were deprived. Everyone should grow up with other things in their lives – little furry things – that have to depend on you. All children must have a dog or a cat to fall madly in love with.”

“Do you realize you speak in absolutes? Constantly.”

“I got a basset hound when I was twelve. Named Adam – after the Counting Crows lead singer. I really was in love with him.”

“Is the waiter kneeling before your dog’s feet?”

“I don’t know. Are you kneeling at the dog’s feet?”

“I’m ignoring you Miss Arri. But I refuse to ignore this precious little creature.”

“Would you please turn in our order?”

“Very well.” The pup, unhinged by Simon Waiter’s shoelaces as they danced away, tugged his leash taut, spit, snarled and nearly choked himself.

She leaned over and kissed Will.

Will struggled in a world somewhere between two polarities. He wanted to please Arri – something new and strangely provocative, as opposed to the abiding intransigence he felt – but there was also something irreconcilable in his constant and consistent

redefining, re-issuing of his autonomy. His ability to stand on the outside and knock and pound on her windows. To shake up her vision. To scribble across the script she wrote for herself and the people with whom she was most intimate.

Below the table, Jesus sighed and flopped his head onto the cement, disappointed by the sudden and completely unwarranted lack of attention.

Monday, after Ground Breaking

Overseeing these heathens of production is a necessary evil. But if I could build the whole lovely beast with my own hands I would. Every glorious steel beam. Every yard of tensile strong steel mesh, I'd unroll with kindness and caring. Every sole, every anchor belt.

But I suppose amidst these workers, this sweat. The mistakes I must constantly retrace and correct, I find humanity.

There you go again Figueres. With your largesse and your assumptions.

Ext. Outside Will's townhouse – Just before dawn

It must have been nearing the early hours of the morning, when Will found himself in an inexplicable situation. He could just detect a hint of the sun on the horizon turning the stubborn night to lavender. He was climbing the tree outside his building. He wasn't sure that he didn't have his keys. He hadn't checked his pockets that he could remember. But he knew he had to climb the tree if he wanted to get into his house. It was a priori of any logic that climbing the tree to the balcony on the third floor of the building, that was really the second floor of his loft, was the only suitable way for him to enter tonight because he really felt sure that he had left his keys. Somewhere. And so he did. He cut his hand on one of the branches. He looked down and saw some of the blood trickle and bleed all over again into the woven fabric of his shirt sleeve. Truth be told, he hadn't remembered the tree being here at all. But he knew it was his loft that he was peering into because when he looked into the floor-to-ceiling windows he recognized his own ceiling fans. They cut dizzying shapes round and round over his white oak floor.

There were only a few feet between the balcony and his perch in the tree. He paused and felt a little nauseous for the first time during this evening's weird excursion because he never remembered the tree being this close to the balcony from the vantage point of the balcony. An acorn dropped to the sidewalk below and split in half. He watched as one of the halves stopped abruptly, but another took a weird leap out into the street – and kept rolling.

He was for a moment preoccupied with worry over burglars. If he had ascended the tree so adeptly, and was now able to negotiate the balcony's rail, what was stopping anyone else from scaling the same tree and doing the same thing? Will reached for the

handle of the door, which wasn't a handle at all, just a small stainless pad to push and stared at his reflection in the shiny glass. It wasn't him at all. It was Arri. Right behind the glass. He could have just knocked on his own door, and she would have opened it. From behind the glass, Arri was talking to him. He could not understand her. He reached up and touched his own lips, signifying in the dreamlike language of those for who words did not matter, I can't understand you.

He had always been a heavy sleeper, but since quitting his job, Will couldn't make it through the night without a series of restless and jarring dreams, in grayscale. No monsters or murderers. No falling off the tops of buildings, or flying through the air uncontrollably. These dreams were of things that he knew. His ceiling fan. Arri. A tree that didn't exist outside his window. And though he'd never much taken stock in his dreams, he couldn't remember having such vivid dreams with such regularity before.

Even though he found some comfort in Arri's body, Will seldom made it through the whole night. This early morning found him flitting in and out of consciousness on his \$5,800 chaise attempting to focus on the bleary numbers on the plasma's amber LED display, hoping the numbers would stop their incessant post-drinking dance and rearrange themselves into something meaningful. For the last couple of weeks he had been waking at 3 a.m. and going for walks on the street to clear his mind. Or fill it. But tonight, or this morning, he felt uneasy about leaving. And decided to stay in. He wanted to write. To do some kind of work.

In order to see the LED, he had to crane around the trash bin in the center of his living room. When he had been doing all the work for other writers, he had always had a project of some sort on the side to which he could direct his attention, but never really had the guts to make a go of it. And now that he wasn't actually working, and actually had time to devote to it, he couldn't make himself do any of it. In the daylight.

The night air was tepid and he was restless.

He flipped on the television. A grinning overplump contestant reached over the padded counter to his turn at the wheel. Will wondered why they weighted the wheel so heavily, it always looked like such a struggle for people to get the thing moving. And the contestants seemed so embarrassed at not being able to get it to go faster than they thought it should. Robert, the contestant in the middle, forfeited his turn for not making the wheel go all the way around – on two separate occasions – and slumped back into a rounded posture looking appropriately dejected. Will crossed his legs, unblinking, and watched as Jay gave the wheel a hearty spin and asked for a “J.” Sure enough, it popped into the first spot.

Jesus, Will, this is art, for sure.

Vanna tossed her hips expertly across the stage and did what she had done for years, smiling, smiling, smiling. Will had seen her do the whole thing, he remembered as a kid, while pregnant, still bedazzling in her spangles. He had asked his mother why she had a basketball under her dress.

I'd like to solve the puzzle. Is it JUST KILLING TIME?

Cut to the audience gaily clapping, gleeful at the extra \$500 that Jay had just amassed without even having to buy a vowel. Jay bounced on his toes, rather

effeminately, Will thought, and then, as if he heard Will's thoughts, stroked his mustache proudly.

Pat mumbled something that was – though audible – completely unnecessary into the camera, then cut to commercial.

Bird's Eye shot of criss-crossed rows of gleaming corn. The geometry so precise it hurt Will's eyes as the dolly moved at a dizzying pace. Michael Douglas's old man voice started his frank matter-of-fact proclamations of good will and better practices for the world of tomorrow. "Congranja. Feeding a global community, one village at a time."

Will knew this commercial. He clicked it off before Michael had a chance to walk by the playground full of happy multi-colored children and before Jay even had a chance to win the 20 K or the mini van. The sun really did start to glint its lavender rays over the city and Will resigned himself to burn a page from the trash bin, for every page of real work that he did.

But page one? Arri.

Int. Francis' and Yelba's home, 1990 – Day

When Yelba buzzed down, the doorman said that somebody had left her a letter. He would hold it for her. Normally, he would be happy to bring it up only, Miss, no one else was with him at the desk and would she be so kind as to come down.

The doorman handed her a worn, leather journal, tied with twine. Inside the front cover there was a folded letter addressed simply, Y-. She knew before even opening it who it was from. She remembered in his work, particularly the bridge she had seen of his in Llança, a dark will. Like the structure came from the very core of him. His body. Something immediate and inevitable and unashamed. Marbelys would have said to Yelba that it was her own longing that she felt, not the longing of the stranger. When she unfolded the note, a pressed white star of Nica blossom fluttered to the ground.

Yelba.

Though we never met, my eternal gratitude will always be with you for your contribution to my work. I understand that without your careful counsel, Francis would never have seen anything of worth in such "frivolities" as space and art. Our world is made warmer and brighter because of your blinding presence in it. I wish for nothing else that It may be a place that can make you happy in this city of electric distraction.

F. F.

Tonight, she would take the note back up to her room, and put it and the journal into a box in the back of her closet. Tomorrow, she would walk by the building and not go in, but would idly run her hand against its strangely forgiving tensile fabric housing. Being

near such unknowing emptiness made her uneasy. In the future, no one would ever see Figueres – the tormented architect – ever again.

Int. Will's townhouse – Morning

Another Monday morning. Arri had been sick with a stubborn flu of some sort, either that or food poisoning, she had said, just to nettle him about making her eat the Indian buffet down off the corner. She had come down with violent cramps last Thursday, nasty vomiting Friday and Saturday. By Sunday, she was on the mend. A recovery complete with greasy hair, 7-up, and rancid breath, was still – and Will was utterly amazed by this – not able to deter his violent, sudden and alarming need for her body. For Arri.

This morning, Arri had called in to work to say she might be in by noon, sick again, just for good measure. Will could stand it no longer. He woke with the sun barely peaking over the horizon visible through the balcony windows below them. He woke Arri with the gentle lovemaking of someone looking for answers.

Will stood naked from the waist up, his reflection blurry in the mirror, his senses clouded by too much love and sleep. It was noon and he was only just brushing his teeth. He winced when the bristles rubbed on the sore spot where his wisdom teeth had been removed. Will paused. He pulled a long strand of Arri's red curls out of his mouth. Must have somehow found its way to his toothbrush last night. He paused in disbelief that he had just pulled a hair out of his mouth, someone else's hair, and didn't retch.

Within weeks, Will and Arri had slipped into the ease of relationship that only comes after the mutual witnessing of one another's bodily processes. The minutiae of daily life fell in place the way you hope, when decisions like these are made on the basis

of nothing more than a couple of conversations and the mutual love of a filmmaker. In the same way fall turns to winter. You just wake up one morning, and the trees have divested themselves of their burnished ornaments of leaves.

They had been living together ever since. Their life together had grown at the same time that Will read about Figueres' building growing into Congranja.

January was coming to a close, Will had left his job four months ago, and he'd been writing and jotting and plotting and scheming ever since. The fruits of some of last night's labors, scraps written when Arri'd finally found peace enough to sleep, were spread before him. He sat at a small dark table, a gift his mother had paid too much money to have shipped to him for his birthday one year, from Spain. His notes were strewn about, covered with last night's feast of crusty French bread crumbs and some wine rings. The scent of goat cheese still hung in the air. Ever since his younger days when his mother would pack him giant lunches of fruits and rice and sandwiches and orange juice and milk to take to school, he could not divorce himself of the latin tradition of eating large midday meals, and small snacks at night. And like last night, sometimes it'd be just a bottle of wine and some cheese. He sorted his papers into stacks and mindlessly stirred a cup of coffee, watching the cream swirl in oily suspension with the richness of the beans he'd just ground, and marveled at this new life. With Arri.

"Goddammit Will." She had just come down the spiral staircase that led to the bed – the only piece of furniture that occupied the second-story of the cathedral ceilings. It was sort of a perch in between floors that overlooked the whole of the space, their domain. Their lovemaking often inspired passionate reactions from Arri. Apparently Will wasn't as in tune with Arri's dis-ease as he had once imagined.

She continued to surprise. “What?”

“Goddammit, why didn’t you tell me about this?”

He didn’t come out of the bathroom. “Arri. Come down here, I can’t hear you.”

“Why do you keep this shit from me?” She rounded the spiral staircase again and again, the invitation to his father’s gala in her hand. A black and white ball. Lifetime achievement award. The youngest man in the history of the city to win it. Asshole.

“Your father’s winning the McAllister?”

“I would have asked you –”

“It’s not about that –”

“I’m not going –”

“You think I’m hurt I didn’t get invited?”

“He’s an asshole Arri.”

“You’re infuriating Will.”

“I’d rather attend a posthumous lifetime achievement award ceremony.”

“Jesus Will.”

She left the apartment, in all black, knowing well Will loved it when she wore black.

That night, after they had eaten, Will packed a bottle of champagne, and two flutes wrapped in newspapers in a bag, strapped it on his back, and pulled Arri out the front door with no explanation. The hot smoke of the city’s blowing off steam sank into their skins, chilling them. Will more than Arri.

They reached Figueres' building, the hum of its respirating system creating an unsettling vibration Will could feel even through the cement of the sidewalks partitioned into the parts that would not break his mother's back and the lines that would.

"What are we doing here?" Arri didn't understand.

His hands were clammier with every symmetrical block of cement. They turned at the west end of the building and headed to the back.

"We're going to your old work?"

He fumbled in his pocket for the key to the back stairwell door.

There was a familiar suck as the door was pushed open, like a deep-freezer. But when they entered the space he'd gone to several times before, this time with Arri, he shivered.

"Will, seriously, what are we doing?"

The safety lighting in the room cast ugly orange shadows on the floor.

"Isn't this your father's building?"

"It's not my father's building. It's Figueres' building." Will grabbed the journal from its spot in the basement control room where he had kept it and led Arri to one of the elevators. "We're going to the top of this building. To see the stars."

The elevator carried them up the side of the building's delicate curve. He had designed it to course the sides of the structure, rather than cut the building's open center, like an esophageal passageway. He wanted the people who worked there, in the space, to be able to share intellectual energy and so the building's center was a place of emphasis, not transportation. No, the elevators were left to trace the building's sweating curves. As they followed the subtle curvature, the elevator's floor shifted to maintain its horizontal

plane, despite the arch of the elevator's parabolic path. Arri was awestruck. But as with most everyone else too, she was strangely calmed by the building's inexplicable warmth. He remembered feeling it the first time he'd come inside.

The reached the top of the building. The elevator let off at a look-out deck. The building's width on the ground belied its enormous height – it seemed like a building with such width and stoutness couldn't be very tall. But they could still see over the tops of buildings downtown.

Arri had been quiet while the elevator doors silently slid shut behind them.

"I used to come here after I left work next door. After I was sure my father had left for the day."

"That's quite some maneuvering."

"In his old age, he had gotten pretty predictable."

Will had haunted the building.

"So you managed to avoid seeing your father, even though you both live on the same street and you work – worked – in buildings next door to each other?"

"It's not that hard to do when you know certain schedules of the universe."

"Really."

"Really." He pulled out the champagne and unwrapped the two flutes. "Like yours. For instance, Monday through Thursday, lunch at *The Duumvirate*. You'd usually grab an espresso in a to-go cup, and take your satchel out the door." Will popped the champagne and poured two glasses. They climbed the bar of the building's top and hung their four feet over the edge, the railing squeezed over their hips like the safety bar of a roller coaster seat.

“And you never said a word to me.”

“I was much more interested in watching you.” Will handed Arri a bubbling flute. A breeze caught a song over the glass’s wet rim.

“Watching me, huh. Is that what you call it?”

“I mostly had you figured out.” Arri’s teeth glared luminescent. “But for two things.”

“What?”

“One. I never saw you on Fridays.”

“Yes.”

“Where’d you go?”

She didn’t say anything. She was glazed over, lost in the glow of the city. Will could see the reflection of the blinking Maxwell house sign twinkling in her eye. “And what’s two?”

“One day, I saw you crouched in the breezeway of my building. Arri. You were tap-tapping on your laptop.” She looked delicate and more like a pen and ink drawing, a Beasley figure holding a glass between tiny fingers, than a girl on the edge. “Do you remember?”

“I do.”

“I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“I was writing to my brother.” She didn’t say anything else. And Will didn’t ask. For the first time, they settled into a quiet that was comfortable. There was knowing in that. Will knew there were things he wanted to tell her, but he wouldn’t break this silence.

Arri squeezed the railing. Will watched the halo of lights surround the twinkling buildings that made them look animated, almost alive.

“So my brother was one of those one of those ether-people. He came and went, a wisp of fog. No one knew he was sick. He didn’t know he was sick. There was really no warning to speak of. But, I can’t explain it. It was like I always somehow expected he wasn’t going to be with us long.”

Will stopped looking at the skyline and turned to face Arri full-on. He couldn’t help but see things as they played out in scenes. He couldn’t help placing himself in that scene, especially the ones in which he was actually a player. As much as he hated it, especially at times when he knew it to be important to be there, in the moment, in the present, it was automatic. He couldn’t help himself from making it something that would be beautiful if it were staged for camera.

“I remember hearing my mother tell me about how when you have your own children you’ll understand the fear – at times panic – you feel for the safety of your own child. And I just thought that this was it. That I felt for Thomas – you know, just plain worry that he’d hurt himself, or something. But this was more than that.”

Will turned back and looked at the reflection of the city in the stainless steel of the elevator doors.

“I don’t even know where that came from.”

“It’s okay, Arri.”

“I met your father today.”

“You what?”

“I met your father today.”

“Oh?”

“That’s it?”

“I mean, oh.” He decided he’d not say anything more until she explained, though it gripped him, words like vices. Angry red vices. He imagined his eyes crushing the tender glass of the flute Arri’s hand held suspended in air. As if it were only made of air and not sand, that under intense pressure was made so fine it was clear. Crystal and adamantine.

He came into the office today. Will heard the words before Arri even said them.

“He came into the office today. Our firm’s representing him.”

“Oh?”

“You’ve already used that one up? Two different ways. No repeating.”

“Okay. Wow.”

“He – wanted to meet with me. So I met with him.”

The cork popped earlier that night rang in his ear, echoed its intrusion over and over again. “And?”

“I know he’s your father, and you two have your issues and I wouldn’t dream of saying a thing to you about how he wasn’t that bad, or even that I hated him, because if I say either, I’m fucked. But I hated him. I see what you mean. But, I’m also going to say it. He’s not as bad as all that.”

“Oh Christ, Arri. It’s fine.”

“I knew you would want to know. So I’m telling you.”

“So what small country is he planning to take over now?”

“They’ve got some work they need done. A sort of preemptive plan to cover all their bases. I’ll be working with a partner whose specialty is international.”

“You’re working on it? Present tense? Aren’t you all supposed to be hip to the whole conflict of interest thing?”

“I don’t think it’s considered a conflict of interest when you’re dating the son of the man you’re representing. Even if the son happens to hate his father.”

“Hate’s a very undiplomatic word.”

“It’s a pretty undiplomatic sentiment to have towards one’s father.”

“Now you’re making judgment calls on familial relationships?”

“Yes. I’m allowed. You can’t tell me no.”

“Fine. So. More details.”

“So you won’t tell me the first thing about your father? And I start talking about him, and you’re all about it?”

“I’m a voyeur, Arri. You know that.” He poured the rest of the champagne in his glass over the edge.

“He invited us to the McAllister.”

“What do you mean he invited us?”

“I mean he asked if we were coming?”

“When you say ‘we,’ what exactly do you mean? Like he said, ‘Are you,’ as in the second person singular, ‘coming?’ Or ‘you’ as in the second person plural?”

“It was a definite implied ‘you,’ as in second person plural.”

“So he knew about you and me.”

“Yes. He knew about you and me before you and me were brought up.”

“So he knew about my involvement with you before he hired you.”

“Will, don’t.”

“What? Are you saying you don’t think it had anything to do with it?”

“Are you saying my reputation in this city working with large corporations particularly in dealing with multi-national corporations, particular in Central and South America – You’re saying that has nothing to do with it?”

“I’m not saying you’re not good at what you do, Arri. I’m just—”

“You’re just saying you think it’s strange that he picked me. For all those reasons. But maybe Will, it’s a little strange that you picked me. Things aren’t ever black and white, like that. Not in law. And from what I can tell so far, with you and me.”

He wondered if that’s what Figueres saw in all his buildings – night and day. In his jacket pocket, somewhere over his heart, he felt the weight of Figueres’ journal and the things left unsaid. And then he watched Arri, knowing that the thing he would commit against her would be worse than the thing her brother had done to her.

“So what’d you tell him about the party?”

“The gala?”

“Yeah.”

“I told him we’d been planning a party for that night. I said if we shook up a little eight ball that’s supposed to answer all our questions for us, its reply would probably be ‘the outlook is not good.’”

“So you charmed him while simultaneously telling him he could take his gala and shove it, while you happily took the retainer?”

“Pretty much.”

“Arri. This isn’t how I envisioned the evening would go.”

“Is it the script? Or the casting?”

“I think it’s the shoddy camera work.”

“Fucks you every time. Want to go to the *Thelonius*? Over some real alcohol, and some jazz, you can tell me all the things you were going to tell me up here. Back on solid ground.” Arri downed the rest of the champagne in her glass.

Will wondered if he’d ever be able to tell her all the things he wanted to.

Int. The Thelonius Monkey - Continuous

When they got to the wide steel door underneath the familiar red stair case that was the only signal that there was some sort of establishment, Will decided he never would. Arri was right. He did feel better on the ground. Maybe it was Figueres. Maybe it was so much pressure looming over the moment. Maybe it was too much wanting. Amidst the truth and honesty of Figueres’ words in his pocket, maybe with Arri staring at him with such vitality, loveliness, honesty, maybe with the thin air and the transparent clarity of the night sky, he wanted too much. He couldn’t decide. Arri stopped on the sidewalk to look back at the building on whose top they had precariously perched just moments before. Will put his hand in her hair and whispered that he was happy that she had been up there with him. And that he was happy.

“So are we going to have a party?”

“A huge one.”

Arri pushed her hands against Will's chest, into the wall. And kissed him hard and then pushed off him again, like an eighth grader in the halls. "What's this?" she touched Will's chest again. Then she pulled the journal out of his inside jacket pocket.

"It's where I keep all the things I was ever going to say to you. Up there."

"No seriously. You need way more pages than that."

"No. It was actually supposed to be part of the Oscar winning speech I was going to give you up there."

"Really. Well, let's try it out inside with some different lighting. Shall we?"

"No. Actually, I prefer it out here. When we go inside you can tell me about all the shady deals you were making with my father. Let's save the lighting for that."

"Alright." She traced his widow's peak from one ear to the other, then paused again, then lingered over his pocket where the journal was.

"It's a journal. Not mine. It's the man my father hired to build the Congranja building."

"That crazy Spanish architect?"

"He was Mexican, actually. But formally trained in Spain."

"How'd you get it?"

"He gave it to my mother."

The light of the moon was perfect for backlighting. He always liked shots of couples talking, from the backs of their heads. Especially on nights like tonight, with the corona of the moon echoing around Arri's head. He told her about how he had been given the journal. How he found it. How his father would never understand. He was

happy to get to tell her something real. A story. But a story that was important. To him. And maybe to her too.

Will stood just behind Arri, making their way past the bouncer. Dak was playing a variation of Brubeck's "Take Five" that he sometimes played when he was feeling especially uninspired. Crowd favorite, but not to Dak. But it was one of Arri's favorites. Will leaned forward to hum along with it into Arri's ear and for another excuse to twirl her hair, but Arri had finished paying their covers and was lost to the smoke and haze of the club's own hum.

"So I hear you're having a big naked fizgig." Dak finished and sat down at their table.

"Well, the naked part's right. Not sure about the fizgig. You coming?" Arri asked.

"I'll be there. See the two of you kiddoes do your thing. I'll hang for that." He thumped the table underneath to the house beat they piped in for his breaks.

Will had become comfortable with the two of them. Together, though he still found himself, if not entirely focused on the conversation, blocking the movements of their great battles that Arri said always devolved into maddeningly good sex. But tonight he didn't feel the threat of that. It seemed that Arri wasn't in her holding court mood. Didn't have much to do with Dak tonight.

"So I met Will's father today."

“Oh yeah? They was talking about his big soiree on the news about ol’ Francis just before the after-dinner crowd showed, Will. They ready to canonize him. How ‘bout that?”

Dak had an interesting mix of hipster and old man in him. Probably from his dual life leading the band at this place, but also managing the homefront with an ailing octogenarian. Will liked that about Dak.

“What does Francis want to do with you?”

Arri laughed. “I don’t know about all that. But he needs some representation. Well preemptive representation. Advice, really. But I’ve probably already said too much. Hush-hush and all.” She ordered a gin and tonic and begged off to the bathroom.

Dak looked at Will, suddenly serious. “That’s one way to meet the parents. As soon as Arri met my dad, it was curtains. She was in. I think she loved him more than me. She still visits him. And he lights up.”

“I’m glad I didn’t have to be there.”

“Straight up.”

The drinks arrived just as Dak was getting up to go start his next set.

“It’s only eleven-thirty. What’s with the Dave Brubeck so soon?” Will asked curious to see if his assessment had been close.

Dak stood up. “Just not feelin’ the crowd today. Maybe it has to do with the lack of drugs.”

“How’s that working out for you? The sobriety thing.”

“I’m not sober. Just switched addictions.” He pulled the cigarette from behind his ear. “Food Network and cigarettes.”

“Sounds like that could be expensive.”

“Not as expensive as coke.”

“Jesus. I’m sure there aren’t many things in life as expensive as coke.”

“True, bra. True.”

They both stared into their drinks, as though reflecting on the revelation of one of the world’s profound truths. Arri returned in the silence, as did the server with a round of drinks. They all sipped in silence.

“You’ll have to excuse me. I’m gonna go beat up the bartender. I may be off alcohol, but that doesn’t mean she can start sending me fucking pink drinks. I’ll see you on Friday. Cheers.” He squeezed Arri’s shoulder and patted Will’s cheek, a move that on any other man would have made Will feel either violent or madly antsy, but on Dak, was representative of some strange secret handshake, of the final step in the roadmap to solidarity. It was as if to say, I know what you’re going through with this one. Hang in there.

Arri squeezed the lime in her drink.

“I read some really interesting documents today, Will. How much do you know about Congranja?”

“Enough to know I’m happy not to be on its payroll. You should be too if—”

“Gee whiz, Francis. How did I ever survive in this dog-eat-dog world without you giving me advice.”

“Can we make it a rule that I never call you Evelyn and you never call me Francis? Ever again?”

“Very well, then. Very well.” She said this deferring as only a queen can, knowing that though she acquiesced, she had still hit her mark.

“How long did you stay there today?”

“I was there for a little over two hours. He ordered lunch in.”

Will rolled his eyes, and was instantly embarrassed by his inadvertent return to adolescence.

“I read some documents that implicate the company in the Sandinista rebellion.”

“My mother used to talk about that a bit. It was the only thing I ever heard them raise their voices about. And it was only a couple of times. It usually resulted in slamming doors and Mom reciting poetry aloud.”

“Poetry, huh?”

“When she left Nica, she left the church. Instead of reciting Hail Mary’s, she recited Hail Dario’s. Always some sort of revolutionary.”

“Fitting.”

“What else did Francis let you see?”

“He gave me everything. Files and files. It’s all very interesting. And complicated.”

“It’s been complicated there for a long time.”

“Your father wanted to do more for the country. He liked what the Sandinistas did in the beginning. Taking over Congress and kicking out the fat cat bastard Somoza and the rest of them.”

“Most people did I think.”

“But your mother, Francis said, was worried about her brother still there, so young. She didn’t want him fighting. It was a slippery slope, he told me. As long as Congranja could stay there, which meant cooperation with whoever was in power, which was the Sandinistas for the first eight years they were there, as long as Congranja could stay, Norlan was safe.”

“My mother told me once, she had asked Francis to bring Norlan here. To live with them.”

“Your father said it was too dangerous. As soon as they took over the Congress, the whole thing collapsed underneath them. He looked pained, Will.”

But Will’s mind was elsewhere. This time it might have been Arri leaning over to him in Will’s ear. He was already gone. His father had always been like the coconuts his mother used to give him to roll around the kitchen floor. Hardened. Simple. Arri had made him appear more like onion paper. Peeling away the transparent sheath all too easily. Before him now. He held onto her, pulled himself back in.

He wondered if she could sense her departure and return.

“Your father loved your mother. He loves her.”

“My mother loved her brother.”

Will was deciding how much he had hurt Arri’s feelings. Arri was probably over there deciding how much more she should try to tell. And despite himself, his own sense of survival, Will wanted to know more. And didn’t.

“The reason they need me is because the current guy they’ve got, left. They were worried about his allegiances for a long time. But they couldn’t keep him. Apparently he

left the law business altogether. Bought some land in Costa Rica. They need someone to advise them on ethical environmental practices.”

“So you’re supposed to put it all together – so if – when – they get investigated, everything’s above reproach. Is that it?”

“I don’t have to make it look like that. My firm would never take the job if that was what it was supposed to be, Will. So far, everything looks perfectly legal.”

“Fuck. Arri. Don’t give me that legalese. You’re a lawyer. But you also happen to be a decent, and from what I can gather so far, ethical human being. It is not necessarily the case that the law and what is decent and ethical travel the same circuit all the time.”

“I know Will. You’re absolutely right. Listen, all, all’s–” she knew that irked him –“I’m saying is, I can’t find much that indicates your father wasn’t involved in doing the right thing for those people *most* of the time. Ethically, most of the time. And when it wasn’t entirely ethical, it was certainly legal. The suicide seeds... yes –”

“There is nothing ethical about those suicide seeds–”

“And your father didn’t keep that guy on for too very long.” Arri looked defeated for a moment, a sight Will was sure no one inside of any courtroom had ever seen on her face before. “Look, I don’t want this to become – I mean I’m not trying to convince you of anything. That’s not what I’m doing here.”

“I know.”

“No. I mean, I’m not saying your – feelings. Your, I don’t know, whatever you feel about your dad aren’t well-founded. I’m not saying that. I’m just telling you about my day.”

Arri lit a cigarette. One of the last in the pack Dak had left on the table. She hardly ever smoked and Will knew it was more of a defense mechanism than any sort of habit. Whenever she felt threatened, like a squid, really. She'd spray inky smoke into the air, to evade Will's –

“Dammit, Will. That far away look of yours.” He snapped out of it.

“‘Dammit Will.’ It’s starting to sound like a tag line of yours.”

“Can we make another rule?”

“What’s that?”

“Can you asked to be excused before you take those massive trips of yours?”

Will smiled. “What’s a matter Arri?”

“Or just fucking take me with you. Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t know if I can do that.” He poked two forks from the table into the last two of Dak’s cigarettes – Will’s own variation of the classic Chaplin Tramp move. He danced the cigarette feet on the end of the forks with an authority and poise he wished he had on the dance floor. “I don’t know if you could handle the way I move when I go to that special place.”

Arri tugged on Will’s jacket sleeve, taking the bait. She shrugged, “Dammit Will.”

Friday, the building continues.

I think the city doesn't need me, but I need the city.

Int. Francis' and Yelba's home, 1984 – Evening

When she could find them, she stole small moments up on the roof. Francis hired a part-time worker from the building to fashion a rooftop garden for her. She stroked the tender leaves of basil. This garden was nothing like the one she and Apell worked together. Here on the roof, she could find very little of her then in her now. Her soil here could not produce the heavy tomatoes or the night-blossoming squash as in the place where she and Apell had silently raised fruit. She still found the same satisfaction in plunging her hands into the dirt. She ground it deep into her fingernails like she had in those days. Knowing that throughout the day, even into the night, she would be reminded of the earth she had mingled with in the day's beginning. Francis would be flying home this evening and she smiled to think of his arrival, kissing her on the forehead, kissing her warm, swollen belly.

Yelba was stroking the tender leaves of basil, when she felt the baby finally pushing to enter the world. The summer refused to release its grasp on the air, just as the baby had been refusing to release his grasp on her womb. The cramp took over her body. The sensation reminded of her of the one time she had been to Europe. On their honeymoon she had plunged into the Mediterranean. They had rented a condo in the twin fishing villages of Llança and Figueres, and it was that seizing cold suck of oxygen right out of her that she remembered now. A flush of cold sweat dripped down her back as though her spine had become a frozen column of ice. She wondered if Francis had gotten on the plane yet.

The baby's name would be Will. It was strong – William – a good American name. She knew before she ever even suggested it, Francis would approve. She thought of William Shakespeare, who she had learned to love, not because she had read his complicated iambic prose, but because she had watched over and over again Olivier's *Hamlet* – how she practiced her English – to learn, as Francis said, the King's English. When she met new people, it was often remarked that Yelba had the strangest lilting British quality to her speech, never running freight train over her t's, but granting them the same plosive quality the players did.

But this was not the only reason she had chosen Will's name. This reason she kept to herself. It reminded her of the work she had done to become a part of this culture. There was a delicate balance between what you could control, and what existed in life before you ever got here. And there was such thing as striking a mystical balance between the two. And it was constantly shifting, push-pulling its way through your life. The double meaning of the word Will pleased Yelba. The reason she felt it sounded powerful was not just because of its association with Shakespeare, but because it also meant the only ability you have to do anything on your own, while you're on the earth. While your feet trod fertile ground.

*Sunday, the day before the building's
grand opening*

Today, this morning, I went out to the site. To breathe. To look. I sat on the ground, feeling the stability of the building's foundation, in which we had dug all the holes where the soles of the long narrow windows reached clear down into the earth. I put both hands on the ground next to me and waited for it to be warmed by the rising sun.

I had always been bothered by a few ghastly telephone lines that intruded on the experience of the building. Even though the lines had not been functional for years, the city's board wouldn't take them down. Something about the poles' creosote treatment and OSHA standards &c &c. But this glorious morning, the lines that had previously been such an eyesore to me were covered in the most beautifully linear silhouettes of blackbirds. In random sprays. Blackbird blackbird space space space space blackbird. And every so often, one would alight. Filling the space where another had been.

Int. Hospital, 1984 – Continuous

The nurse in her strangely artificial green clothes – a green Yelba had never seen in the real world of trees and ferns and herbs – came into the room carrying a sleeping William. She placed him in Yelba’s nervous arms and told her Mary had finally found Francis and he would be home this evening, but there would be no flights out before 3:30 p.m., which meant he would get to the hospital around 7. She said Mary was just sick about the situation and was waiting outside.

“Would you please tell her in a few moments. I want to be with Will alone.”

She stared into his wrinkly, dark face. She did not know it now, but the darkness was not because he favored his mother’s coloring, but due rather to the lateness of his term in her belly. She had made it too late to the hospital to have any medication to numb her pain. When Will’s head pressed into her cervix with all his resolute angry energy, she felt it. When her tiny pelvic bones, shaped like a pair of saucers at the base of her uterus, retracted and their round ends fractured, she could feel it. When his head tore the membranes surrounding the birth canal, she felt his heat. And knew it was her penance. And it was the most cleansing heat she had ever felt. When his long body slipped from her, his feet the last to know the dark murk of her insides, she felt him leave her. Perhaps dizzy from the pain and her dislocation, she imagined she felt the moment when the umbilical cord, the last remains of the tangible connection between mother and son was cut, something akin to the tearing of ligaments. All at once, the tension gone out of sinewy fibers, separated. She felt the cleaving in the back of her throat.

When she had to bear down one more time to deliver the placenta, she felt her old selves die. She would take the placenta home to bury, just as she had buried the placentas of all of her siblings. She still vividly remembered Marbelys explaining to her as her oldest daughter that since it had given the baby life, it had been a part of its soul. Half the baby's spirit, the bad parts, had once resided in the placenta, and so it was necessary to bury it so that it could be at peace. Otherwise, the child would grow up and never find wholeness because half of it, the dark part of his soul, wandered the earth looking for a redemption that belonged to its corporeal self. Without this, the baby would be a peregrine, never fully knowing peace or wholeness. The nurse told her the information she already knew in her soul, that baby William was a boy. And then she blacked out.

She believed she had existed as two selves. The self she remembered from Nicaragua and the self she knew since she had lied to her mother and left her to be with Francis. The only way to make the transition was to pass through a seemingly endless sea of guilt and suffering. She knew from maternity classes that sometimes genetic material skipped genes. So occasionally some traits like blue eyes and alcoholism could be present in the grandmother, skip the mother and reappear in the child's genetic material. She hoped that this is how Nicaragua would pass from Marbelys into Will, since she herself had abandoned it.

Whispering to a sleeping Will in Spanish, an alien emotion swept over her. She didn't recognize it at first. It had been since Before, when emotion was uncomplicated, since before she had to split her emotions into two languages, two countries, two selves. It was a relief. A guilt she didn't know had been suffocating her for the last seven years, while she had been busy Americanizing herself, was lifted from her. And to be sure – to

be grateful for this grace, she would never let Francis change Will the way he had changed her.

It had only been two months since Norlan died.

“Mi solito, mi solito. ¿Como está papi?”

Safe at home now, she unfolded the powder blue blanket he’d been wrapped in from the hospital and folded it, while Will squirmed against the cold bright world on the Outside. She touched each of his fingers and counted aloud. *“Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco. Cinco, cuatro, tres, dos, uno.”* He fought and collicked, his long arms and legs flailing sporadically.

As she counted, she did not know that underneath where Will used to be inside her, a tumor grew that had been supplied with metastasizing nutrients from the same placenta that made Will grow. While the black circles underneath her eyes would fade away and the warm glow of her skin would return, the other thing inside would grow.

She wrapped him in a blanket her mother had sneaked into her bag the day when she left. She carried his impossibly small frame into the kitchen, where the sunlight was strongest. She felt at once irrational in her extreme fear – so many sharp edges and hard surfaces and such a tiny thing in her hands. There had been little communication with her mother, as their home in Tipitapa was still miles from any phone lines. What little correspondence they had was through letters, and even that was pretty unreliable as the Contras had destroyed most of the country’s infrastructure in an effort to paralyze the revolutionaries.

“¿De dónde eres, mi solito? ¿Del cielo? ¿Del sol?”

She only spoke Spanish to him when Francis wasn't around. It wasn't that she wanted to keep him from it – hardly. Since that morning in the kitchen with her mother, she made it a point never to lie again. Even the smallest fib. But she wanted for the Spanish to be something that she could share with Will. Alone. And it felt surprisingly good to form her mouth around the slippery sounds of her old home, Will's peeling fingers exploring her teeth and lips.

When Will grew, and the first word he spoke was not Dada or Mama, but rather “so,” Yelba felt like she had lied again. Francis didn't know that the “so” was the beginning of the word *sol*. For she had sung to him a Spanish lullaby about the setting sun. And she called him her little sun, knowing the strange peculiarity about English that words sometimes have each their own pronunciations. That though there was an ‘o’ in son and a ‘u’ in sun, the word sounded the same. In Spanish, these words for son and sun – *hijo* and *sol* – were worlds apart. Will was her solito. Her mind boggled at *sol*'s homonym partner in English. Soul. It seemed the perfect maze-like path, the tracing of these words mirroring her own journey from the soft earthen floor of her mama's kitchen to this hard granite, on which even the smallest thing broke if it fell.

Int. Will's townhouse – Night

Outside his two-story windows, the rain poured. It was a sleeted rain that cut precision angles into the ninety-degree plane where the building's sides met the other sides and the ground, building and horizon, bisecting them in perfect neatness that was at odds with Will's scattered tendencies. It had been two weeks since their meeting on the roof, when Arri had told him about Thomas, and Will had not told her all that he wanted to. He couldn't tell her everything about the journal. About how he suspected his mother had fallen in love with the architect. How he hoped that his father wasn't his father. In this, like all times that Will refused to make decisions, he left. He went for a walk.

Ever since he'd stepped these same steps behind the building with Jesús and Arri, he couldn't walk without looking at every step. Each time he stepped on a new square of pavement, he thought of all the culminating steps that had led him to this place. The steps that he'd walked to get here, the steps that his mother had walked. The steps that his father had walked. Within the last couple of weeks (that not coincidentally corresponded to their next discovery trip, this time in Guatemala City), Congranja had been responsible for the erecting of a playground in the downtown area. They had been popping up all over the country, in fact. In similar areas of re-vitalization. He was happy to be out in the weather, in the angular sleeted cold. He'd had a bottle of wine and wasn't afraid of cold or sickness. And walked all the way to the playground for no good reason. Just to sit and be wet. And cold. Overhanging the whole thing was a large tree,

one of few remaining that hadn't succumbed to the strange urban illness that had swept the city destroying most of the young trees that occupied the planters and avenues.

Things had changed. He was considering leaving for good. Because there was, as there always is in these things, with Chaplin, with all babies something about hating that comes naturally. It's what we hate in ourselves that makes us hate our parents.

Will walked down Shepherd Avenue. Had the sun been beckoning to him that day, he wouldn't have gone out. Because he felt it was telling him to do the other thing, to stay in, to work things out, he went out. Sun, clouds, wind, but no humidity. A little sweat on his back from the walking, just to let him know he wasn't completely out of summer yet.

The playground was built up on an embankment, four feet or so above the sidewalk. The kids had a yellow pathway they could take to reach the newly erected play area. Instead of being filled in with gravelly-quartz pebbles, the entire playground had a fish theme. It looked like a giant fish bowl, with underwater treasure chests and an entire sunken city. They had even thought to build a smaller replica of the Congranja building itself, inside this little bowl. Will sat on the edge of the wooden creosote-covered railroad ties that kept the bright aqua pebbles inside and rubbed his hand on the plaque that announced the equipment had been given to the community as a gift. Giving back after the community had given them so much.

Tracing his finger across a bit of brick embankment, he noticed the terrible condition of his specked red cuticles when a teeny foot almost smashed his left pinky.

This was Ben. He had totally forgotten about Ben. Until he saw him again. He couldn't have been older than six. But he seemed older. He looked older. It couldn't

have been that long since the last time he saw him. Will had seen Ben here before, on one of his lunches. They'd had meaningful conversations about chalk dust and eraser chase, peanut butter and jelly, and the notion of insects having feelings too, and how we should probably invent things that made it possible to walk places without crushing their tiny exoskeletons, some kind of material that was really really soft when it needed to be, but hard all the other times, while his mother's careful eye looked on from afar.

Ben had been the reason that a certain sitcom stayed alive another five seasons. It was the only work he had done for sitcoms, and the episode he wrote, had become one of the most popular in the network's history. Television had just begun to fight the war against Tivo, when live television seemed to be dying. Will devised an episode of "Soon We'll All Be Crazy" whereby they hired children to play the parts of the adults. The same script was to be used from one they already had written, but Will suggested the child actors' voices be dubbed in. So the adult actors would say their same lines, but the absurdity was that they were in children's bodies. It was an huge success. It was also evidence of Will's growing cynicism. And his bitterness. The whole thing, the whole clique-ish thing had become too much for him. Too much like his childhood. Like everyone's childhood. Wanting always to be on the inside. It was the beginning of Will's retreat. When he first realized something had gone terribly wrong with his work.

Ben had in one hand a busted cell phone he had carried with him on that first day they'd met. His mother had given it to him to play with. And by all accounts, since he was still carrying it, the toy had become more than just a passing fancy. In the other hand, he had a violet-black beetle. He opened his tiny fist and peered in. Of course Ben hadn't acknowledged Will. How could he possibly be more pressing than what it was

that impossibly fascinating beetle was doing on the inside of Ben's little world?

Childhood being about refusing the artificial forcefields created by an adult world, he continued tracing the shape of the beetle with a stick in one hand, and holding his own conversation with someone who existed only in Ben's own mind that he apparently channeled through the cell phone.

Seeing Ben older now reminded him. When he had gotten there, it was empty and unreal. He was loved for making fun of them all. He hurt at how he had managed to take something so pure, so lovely in this boy Ben, and turn it into what was his ugly retreat into popularity. Into acceptance.

Will lost himself in observation, like the old days. Maybe he was too drunk, but the worry of Ben's mother was superceded by his wanting desperately for this moment not to end. While all around Ben, an unassuming, bright young boy, speaking volumes on the cell phone, to no one, the world churned and whirled around him, spewing its hurt, its pain, its upset. Ben only knew the beauty. The calm. The wholeness. The purity of uncomplicated and real emotions.

I don't get it, Ben. He wasn't entirely sure that the words he had been thinking to himself were actually being released into the world, into the world between Ben and Will. He was confused. Why was Ben out here alone? In the rain? Where was his mother?

You know what, I don't get you. Now Ben was answering back. Was Ben talking back to him, or into the busted cell phone?

And Will was saying, I love her. But I don't think she (or he) gets me.

My own father, he was saying. And now maybe even Arri. *She* just doesn't get me. You get me. Her not getting me. It hurts me to say it. I wanted her to get it. I

guess this is okay, but I expected more from her, I suppose. This is the nature of expectations. But for her, the sounds she hears are all the sounds I make an effort to catalogue in my mind. Order, sort, organize into intelligible bits of meaning. In her, they are cacophonous. Just din. Messy, dirty and impure. She wants something different from life. She wants happiness. I want what is real. This means pain on some days. This means not being understood every day, and we have the tremendous capacity as beings to be more. I won't do it anymore.

Ben opened his hand and watched the beetle make its way from his palm onto the brick. Not at all, it seemed, disoriented from the trip in the child's fist. Knowing that beetles are brighter. Birds live longer. Accidents are bloodier, Ben said. That's what I know. That's just what I see.

But it's more, Will said to him, you have so much talent. You see things in ways that we can't. Those of us too busy to stop and see what you do. You tell us what we're too stupid to see anymore.

For a moment Will thought he saw sadness in the boy's eyes. Deep. Though there was no outward projection of that sadness. He knew it was there. Or maybe, he knew, feared, it would be there.

Or maybe it was his own sadness reflected back to him out of Ben's eyes.

What are you so sad about? Will asked Ben.

"Me. Darfur. Balinese earthquakes. The expanding gap between the rich and poor. All bloody and busted."

Still under construction.

The building is giving me fits. I don't have children and I suppose I never will, if you believe all of the things I have to say about my building. I'll never have children. You'll say this building is my child. (My God, have I started writing to you?) Maybe you're right. Maybe architecture is my bride. And my child is what came out of this relationship. The Congranja building. In the growing stages. Why must there be such issues with the making of it?

I am overwhelmed by my inability to express what it is I want to say. I was so upset, it is in fact the reason that I never finished formal training. At the university, it was all about all they wanted me to know, and nothing of what I wanted to know. That mattered little to them. They were only interested in churning out a product. Just like so many architects are interested in churning out buildings that somehow represent them. Or represent efficiency. Or that represent their own idea of space or time. Or something else that is an interesting concept. But the Congranja building is something larger, and it is having all the problems I imagine parents who are raising teenage children to have. All the growing pains.

Nothing is going as I had planned. I wanted the wall studs to fit precisely with the soles. The cantilevers have been cut poorly. I suppose I should take some consolation that the fascia – what it is that everyone sees on the outside – looks as I had planned it would. Now it's a matter of getting the inside of the building to cooperate. Guess it is more like a child than I thought.

I wanted the cave's respiratory system to work just as a human being's might. I had really grown rather attached to it. But to no avail. It is heaving out as fast as I am breathing in. But it never breathes in. It just constantly expels. Fits, I say.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. ANNA'S BACKYARD - DAY (COLOR)

Dad is playing with Sadie, a little mutt of a dog, and her tennis ball. Anna is sitting on a lawn chair impatiently attempting to string together a crown of flowers. Alice in Wonderland could do it. And much faster. Her siamese cat, KUBLA, is stealthily pursuing a tree frog who is glued to the back door window. With a slight wiggle of his latter half, Kubla leaps with one swift movement and traps his prey. Anna catches the end of this cat and frog ballet and with a grievous cry runs to Kubla in an effort to save the frog's life.

ANNA

Kubla, no. No, kitty, please.
Don't.

DAD

What's he got?

ANNA

I dunno, dad, make him stop.
Kubla . . . oh no.

Anna is now crying uncontrollably at the obvious hopelessness of her attempt to save the frog.

DAD

It's just part of a cat's nature to hunt, Anna. That's what they do. Without us, Kubla would have to search for his food every day.

ANNA

But he has food. I fed him this morning.

DAD

It's his instinct. He was born with it.

ANNA (V.O.)

Dad never resorted to Disney-type "circle of life" explanations of anything. He knew that sugar-coating was delusional. It would only serve to create weak children. Other parents told their children, "Sure honey, you can be whatever you wanna be. Just follow your dreams." But, they were also the ones who would have lied and said that that frog, "hopped right on home to its mama."

Anna, not accepting her Dad's explanation, runs inside and stomps up the stairs to her room.

INT. ANNA'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Anna throws herself in a crumpled heap onto the bed and wiggles her way under the covers still crying.

ANNA (V.O.)

The pain I felt was immediate. It was like that day I asked that big girl at school to hit me as hard as she could . . . and she did. Right in the stomach. It knocked the wind out of me.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - CONTINUOUS (BLACK AND WHITE)

Anna and the Boy continue to sort the shells in silence.

BOY

I don't have enough blue ones.
Let's go look for more.

Anna walks along the water's edge while the Boy splashes in and out of the water looking for more shells to fit his description.

ANNA

How old are you?

BOY

Eight. And a half.

ANNA

What happened to your mother?

BOY

I don't have one. It's just me and my Dad. Did your mother die?

ANNA

No. They're both still alive.

BOY

Do they know you're out here?

ANNA

You know what? I think so.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. ANNA'S BACKYARD - DAY (COLOR)

Anna has grown. She is now fourteen years old and is sunning herself in that same lawn chair - only now it is a bit rusted with age and weather. She is wearing a too-big bikini, stuffed with rolled up socks, and reading a collection of Chekhov's plays.

ANNA (V.O.)

My grandmother died when I was fourteen years old. I remember it because I was on Spring Break and my parents left me home alone. They flew to Columbus when she first went into the hospital. I can't even remember what she went in for.

Anna gets up and walks to the fences on either side of her house to see if, by chance, anyone could be spying on her. Then, she nervously unhooks her bikini top and places it, along with the socks, on the ground. The phone RINGS.

ANNA

Dammit.

She puts her top back on while running inside to get the phone.

INT. ANNA'S KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Anna picks up the phone.

ANNA

Hello?

Oh no.

How's mom?

I have to fly by myself?

No. That's alright. I can manage.

ANNA (V.O.)

It was my Dad who told me. It was all very strange.

But I remember thinking . . . feeling guilty . . . because it didn't hurt all that bad.

I was just really worried about my mom. I guess you just never really understand things as they happen to you.

Not at all when you're fourteen, but even less as you get older.

DAD
(on the phone)
I love you very much, Punkin.

ANNA
I love you too, Daddy.

Anna hangs up the phone and walks back outside.

EXT. ANNA'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Her pace is much slower as she moves back to the lawn chair. She lays down, unbuttons her top, exposes her young breasts and stares up again into the sky. Just now, a cloud moves across the sun, and the whole yard becomes a little more grey.

ANNA (V.O.)
I half expected to burst into a Chekhovian fit of tears. Like that girl in "The Seagull" was always doing. I wanted to. But I couldn't.

Anna picks up the book and begins to read again.

INT. ANNA'S BEDROOM - ANOTHER DAY

Anna sleeps peacefully in her quilted bed. After couple of seconds, she twitches awake. Mom and Dad's voices and sounds of breakfast can be heard wafting through the vents.

Anna looks at the clock.

ANNA
Twelve-thirty?

ANNA (V.O.)
I couldn't believe it was Christmas morning and I was waking up at noon.

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Anna, in her robe, sits at the table. Mom and Dad sit down too.

ANNA

Where's Ben?

MOM

He went over to Amanda's house to open presents there. He should be home soon.

INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTER BREAKFAST

Mom, Dad, Ben, and Anna are opening presents.

ANNA (V.O.)

I wasn't pissed that I didn't get a yo-yo or a Barbie or a remote control car. I was pissed it was Christmas morning and I didn't have butterflies in my stomach.

Int. Will's townhouse – Night of the Grottesquerade

One by one they came to stare at her body. Will had never seen more beautiful tattoos than the ones covering Haylan's body. Who knew tattoos could be so alluring? And no one, well no one who knew Haylan from her sandwich-making days at *The Duumvirate*, would have seen these tattoos before, though not because their numbers weren't great in magnitude and coverage. He, and the people whom she had served, had never seen these tattoos because they covered every inch, and only those inches, of her body that normal clothing would have covered. She had tattoos in every color and shape and size and encyclopedic image from the neck to mid-thigh. From her delicate shoulders to her unassuming hip bones. She looked like she had a wrestling suit, or some French daddy's Victorian age one-piece swimsuit of ink. She, in all her tattooed truth, epitomized the Grottesquerade.

Will and Arri certainly hadn't expected this museum-like quiet to take over the atmosphere of the truth-serumed bacchinalia they had envisioned, but the kind of reversal of guests spectating the servers, was just the thing this sort of event invited – the unexpected. A careful mix of realism and liberal amounts of the fantastic on the night his father was to receive the McAllister.

Only mildly different when sober, Dak actually preferred the minor revelations of clarity in his ephemeral sober states to the artificiality of his drunken revelations but never quite managed more than several consecutive hours of sobriety on any given day. Plus, he couldn't play as well sober. And since he played every day but Sunday, he and God, man

– he and God – he was nearly always drunk. Six days a week. The problem with the truth he gained from these experiences of sobriety, these brief forays into the reality that the tight-assed sober people experienced all the day – the trouble was he just couldn't seem to make sense of it sober. He couldn't talk that well. The only way he could really make sense when he talked was when he really, really thought about what he was going to say before he said it. Really attempt to control and formulate his ideas before they spewed willy-nilly from his mouth. And this forced thinking only happened when drinking. When he was sober, he just didn't have any inhibitions about how we would be received, so his speech didn't require much deliberation. He ended up saying a bunch of shit he just didn't mean, not because he was a bastard asshole, just because he couldn't make much sense. The shit just come out.

So. He spent most of the time loaded. And it didn't bother him, or seemingly, anybody around him. He liked the dichotomy. His playing got easier. His talking, more labored. Luckily, this Grotesquerade thing was on Saturday, which meant he could drink his effing mind crazy.

Okay, so yes his father sometimes got on him, but increasingly, with each successive visit home (though it was a place Dak had never lived, he called it home, because his father was there) dad had become less and less coherent.

“How's the ol' Pops, Dak?”

“Fuck man. Every time I turn around I'm taking him to the doctor. First they wanted to check his kidneys, then his liver, then his eyes... and well, now it's his kidneys again.” See like that. This is what sobriety gets me. Spilling my guts to this fucking naked-assed stick dick. Drink man drink.

“So. What’s your dig, man?”

Will knew Arri still liked this guy as the guy who came before him. He also knew that Arri had been fairly in love with him, up until the point when Thomas had died. But the night, seeing everyone at their most vulnerable, had conflated the images of Dak and Thomas in his mind. This whole fucking night had been like that. It was tantamount to seeing your second grade teacher in a strip club. On the pole. Like, she seems familiar, but so out of place. Plus, fuck, everybody was naked. The whole party had this sort of feeling. “What do you mean, what’s my dig?”

“What do you do? What’s your beef? I mean who the fuck are you. This thing’s about tellin’ the ol’ capital T and I’m just thinking who the hell are you because I don’t really know.”

That Will knew Dak and Arri’s relationship had deteriorated over their being too similar provided him some comfort. The two of them together, Arri had said, started out like Clark Kent and Lois Lane but ended up more like Superman and kryptonite. She said he just couldn’t stop poisoning her. Draining her. Dramatic, like that. He’d do his best to avoid drama tonight. She was creating enough of it for herself, to not notice that he’d not been participating.

“Want a smoke?” Will figured donning a coat would be justified due to the frigid October evening, not that Arri’d see him step out. “I’ve got Cubans.”

“Sounds good. Can we break the rules?”

“Coats?”

“Yeah, man. Freeze my balls off I go out there like this.”

“Oh yeah.” Will walked back to the bedroom through a maze of naked frivolity. He paused to refill his drink and catch Haylan outlining how she’d been inspired by an ex-boyfriend she’d had in Houston who’d tattooed his entire scalp, but nobody knew it because he worked for FedEx, which meant he wore a hat all the time. When he was out with buddies, he’d wear the hat. When he was out with her, he always kept it on. Then, they’d gone home to go to bed together, late in the relationship, she being pretty chaste and all. That’s what she said. Chaste and all. And he took his hat off, just like that, and there it was. The most perfect tattoo you’ve ever seen of Jesus Christ on the cross. Covered his whole noggin.

“Prettier than stained glass. That’s how they’d done it. Like it was a stained glass window. All colors and lines.”

“Nice.” Arri was into it, but only because everyone else was speechless and she’d gotten to fill in the blanks. “Babe, did you hear this?” She’d noticed Will passing through.

“Yeah.”

“Crazy, huh?”

“Tremendous, really.” Will couldn’t help but being intrigued. He wanted oh so not to be. But Haylan’s inked body was really quite astoundingly perfect. Her nipples perfectly outlined with what looked to be lace doilies. The doilies disintegrated into hydrangea bushes with several small angels fluttering to and fro. Clearly inspired by Dalí, the artist had penned little ants on many of the angels’ wings. Below the hydrangeas, circuitously dancing round her navel, there appeared a shaded, moonlit woods where two

lovers held hands, backs to the world. They walked south. To Haylan's trim chestnut curls. Underneath the darks and greys and shades of brown, all pleasingly neutral, her milky white skin glistened with the tiniest droplets of sweat. Arri and Will had turned up the heat, just before the guests arrived to keep the nudists safe from the chill October night. He fought the sensation to touch her. To trace the path on which the ink lovers perpetually traveled. Her muscles underneath the masterpiece were a masterpiece all their own. Her tiny pelvic bones moved with almost lyric abandon. They seemed to twitch there with some kind of reluctance and expectance all at once.

Haylan, fixing the spotlight firmly back on herself, though it really had never left her, even with Arri's outburst, explained she had wanted to do something similar to the bald guy she'd dated. To hide a part of herself from everyone. Well, almost everyone. The world was so bright and invasive; she wanted to keep some part of herself to herself. She was dramatic like Arri.

"Can I touch it?" Arri said it.

"Touch what?"

"I just want to see if it feels the same."

"Sure, I mean. Yeah, I guess." Arri, as if she'd heard Will's thoughts, started her finger off at the crevice just under Haylan's left breast. And she drew the same path Will had imagined he might follow. Down the middle, across her perfect abdominals, and stopping just on top of the pair, she tilted her head back to meet Haylan's gaze above.

She drew a little circle and said with some reverence, "It's beautiful. It even feels beautiful." They matched eyes for a bit, perfect reflections of what the other wanted to be. And just like that, the crowd dispersed. Will to the bed where the coats had been

tossed with some frenzied effort to find something tall and wide enough for Dak. Arri to the corner by the candles, where she and Will had one time made love while standing. Her hair reflected the flickering of the candles' flames on this night just as they had on that night. She sat down, crossed her legs and sipped her wine – completely comfortable – just as if she wore her favorite cashmere sweater and faded jeans.

Will found a coat, even the one he thought Dak might have come in with, and headed back to the terrace to escape the warm light of the nudes and the party. He wanted something real. He figured with him, because he was so intimidating, so new, so formidable, he'd either decide for or against the trip south. Dak would be his litmus test, though it had nothing to do with him. Will could no longer stand the thoughts existing only on the inside. Dak the bass player. The bass line. The sounding board.

The one thing he hated about the apartment, when he'd moved in, but was just too laborious a task to fix, and ultimately not worth the little ease it would have lent him had he had it fixed, was the ugly handles on the doors to the terrace. Because the entire west wall of the apartment was nothing but floor to ceiling windows, the builders had wanted for the doors to extend the same length and not disturb the line. They had wanted them to be nearly invisible. But, and it seems it was somehow a last-second addendum to the place, considering how much time and effort had obviously been put into even the tiniest details, someone had added horizontal bars to the glass doors, dissonantly cutting the doors – and not even in half. The section from the bottom of the door to the handle didn't even appear to be a proper third or fourth of the door. It just seemed to stick out there, oddly. He'd much preferred a stainless steel panel affixed to the glass panel itself that

just got pushed, instead of this ugly, what looked almost commercial, Wal-Mart handle in the middle of his living room.

He allowed himself a minute shudder of contempt, opened the door and signaled to Dak that he'd found a coat for him. Dak followed onto the terrace, his imposing frame cutting shadows as long as the windows on the floor as he went.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - CONTINUOUS (BLACK AND WHITE)

A butterfly flutters past Anna and the Boy as they walk. The Boy chases after it.

ANNA (V.O.)

All this time. In all this thinking about my life and how silly and mundane it had become, this is all I wanted. I wanted to feel like a child again. I wanted to experience life as a child does. I wanted to chase after butterflies and stub my toes and skin my knees.

Anna begins to chase after the butterfly, too. She runs faster and faster until she passes up both the butterfly and the Boy. She keeps running. She begins to laugh. Behind her, she can hear the laughter of the young Boy. Anna stops. Her chest is heaving as she breathes in and out hard.

The Boy stops, too. With a giggle, he immediately turns and runs back to his satchel by the pallet. He returns to Anna with a notebook and pen.

BOY

What's your name?

ANNA

Anna.

The Boy stops.

BOY

I knew I liked you. You like cherries, just like me. I'm gonna write a story about you. I'm a writer.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

EXT. BACKYARD - DAY (COLOR)

Anna is sixteen now. She is pacing around the backyard, rehearsing lines.

ANNA (V.O.)

When I was sixteen, our high school put on "The Three Sisters". I got the part of Natasha. All those Russians had such great names. Strong names.

ANNA

"Yes I suppose my hair is all over the place. They say I've gotten fatter, but it's not true! I'm not a bit fatter. Masha's asleep." ... um ...crap... "She's tired, poor girl. How dare you sit down in my presence! Get up? Get out of here!"

ANNA (V.O.)

Natasha was always breaking down or stamping her feet or kissing people's hands and asking for forgiveness. She was an absolute assemblage of emotions, the full range of which was often expressed within the span of three or four sentences.

ANNA

Shit. How the hell . . . is she supposed to just flip out?

Anna meditates for a moment and then attempts to cry.

ANNA

Fuck.

ANNA (V.O.)

But I couldn't. That part of me was gone. Those extreme emotions had left. I couldn't even pretend. Most of the time I memorized the boys lines, instead.

ANNA

"I must go; it's time. Look at that dead tree; it's all dried up, but it's still swaying in the wind along with the others. And in the same way, it seems to me that, if I die, I will still have a share in life somehow or other. Good-bye my dear."

ANNA (V.O.)

Their lines often made more sense to me. I could understand that feeling of fleeting existence. That feeling that it was all out of my hands.

Anna lays down in the grass clutching some blades of grass in her fists and stares directly up into the bright afternoon sky with a look that is so pensive, she might break into tears any second . . . but she does not.

Int. Will's townhouse – Later that night

On the night of his unexpected departure, the night of the Grotesquerade, after all the guests had dispersed or passed out, Will Dante said these words to Arri: “But after all is said and done, I loved you. I know that now. In some way that is incomprehensible, unexplainable I always have. I was hoping that that would go without saying.”

He picked up his knapsack sitting by the front door, and walked out, only stopping to scribble a note he then stuck to the outside of the door, right under the peephole. It read, “I’ve left to look for home.”

Part 2: Against the Fade to Black

Ext. A la chureca, 1984 – Sundown

As much as he hated to admit it, Yelba had been right to distrust the big company. But the intimations that the wonder was wearing off came slowly, and Norlan wasn't heeding the warnings.

They were running. Running so fast, Norlan thought his feet might pound through the pavement in all its brokenness before he made it to the refuge of the refuse. The dump. Norlan, Santiago, and Danilo were running from the two national guardsmen that had caught them and shouted in their direction. Just like in the movies, the guardia had yelled in their general direction, across the crowded market, giving them just enough time to get a sufficient headstart. And they broke through the flimsy taped-off barricades that separated shop from shop, seller from seller, and made their escape. But when they finally hit pavement on the road to the dump, the original destination, the guardia were still following them – farther behind and huffing like roasted pigs leaking air – but there.

It was Danilo's idea to steal the new pair of shoes. Norlan wondered if in only three weeks it was possible to already begin to lose your moral judgment. Was it possible that the glue could hone in on just one aspect of his personality and attack and destroy it and only it? The road to the dump had been paved once, several years ago. But originally it had been a shoddy job, and now with all the traffic of the heavy trucks full of the city's shit, the road resembled more some outerspace terrain, or the ugly landscape of pockmarks on Danilo's face.

Norlan smiled at his own insult and tried to remember it hard. He'd rib him later.

"Jesús Christo. But they're fat," Danilo huffed out as he fell two paces behind Norlan, Santi two more behind that.

“You’re not so skinny. But you’re not drunk either. Just. Keep. Running.”

Danilo had begun working with Congranja only two weeks ago, and he’d already quit. He and Santi were caught sleeping on their lunch breaks and weren’t able to defend themselves. So when they fired Danilo on the spot, Santi just never returned. He knew a kid that he had been in school with before the revolution who had quit two different jobs in one day. Norlan was not going to be like that. He would still make it out, even if it meant subverting the company that had made it possible to feed his family after Yelba had gone. Marbelys had refused to use any of the cash that had made it into the country in those early months after Yelba left with Francis. That money was buried in a cigar box under the lemon tree for the babies, if there was still school to be had after all this was over. But since the Contras had taken over, that had all dried up, and the rest was up to Norlan.

He had grown increasingly disenchanted with the work Congranja had been doing in Managua. It had now been seven years since he had started working at Congranja and the newness and excitement of the possibility had long worn off. He had done his work when needed for the higher-ups. Showing them around the plant and back to the city. But Francis had stopped sending people to see when the fighting got more serious. So he mainly showed them around the plant only. Then that too eventually ceased. When there was no one left for him to show around, no Americans to come visit whose only job was to be suitably impressed with the work they were doing, the progress they were making, he started doing manual labor. Just like everyone else. Just like Danilo and Santi. It had been at least two years since he had last practiced his English

and his hand-shaking with any other Americans. Six years since he had seen Francis, seven since he had seen Yelba.

He dropped out of school because it was too dangerous to make the trips as a student because everyone past the age of seventeen was supposed to be a soldier.

The weekly treks to the dump had started three weeks ago, and he had not seen any significant difference in his ability to work. He actually felt more capable, more alert at work. Felt like he had more energy.

And now he was running. His feet ached. His lungs burned. If they could only make it to the gates of the *chureca* then the *guardia* would stop the chase. There was just too much to do in the dump that the guardsmen couldn't manage. At every turn, they could arrest, prosecute, beat up anybody. The task was so overwhelming, they just as soon allowed the lawlessness to take place in that contained place, then go in and confront all the lawlessness elsewhere. The criminals knew that the *guardia* had enough of that to deal with on the outside. And they counted on the refuge of the dump.

The stench reached them long before they ever saw the gates. Nicaragua didn't have any sewer systems, any method for dealing with waste. Or rather it used to, but no longer could. In Managua, there were several levels of poverty. No one was extremely rich, unless they had been employed by the state. Well, by the United States. But since the Contras had come into power, since the United States had become more involved in their dispatch and quelling the revolutionaries, the poverty had become more and more widespread. Where before the Bojorge's had always been able to distinguish themselves from the bottom-feeders, those who lived in the dump, by their running water, now there was no system in place. There was no sewage or water systems. It was one way the

Contras had any leverage. If there were to be peasants and poor continually running off into the forests to join the revolutionaries, then the government would starve their families while the men were away. If it had ever occurred to Norlan to join the uprising, the idea left him as soon as he had a look at his little sister, Marcela. He had heard rumors of rapes of girls in his village, younger than Marcela. And he wasn't going to leave his family prey to that possibility. It wasn't much easier staying here fighting in the only way that they could. Trying not to starve. Trying to still pay for their things. Pay for their food. And that was revolutionary enough. All around him the opposite of things became the Truth, the line separating good from bad became more and more blurred.

A truck carrying what smelled like this week's fish wastes trundled by them, tossing up Santi's curls, making him look toddlerish. He tossed his head back over his shoulder for a look at the policemen.

"I can't believe your ass ain't tired yet, chickenshit." Norlan was the most fit of all three and he was still sucking wind.

Danilo tripped and started a hard roll down the hill just before the gates, his flailing arms and feet resembling more the blades of a children's pinwheel than anything human in nature. The dump was built on a steep incline. It was said it had been started by the shores of Lake Managua because it was the lowest part of the city, some thirty feet below sea level, and it had just been added to and added to. Through earthquakes and the largest hurricane in the twentieth century, the refuse rose steadily against the sky. It had begun to rival even the great heights of Managua's triplet volcanoes, over one thousand feet. It was the subtle slope of this incline built on the wastes, the trash of others' that had been dead and gone long before them, that Danilo now took his tumble.

Finally the *guardia* began to let up. They weren't keeping time with the younger kids. But still, Norlan and Santi couldn't afford to stop and help Danilo. He'd either make it or not, but if they stopped, they'd surely all be caught. Norlan glanced over his shoulder again at Danilo who had finally come to a stop at the bottom of the hill.

The *guardia* stopped behind them and fired their machine guns into the air.

Danilo shouted something back to Norlan and Santi.

"Get up you dog. They've stopped. You can still- ." Norlan couldn't finish yelling the sentence. He was long out of breath. He and Santi reached the dump and bent at their waists to heave more effectively and dramatically. Danilo made it close behind and bopped both of them with a closed fist on their craniums.

"Some asses you both are." Danilo nursed both his knees that were now exposed through ragged holes in his pants. Blood seeped into denim.

"Aye, mammy. Did you hurt yourself?"

"To hell with you." They were safe in the dump. Santi started them on their search, looking for anything that could distract them. Even then, when they started digging through the trash, scavenging for release, Norlan was still holding out hope. Still thinking maybe, if he could hold on for just a little while more, maybe things could change.

Ext. On the tarmac – Morning

Will would remember his first visit to the place where his mother had grown up, the place from which she was unfastened, the arena in which his mind and his soul would do battle, by the light of a dueling sun and moon. When he arrived on the tarmac, the sun had begun its fiery ascent despite an obdurate moon refusing displacement high in the sky. He had come to find out about his mother. Not out of any particularly burning desire to know, but because it seemed like this not knowing was something he lacked. And, because he couldn't sense a lack of anything else in his life, he came to fill the only void he could define. At age twenty-six, he pretty much had everything already. And despite, or more precisely, because of this, he had grown disillusioned. He didn't know if he'd find it here. But he was here, in Managua, searching for that which could not be defined, and the satellite and its sun mocked his polarity. Looking up at this strange duality, he couldn't help feeling vaguely secure in this falling into obscurity fitting nicely with the image of reckless individuality and due nonchalance he'd left in the city. With Arri. What had led him to this place: a turbid need to do, to be somewhere else – and really he wasn't especially compelled to define it any more clearly, any time soon.

His pack was heavy. He had carried his Chaplin biographies. Figueres' journal. He had thrown in two pairs of pants, some shirts, and as much literature on film as he could cram in there. And he brought his camera he'd purchased on a passing fancy at the height of his script-doctoring career. Even before he knew what he was wanting, his wanting was fighting against him in the form of strange compulsions that he had been able to dismiss as the capriciousness of having one's own money to blow and the comfort of knowing that there was plenty more to be coming.

He carried the North Face backpack on his back, misshapen because of too many books and not enough clothes. The backpack itself was another symbol of this same thing. Another yuppie escapist planning to move to the Appalachians and, gee, he didn't know, like, buy an old school bus, strip out all the seats, and start a river rafting-kayak-tubing place during the summer months. Shit in the woods and warm hands over a wood-burning stove munching granola and drinking soy. Because you can't be without soy and access to eggplant and kale to accompany the wild Lamb's Quarters greens. Carrying all of this down the road, he existed as his own carefully constructed cliché. No one else to blame.

The directions he had pieced together, as far as he could tell, were simple. And now, after leaving the airport, he realized not only how cliché his life had become, his deciding to leave Arri and his home, his life, but also he had realized how naïve he had been. Why are you never careful with those things that are crucial and important, and so worried over the things that end up mattering little?

Will was more than a little nervous on the walk – a sensation he hadn't felt in a very long time. He knew that despite his darker hair that he had inherited from his mother, he still stuck out as an Other, as American. What work he had done convincing himself in his preparations for the trip, his careful selection of clothing without branding, his unkempt hair, the decision to grow his dark full beard – the only other time he had done so was when he was an angry drama student who wore nothing but black turtlenecks, who lost forty pounds for certain roles, but really just liked pushing his body to the limits. For his final production, he had been cast as the eccentric old family servant in *The Cherry Orchard* who talked only of the good ol' days before the serfs were

freed and before aristocratic blood had been compromised by radical ideas and the mixing of classes. He had been scolded for inserting irony into his catchphrase line, “I’m such a sillybilly.” “It’s supposed to be a comedy, Will. You’re the comic relief in all this. Lighten up.” Will to this day remained unconvinced that Chekhov’s last play would have been devoid of any irony at all. He’d kept the beard through the humid summer, before he’d gone to the liberal arts school up north where everyone would have beards and long hair that reeked of poignancy and seriousness. Then he cut it. And had never grown it again, until now. He was still self-conscious of it. Touched and tugged at it a little too often.

He was feeling this awareness of himself intensely as the world around him opened up. The heavens had the greenish color of tornado skies and were knotty like the trunks of very old trees. He wondered if it was the result of the weather, or just the quality of the dusk light here. There were so many emotions running high in him that he couldn’t determine which parts were fear, anxiety, anticipation; he could not tell if there was not some greed still mixed in with it all.

Will pulled out of his pack a bottle of water that he’d bought at the airport and took a long drink, hoping perhaps the water would bestow on him some kind of orientation. Some sense of direction.

He had begun corresponding with Marbelys long before he had decided to come here. He couldn’t write in Spanish very well and so the letters were short and often probably incomprehensible. And now two of the letters he had received weeks before he had headed south served as the only directions he had to get from the airport to the place where he would be living. He felt certain he was the dumbest man he’d ever known.

The air was heavy as it bumped and whirled comic-book style off the cars bleating by him on the highway. It tangled his curls and raced past him. He felt in some ways like it. Like that nothingness that got swept through and compelled. And then dissipated. Not autonomous. Only acted upon, wispy and unconnected. He could be it. Ride along with it. Without sense of where and when it should be going. The sun passed over the horizon of the not-so-distant peaks. He hadn't expected Nicaragua to be so mountainous. Flying in he was shocked by its greenness too. But in the lengthening shadows, the heat still hung heavy. Though he wasn't sure how long he had been walking, he was out of breath. He was looking for a house with a dog, some chickens, and a chainlink fence. Marbelys had written they had one lemon tree and a metal archway over the chained fenced that had a big light on it. That and that it was two or so kilometers from the airport was all he knew about the house. Which direction from the airport, he either couldn't remember or he had never been told.

Ext. A la chureca, 1984 – Continuous

The cops had long since gone. Norlan and Santi had taken sweaty, smelly refuge in the very small shop of a family friend, Gisella. Danilo had disappeared into the dump. In the middle of the heap, the refugees had established their own fully operational village. They had transport on the back of garbage trucks. Or, if you had the right flavor booze, you could hitch a ride from the old men with their older mules within the confines of the dump. Families had set up towns on one side of the heap, and groups of families, extended, on the other side, quietly waged little wars against the northies for their supposed tarp-stealing and siding-hording. Opportunists, like Gisella, made more money than she ever had when her shop was located in the city center's market. She still received her shipments in the market place, and maintained a fruit stand there, but her permanent cash crop grew in the dump. She sold everything from barrettes to pencils, candies to band-aids. And that didn't even count the cigarettes and beer she sold under the table. Santi and Norlan had been enlisted on more than one occasion to help transport the shipments from her fruitstand into the dump under the cover of darkness. (If the Sandinistas had ever found out the government wasn't getting its cut and wasn't getting its cut no less by supporting the riff-raff of the *chureca*, she'd be disappeared for certain. Once the Contras moved in, though, once things got serious, when the airport closed and all construction had ceased, Marbelys told Gisella neither she nor any of her kin would have anything to do with the black market.

Yelba and Marbelys had operated in absolutes. Norlan could see, when Marbelys couldn't, that people didn't always have the luxury of moral absolutes. Their decisions had become about survival. In this time, you didn't know from one second to the next

what group was going to be in charge or what they wanted. Even Santi, in his very own dumb, oblivious way, knew somewhere that though the ideals of the Sandinistas in the beginning were well-placed, what they had done had been doing since wasn't wholly necessary. The things they were doing, in the name of revolution hadn't brought Nicaragua to a place that was any better than where she had been before with the Somozas. But like Gisella, this life was the only way he knew how to survive. They were all refugees from the only life fighting had left for them.

“You are good for nothing. All of you. I've been telling and telling this to Marbelys and she won't hear it. What's you doing now, huh? What you want? The police come in here, and find you two shitbirds here, what they going to do to me?”

The boys stared at her blankfaced. Santi had picked up a weed and began to nibble the roots. The end was already soggy from his work.

Norlan knew her anger would pass. She loved them. It didn't stop her from lecturing them. “Norlan. If you're not going to fight –”

“Gisella, I told you –”

“He won't fight because he's a pussy.” Gisella smacked him.

“You watch your language in here, shitbird. You do the wrong kind of fighting. No. No. You the one who's always high. Who is this Norlan?” She liked to pretend she'd never met him. “Why you hanging out with him? Where's Danilo?”

“Ah, ma...”

“No you listen to me, young man. I know Marbelys doesn't want you to fight... but my boys. Why should they have to do it on their own? They're no good either. We

need you. We need people who are smart, who can fix this situation. So we don't have to do this anymore."

"If I go fight, what's gonna happen right now. To Marbelys. To Marcela. To my family. It's not so simple. Plus. I don't go to school. I want to go to college."

"You're an ass, man." Santiago hadn't yet learned. Gisella slugged him again. This time square in the solar plexus. Santiago sucked air.

"You never going to have college here again unless we get out of this."

"My uncle is gone. Your son is gone. The Sandinistas are doing the best they can. It'll get better. In the meantime, my ma's got to eat. You have to eat. We have to survive. I don't see how my going into the mountains to fight those god damned Hondurans and those god damned traitors is going to make much difference."

Santiago and Danilo, older than Norlan, had both been conscripted. They were drafted to join the National Guard under Somoza. Then during the rebellion that started a month after Congranja broke ground, Sandinistas stormed the palace and the Congress forced Somoza into exile and effectively took over. Which, at the moment, had seemed like a great idea. Now, years later, not much progress had been made. The university in Managua had shut down. All the libraries. The airport had been destroyed. Yes, it was true, in many ways it was good not to be ruled by a dictatorial government. To know that Somoza was gone. He was glad to not have to join the national guard. But he was still supposed to join. If not for Congranja and Francis, he'd have had to have joined the Sandinistas after the revolution. They were the same. The Contras and the Sandinistas. Just different uniforms.

Santi curled up like a sleeping dog under the counter, the weed hanging out of his mouth. He stuck his bottom lip out the way he had done when Norlan and he were little boys, cousins and best friends.

Gisella muttered. “You want to know what they’ll do to me. I will tell you. Nothing, they going to do nothing to me. Because I will turn you two in faster than you can chew—” She looked at Santiago. “Spit that shit out your mouth.”

Norlan took off his hat, leaned his head against the scratchy shack walls, and closed his eyes.

It was interesting that Gisella had called them shitbirds because that’s exactly what Gisella reminded Norlan of: one of the big, smelly, ugly trash heap birds that came around the dump to forage and binge alongside the lazy dogs with their distended bellies. Or sometimes landed right on the back of one of the aging cows. He didn’t know how the couple of cows got there, and furthermore, how come no one ever slaughtered them. She had folds of darkened skin like multiple gullets that hadn’t seen the scouring of soap in ages, and on it grew some sort of parasitic skin disease that crackled and flaked like so much cheese that hadn’t been properly salted.

“Spit that out, goddammit,” she nudged Santi with her sandaled foot.

Santi made to step out the front door to give up the weedy remains, reluctantly, when Gisella shrieked at him again.

“Not out the front, fool.” She pulled him by his braid back into the little shack, slamming the half door and locking it. “Out the window there.”

Even that little slam of the half door was enough to waft in another wave of the reeking odor. Norlan didn’t think it possible that the stench, the first time it hit you could

be worse, but inside with the heat and their sweaty bodies, and the dank darkness, with the aluminum roof and siding heating things up, he was newly convinced. It could be worse. He had stopped attending church when he was fourteen because the plant had begun operating on Sunday, only six months after manufacturing had begun in Managua. Then he had just decided to stop going all together. He decided it made more sense for him not to believe than it did to. But he was convinced of the fact, at least, of two things. Yelba had been remarkably right about everything she had ever said to him, which was growing ever more annoying. And, two, if there was a hell, Gisella's shack was it.

A customer walked up to the window, swallowing up what little light it permitted. Norlan crouched under the plywood counter – which he discovered from his vantage point, had been an ad for Coca-Cola at a *pulpería*. Santiago spit out the weed at the tin opening Gisella had called a window. It was more a flap. Sweat collected in Norlan's underwear. It dripped like a faucet into his butt crack. Once, he had taken a hot shower. After he married Yelba, Francis had returned to Managua for a brief visit on his way to Guatemala. He still served as Francis' personal assistant whenever he came into town. Norlan wondered if he would ever come again. Francis had asked him to join him for dinner at the hotel one night. He seemed nervous. He hadn't been able to chat with Norlan as he usually did in his excited too fast American English. He spoke in a whisper. Usually Norlan was the nervous one, not Francis. Francis ordered for both of them. They ate. Then Francis explained that he wanted Norlan to come up to his room and take a hot shower. He had said it was one of the things Yelba had wanted for Francis, for the family. That they could have hot water. It was really Yelba's request. Francis gave him

the room key. Norlan had thought it a strange offer, especially with Francis' nervousness, but had complied because of lure of the strange luxury of hot water.

When he turned on the shower on and the steam sneaked past the curtain, he thought about the fish soup his mother made on special occasions. How the meat turned pink and then white as it boiled. Francis had waited outside the room in the lobby, in quiet expectation, with a silly grin on his face as Norlan reappeared fresh and sweaty.

It was a night of firsts. Lobster and a hot shower.

Norlan stood up and kissed his aunt on the cheek, careful to breathe through his mouth.

"Where you going?" Santi didn't make a move.

"To see how dead Danilo is." Norlan left, without turning around.

"We should be so lucky," Gisella said. "When you find him, tell him he's a worthless shitbird good for nothing."

Danilo would be fine, Norlan knew. He always was. Norlan just needed an excuse to leave. He'd walk home by himself.

Int. Marbelys' house – Dreaming in waking life

Will understood Spanish better than he could speak it or write it, but when Marbelys sat across from him, it seemed to be another language altogether that she spoke, different from the calming lyricism he had heard as a child from his mother. Somehow, he had made it to the house. Everything blurred after he changed directions, walked past the airport and gone for what seemed like two kilometers. But how the hell did he know? All that he knew now was that he was sitting across the table from her looking out over a yard that did in fact contain a lemon tree and a metal archway with a big light.

He wasn't well, to be sure, and that must be affecting his hearing. There was this odd movement in her voice. It wasn't quite synching with the images his brain was playing back to him. She had this gravel that bounced along from word to word that affected her language. It would catch in her voice somewhere, and she'd hiccup over it but in that catch, that little moment when the rhythm of her voice slowed, Will felt her speak the words directly into him. It was the moment when speakers of second languages accomplish hearing without having to translate. Your brain no longer has to go through the process of hearing each word, converting it into your native tongue, then comprehending it all in order. It was that moment when you just hear the language and it makes sense. And, it was more than that. It was supernatural.

When Francis was growing up, Yelba had used Spanish as capital. He loved his mother for her secrets in Spanish. At night, when Yelba tucked Will into bed, after his father had already put himself to bed, she prayed over him in Spanish. Will understood every word. Every passionate word. And they never spoke of it to his father. Francis never knew that Will and his mother communicated in Spanish, as it would have killed

him. But she knew, Will believed, that Will's father had tried to change her too much. He had pulled the Nica out of her.

Somewhere in the weathered folds of Marbelys' sun-hardened face there was energy. It came out of her, puss and blood, so much life lived and instantly accessible to Will, because she had willed it.

"En mi sueño, Will. En mi sueño..."

Marbelys was explaining a dream she had had. He wasn't sure how the conversation started. He just sat down, put his bags on the dirt floor next to an old table and began listening to Marbelys. After, she had hugged him to her. Close and tight for what seemed like ages.

Apparently Will had come along with an angel. She mentioned Gabriel – he figured she was talking about the angel. He walked in with the angel and threw up – *vomitó*. And in her dream, all the little pieces of vomit became instead a spider's web and glistened there on the floor where the vomit had been. It had been completely dark in the room, only the light of the moon had shone, but not onto the ground. If she could have managed to find the moon in the darkness, she said, she would have seen the moon's shape. But instead there was only light from the moon, but not the moon itself. He felt as though she were speaking the words directly into his brain. The rest of his body felt light, airy.

He and Gabriel came into her dream. She said they had the same quality of moonlight within themselves. Maybe he was losing something in the translation. Still everything else was dark. Here she paused strangely. He couldn't continue to watch. He felt self-conscious, but he couldn't help staring at her. She appeared helpless, vulnerable,

like she needed something from him – he didn't know what to do, where to look. He didn't want for the idea of her to change to him. She had appeared so immutable and for her to waiver now... it was unnatural. She placed a cup of hot coffee in front of him.

In this moment here in this kitchen, which had nothing more than a refrigerator, a smaller work table that held an old aluminum coffee pot and a squash, he felt heat encompassing his body, starting in his very bowels. Yes, he was definitely sick. He tried his best to continue listening, but was so distracted by the strange sensations, he couldn't help but observe all the nuances of his sickness. He felt as if he were conducting energy out of the air, from her speech, from her lips. He felt it as it led from his fingers through the table into her fingers into her cup set into the saucer. He didn't know if it was his occupying himself with something other than Marbelys' mythical commanding of him, or the incredible heat, but he felt as though he could see the movement of her words through her body and into the grains of the old forgotten trees of the table, like blood in the veins of her hands that sweated there. He drank them with his coffee.

The kitchen area was roofed with a piece of thin siding – only large enough to cover the table. The kitchen's preparation area, sink, and washboard were left exposed. And as rain started to come down, it made strange patterns in a bright green bar of soap there on the washboard.

When Will turned away from the soap and back to Marbelys's face, he saw tears from this woman, but also he saw his own mother. Had she given him drugs for his sickness? He had swallowed a pill. Maybe he was having some allergic reaction to the malaria medicine he had taken the day before.

He allowed himself to get lost in her again. She seemed to be sustained by her own tears. It was as if her tears propelled her. Replenished, she continued her story – telling him her dream. And despite his discomfort, he couldn't bear to look anywhere but her ice grey eyes. Marbelys explained about how Will and Gabriel had come into his life, she believed to give her back her dead Yelba. She could finally have her back again. In the rain, the bright green soap, the beans sizzling in the crock fire-dampened by the October rains, Yelba came.

“*Y Norlan, también,*” she mumbled.

“Norlan? What do you mean?” He had heard of his mother's brother before, but he wasn't sure how Norlan made it into Marbelys' dream. Yelba had only spoke of her brother once in passing. He had heard her praying. Marbelys explained that the angel and Will had brought them. Their leaving was the biggest failure of her life. She had lost her children to a beast she had grown too weak to fight. And that was the end of her dream. She knew at that moment that her baby was dead.

The next thing Will remembered was Marbelys picking him up under the armpits and directing him past a flimsy plywood door to a squeaky cot. And then a cool seemingly disembodied hand felt like the weight of the world as it rested on his forehead. Then he began to dream *los sueños nicaragienses*.

Yelba died in her sleep when Will was fourteen years old. She just never woke up. Will woke up, went down for some cereal. Clanked about in the kitchen. Rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Nobody else was making much noise. He had to be in school in twenty

minutes, and his parents had yet to do their newspaper, toast, orange juice, and coffee. He called out to her, “Mama,” with the emphasis on the long *a* of the second syllable, just to piss off his father. After munching some cereal, he wandered into his parents’ room. His father sat in the large walnut chair in the corner. About fifteen feet from the bed, staring. Straight at her. Eyes closed, still on her side, clutching the sheets between her slender fingers. Will could still see the light dark light dark of the mini-blind’s slats cutting the brightness of the sun into perfect patterns on the plush pile of the carpet and the down comforter.

“Come here, Will,” he had said, strangely unmoving, “Come here babe.”

The “babe” still haunted him somehow. His mother would have said it all day long, but his father had never called him anything other than Will, as far back as he could remember. He just stared ahead. Will climbed onto the bed next to her. Touched her arm a little, then pulled it back. Then he left the room.

Will had noticed the hairy spider several times before when he’d come in to force what he could from his bowels. He’d shoo it off, and it’d crawl back into the hole, into the unknown darkness. He nursed a vague worry that it might crawl back out while he was sitting on the hole and do whatever it is that spiders do to people sitting on, what could only be described as, a hole in the ground. But he’d sit anyway, and worry gave way to intense pain. In the few days since he’d been there, he’d probably seen the spider eight or nine times somewhere in the vicinity of the toilet. Here on the ground, the spider

looked bigger. Hairier. More threatening. He felt like he was intruding on its territory. Were spiders like dogs? Did they have territories, domiciles that needed protecting?

Will wasn't entirely sure how long he had been lying on the dirt floor. It seemed that in addition to this evacuating everything that had ever existed in his bowels along with his bowels, he had also contracted some parasitic mind warp that overtook his dreams. Either way, it was impossible to tell how long he had been bowing before the hole in the ground. Retching and retching. He heard, though he couldn't be sure if this was dream or reality, the grating screech of the shower curtain being pulled back, though there was no shower in here, only the bathroom. Simply a hole cut into the ground with a bench built over it. In and out of consciousness, he preferred the waking. For he was aware of his surroundings in this state. Of his discomfort. Of his feeling. He didn't fear dying. Never thought he was dehydrated that severely. People didn't die from some silly Central American diseases; they were just something to put gringos in their places. Not really to kill them off. But in the dreaming, he was no longer sure of any of this. His dreams were strange because in all of them, he was mentally very active. He considered his next move with precision and crisp logic. In this dream, staring at this spider, he wondered whether or not he should actually talk to the spider. Would the spider be upset that he was interfering? Would the spider run, scared of Will's aura of power and hubris? After all, he had reasoned, he had come in here unwanted, unannounced. What the fuck. He'd ask him.

"Excuse me." Again this is one of the characteristics of the dreaming. Quiet deliberation. Politeness to things, like spiders.

“Fuck off, man,” quipped the spider.

Ext. In the shade outside Marbelys' bathroom – That night

“Marbelys, Marbelys, I’m fine. Really. No, no doctor. *No es necesario.*”

Marbelys pulled Will out of the bathroom and into the moonlight, like he was just another sack of beans. Through the dirt and chicken shit, the baby chicks getting chewed by ants, she dragged him, a trail de Will connecting the well-trod path from toilet to open yard. Marbelys had insisted on putting Will up in the fresh air, as opposed to the little cot he’d been sleeping on in the back shed. She set up the cot that the family used for drying out the rice before cooking it. Two days ago, he’d seen one of the kids expertly spread the grains across the tightly woven netting pulled taut between two stands. At first, he’d felt embarrassed having the position of privilege, being the American come here to dabble in third-world living, and now he’s sleeping on the rice-dryer? But going on the fourth day of his sickness, he came to appreciate the set-up. At night, between waves of nausea, crippling pain, and some of the most severe itching he ever felt in his life, he found brief and shining moments of clarity beneath the night’s sky, when the moon shone its spidered light.

Int. Marbelys' house, 1984 – Around midnight

Danilo pounded on the wall of Norlan's bedroom. On the same road as the airport, their house backed up to another dirt street that led to where their church had been. The church had been taken over two years ago by the Sandinistas as a local meeting place. Danilo sometimes dropped by waking Norlan to come drink with them when their meetings were through. Now that the real fighting was over, they had guns and nothing to do. So Danilo and Santi would terrorize people suspected of being Contras. When only five years ago, the situation was reversed.

“Wake up.” More pounding.

Norlan sat straight up, immediately worried. Rumors abounded about people being disappeared in the middle of the night. The *guardia* finding Sandinistas. Sandinistas finding former *guardia*.

“Wake up, shitbird.” More pounding.

“Stupid jackass. What do you want?”

“Get up. We're going somewhere.”

“You're fucking crazy, man.” Norlan stood up on his bed to peek through the cinderblocks at the top of the wall where the light came through. The bedsprings creaked. He froze and listened for the snoring of his great-cousin who had been kicked out of his house yet again. One of Marbelys' cousins. Norlan hardly slept when he was here. With the snoring still indicating the deep uninterrupted sleep of the incredibly drunk, he checked to see that it was just Santi and Danilo and nobody else.

“Come off it, man. Get dressed,” Santi said.

Santi added, “It's only us, man.”

Norlan found his pants and a shirt, and fumbled towards the back door.

Outside Santi told Norlan to hop on the back of his bike. Danilo rode his own and the three of them pedaled through the back alleys, past the old church, where they had just had a meeting. Probably just to get high. The Sandinistas often got good weed, one of the perks of conscription. Between that, the gun, and the occasional shoe glue at the dump, Santi was always high.

They got on the main road.

“Where are we going?”

“We’re celebrating *el Día de los Muertos* early.”

They pedaled up a steep hill, and though it was well past midnight, they had gone into the national park. Managua still had a curfew, and because it was a national park, this was technically considered Managua and not Tipitapa, where curfew didn’t matter. Santi was harmless. But the trouble was Danilo. Since he had joined the Sandinistas, he had gotten dumber. And more reckless. Norlan usually agreed to come on these stupid excursions if only to watch out for the older but careless Santi.

They parked their bikes and carried them off the trail to enter the park. It had to have been Danilo’s idea to come up to Mombacho. To see who could stand it longer. They hiked, chilled in the breeze, towards the volcano. Norlan couldn’t help but feel butterflies deep in his stomach. The steam from the volcano began to rise over the vista in the moonlight. Danilo carried his pack strapped to his front like a baby. He pulled out some candles and a lighter and passed them around. Catholic missionaries in the new world had been drawn to the volcanoes feeling that the steam they emitted had healing powers that came straight from the creator. Even Marbelys, when their dad had been

sick, had asked Norlan and Yelba to come up here to trap some of the steam and bring it back for him. One of the missionaries that came with the priest, Barbarossa, had fallen into the hole. The path was mapped and the vista was named in Barbarossa's honor.

The boys carried the candles through the brush. The crosses of the missionaries, probably two-stories tall, rose in the distance against the steam. A couple of crows slept on one cross' horizontal crossbar.

Danilo started singing, "Barbarossa, Barbarossa, why do you fall?"

Santi joined in, "Barbarossa, you are death. You are us all."

"Shush." Norlan was not feeling a part of this mood. "We must pay our respects or Santa B will haunt us the rest of the year." He was not too old to get into the spirit of *el Día de los Muertos*, but too old to get spooked. Danilo pulled out three black robes. The school-day song was still echoing in Norlan's head when they reached the summit, in the shadow of the crosses. They peered over the edge of the volcano. Santi yelled into the hole a big loud primal shout. Norlan joined in. His voice blew out his candle. He sat cross-legged at the edge. In the darkness. The volcano's steam reflected the light of the moon and had its own sickly green glow.

They all put on their hoods for the parade tomorrow – all the teenage boys wore them –through Tipitapa. Santi brought the masks. Santi and Danilo looked wicked in the eerie light, especially Santi. A strange shadow was cast by the frames of his glasses: angry eyebrows. The boys donned their masks. The last two candles were blown out. They sat there. Suddenly restless. The crows on the cross were sleeping.

Danilo rifled through his pack. Santi began humming again. Norlan thought about the steam they had brought back in the glass jar. Could have been the same glass

jar his father had used to catch turquoise butterflies when he and Yelba were little. Could have been the same jar. The butterflies died. And his dad too.

Danilo walked closer to the edge. Santi stopped humming. “What are you doing man?” Danilo was carrying something out in front of him. With both hands. Norlan couldn’t quite make it out. Then he saw light from the spark as Danilo fired a pistol into the volcano’s mouth.

“What the fuck?” What are you doing?” Santi was frozen.

Norlan couldn’t quite explain it. He didn’t know why, but rather than to stay and find out, he took off.

Danilo called after him, “Norlan I just wanted to fire it. Come back little baby. It was for Barbarossa.”

Will, dear.

This will most likely be the only letter I will ever write to you. I put it off for, god, a year since you left... until the time I waited to write it had exceeded the time we actually had together – those ten months. I haven't written in that time (that is not to say that I haven't composed this letter over and over again in my head. On the train. Sitting across the table from someone who is not you. No, that is not to say that at all.) because I needed time to think.

I'm running around crazy, but as I am sure you know, this sort of mindless scurrying on which I have always thrived offers the opportunity to escape the unanswerable questions of my life. I am doing things that I enjoy. Don't laugh, but I have devoted myself entirely to pro bono work. (I can see you rolling your eyes, and at times I sometimes balk at the trajectory of my life that more often than not feels like someone else's.) I am maybe not entirely where I want to be, but I realize it is where I need to be. And I may have found even the smallest bit of comfort, dare I say, satisfaction in that. Mostly the free time I have is in transit, late at night, when there are no throngs for me to entertain. No blind admirers, as you so sweetly called them. I have to catch the 11:41 train back to home from work (yes, I have to go that far to find the people who need me for free) which gets me here about one in the morning. So I spend most of that time thinking, composing these imaginary letters, trying to order my life, to make sense of things. Breathing. Watching the city speed faster past me now. I used to imagine I moved faster than it. Maybe that's a signal that I'm growing up? Oh Christ.

I spent last weekend at home in Ohio. It was the first time I had seen my parents since I moved to the city. Seems like a lifetime ago. Time seems to expand with

experience, you'd say.

So, sitting here on this train, for no other reason than it's generally what I think about when I can't busy myself with the mundane, I'm thinking about what happened. I'm thinking about you and how you left. Your final? words about home were curious on two levels for me. One, I know now that I should return home frequently to get a measure of my life and to remember that there are places and people that can hold all the meaning we need in the world. Two, I wonder what you have found. And I wonder if in all this time you'll spend searching through the past, you'll forget to live here in the present. Silly aphorism, you say? God, Will. You're not here. You're gone from my life. And I still anticipate what your responses to me would be.

I know that my time here like anywhere is limited. Some time this summer I will be able to spend more than a weekend with my family and try to do some of the things that I cannot do while working. Spend a portion of my summer time lounging in the backyard on a rickety hammock. Drinking and cooking and being lazy. Which I did last weekend, and I look forward to again. Sure Evelyn generally pisses me off and impels me to madness on most evenings across the Trivial Pursuit board. Paddy sweetly puts up with her and acts very much like a happy puppy when I return home. (Jesús is not, unfortunately welcome at the house. He is still happy, but shows his happiness by peeing, and this would be too much for Evelyn to take on her ecru double-pile carpets. He stays in the city with a friend. Yes. A friend.) No one says anything about Thomas. For me that is home.

And now I get to the part I've written over and over again in my head. Whether or not I feel most of this these days, still, I haven't decided. But I do know I must write it.

Not for you, because who fucking cares about that, but for me:

Most of what you said pissed me off. Your distance. Your isolation. It's infuriating. Mostly because I don't know where the fuck it comes from. It threw me off that fall, that October, on top of the building, when I first noticed it, and it certainly threw me off as it grew and manifested itself in a way that bordered on masochism. Your need for solitude is in direct opposition to your need to be understood, to belong, to be among people who are listening to the world. Who have their ears to the ground and know that the earth spins and that time is as fragile as people. You have distanced yourself from that again and again and I don't know the reason for it. I don't think you do either. I imagine you're happy in your independence. You condemn me, and always have, even before you started to say it aloud with your eyes, you condemn me for needing hands to hold. But you know what? It means I'm not much alone. And for better or worse, I'm okay with that choice for me and my life. That is the whole point. Faith is not some ethereal, intangible idea. It is born of the people around us. Of our history. Of our experience. Certainly things get complicated. In all the mess we have around us, we lose the way. Lose the momentum forward, but no circumstance is that fucking complicated.

(deep breath)

Paragraph two: It is True. Finally, "when all was said and done," as you put it before leaving, we probably never would have worked. But that doesn't mean that we could not extricate ourselves from that past. It just means that we no longer had the will to. If you do not have the will to extricate yourself from the world you live in, the world you've created in your mind, then I understand that. But I don't think that is the case. I

say it mostly out of anger and frustration, but that is something I choose not to help, because I spent too much fucking time trying to not say what was on my mind.

(almost finished)

Paragraph three: I don't know what I can offer you because I don't know what capacity I possess to do anything for you anymore. But you need to know that your self-imposed exile can end when you choose it to. You may be drowning, but so are we all. No one is getting out unscathed. We will all hurt for living, but masochism is something I know more about than I care to admit, and I have spent a great deal of time coming to the realization that I will hurt whether I want to or not. I need to do nothing to exacerbate the pain. It will come and when it does I know that I will be armored with those I love around me. You don't need me; you don't need anyone probably. But it's okay to want someone around. I guess it's okay to need people too. I have never found any fault in needing or wanting to be around people I care about.

There. That's it.

Ar.

Ext. Outside Barbarossa park, 1984 – That same night

It felt good to be running. His mask flipped off his head somewhere on the way down the trail. The downhill slope made him run faster. Any minute he would either fall all the way to the bottom or else fly. The pistol's report bouncing off the walls of the volcano, echoed in his mind. He saw the wings of the turquoise butterflies they had chased, outlined in black. He thought about Francis and air conditioning and his sister. He tripped over his cloak, and stumbled, catching himself for a moment, then lost hold. He went head over first. His feet were above him, then below him, then he was flat on his back sliding another ten feet. He got up, pulled his cloak off and kept running. He didn't have to get up early for the bus to work tomorrow, which was a good thing because he'd be in bad shape after this night. But he didn't want to hang around the house all day either. With everyone else. Everyone but Yelba. He hit the road, and didn't stop for the bikes because they weren't his anyway. Lately he had been growing apart from Santi and Danilo. And it was hard because he didn't want them ratting on him, or exposing him. If he wasn't a Sandinista, then to Sandinistas, he was a threat. But he wasn't a part of the *guardia* either. He didn't fit anywhere. He didn't think they'd rat on him. Not Santi and Danilo. They wouldn't do that. But he feared what their friends might do. What the others might think. They were suspicious of him anyway, for they knew he had some direct ties to that company who had started building here under Somoza, even though Congranja had begged they wanted to stay out of politics altogether. They just wanted to be able to employ Nicaraguans who needed jobs and pay them reasonable wages. Feed their families, no matter who was in positions of power. At least tomorrow, in the parade, he could march as one of the faceless.

Norlan had finally stopped running. The last *Día de los Muertos* they had celebrated with his father, Yelba had woken early in the morning and began work on the costumes. She had made elaborate robes the week before, with red and gold brocade stitched to the edges. She had gone to a corner of the yard and soaked the dirt in water left over from the washing. She must have dug for twenty minutes to get to dirt that dark. She had spread the mud all over her face and then sneaked into the room to wake Norlan. He had been only nine and Marbelys reamed her good for scaring him. Norlan had cried and cried until Yelba washed her face and came in to show him she had returned to life and was indeed his older sister. She had tickled him then, until he began laughing uncontrollably, saying she couldn't stand to have her little bird mad at him. That afternoon at dusk she had painted a white ring around his mouth with water and flour and covered the rest in the same mud. The whole town went down to the cemetery to trick the spirits of the dead to come out and commune with them. People threw them candy and little toys as they paraded with candles through the town's center, a mass of children wearing the faces of the dead.

Ext. Walking into Managua – Daybreak

Will had been here for five days, sick, disconnected and in some dreamworld where Marbelys told him stories he had heard before. On the sixth day, he emerged from the house, clanked the chain-link gate shut, and walked out to the street hoping to find something new, something to do. He knew a couple of things, but lots of things he didn't know. Things he would probably never know. He wanted to find out what happened to Norlan. He couldn't be for Marbelys what she was missing. He didn't want to go back. For a long time. Maybe not ever.

The streets were crowded. Crowded. Kids in navy skirts with newly shined shoes. Running to catch buses. Walking down the streets to school. Two coins of denominations he didn't quite understand clinked in his pocket. He flipped one of the heavy gold and silver coins between two fingers, over the top of his index and then catching it with the middle, passed it under the third and back to the index. It was a trick he had learned in high school debate. Whenever they got nervous, their teacher made them distract their fingers in their pockets with pens or coins or something. Something to temper the reeling of his mind. It had proved exceptionally helpful during extemp. But now, no amount of the quick-witted bull-shitting could help him get through these days. And he was at once glad for and terribly afraid of his new safety-netlessness.

Marbelys had given him the coins, despite his protestations, to board the bus and get into downtown Managua to peruse the city's market. But Will had different plans. And they didn't involve sightseeing. He wasn't sure where the bus would take him. Many of the people were in fact too poor to even afford the meager fare for the buses that Marbelys had doled out so generously. Transportation on foot would do for the day.

He approached a crowd that had been gathering off the side of the road in a place clearly trampled in this style many times before. They were divided into four groups. There were some children, elementary-aged girls, poking one another and giggling. All looked lovingly prepared for school in shiny shoes, knee socks, and lace-collared shirts. Even though the material looked see-through cheap, the girls were tucked in and brushed, like a room freshly prepared for the arrival of houseguests. These girls were closest to the road. Directly to the other side of them, was the equal and opposite group of punching goading boys. Behind these boys were two or three teenagers who carried their backpacks on their fronts, wore their hats with American baseball team logos on their heads backwards, and carried the weight of the future. A fourth and final group of men huddled in the back of the throng. Who knew their stories. It was a whole timeline on a descending scale of hope and promise, disregard and doom. Will wanted not to make assumptions about these people, about how they lived, but in seeing all that he saw, and only in the previous days, he was struck immediately dumb. He wondered what lie ahead of them. What had already been. And every time he got bleeding-heart, he thought about the emptiness he had felt back home, despite all of his comforts. Then his mind would shut down. All that emerged from the circular logic were error messages. Ultimately, he came up with no way to reconcile that him with this him. Or these people – here in the flesh with their lace collars and talking spiders – with the idea of this place that he had imagined. He chided himself again for thinking again like a goddamned American. It seemed pre-programmed that he feel some urge, some unidentifiable desire to take each of the little girls and boys in his arms – the closest he'd ever gotten to fatherly tendencies. He wanted for the rest of the world to disappear. He wanted to start over. With just these

few children. Start over with a clean world. He wasn't so naïve as to think he could raise them all to be super-human world peoplers. It wasn't that epic or sober a thought. It was a flash of moment. A glint of possibility, where suddenly the world was flattened and green. Only these children existed underneath the hot red morning sun. Despite the apocalyptic scene, Will felt comfort. Flash again. And he was amidst the throng making strides to disengage from the mass moving closer to the street.

The bus came up behind him and slammed on its brakes just as it rolled past to pick up the small group of children and adults that had stopped in front of him. Smoggy plumes of dirt and trash avalanched in its wake. The throng pushed and shoved their way onto an already over-crowded bus. A man with a small frame that seemed incapable of sustaining the weight of his portentous belly boarded the bus carrying an all-white pigeon. He pushed past Will to squeeze his way to the front of the pulsing cavities of the heart to board the already overfull bus. The man with the bird boarded, moving Will out of the way – a good thing since Will had no intention to board but had found himself impelled straight to the center of the beating heart – and got on just as the door of the converted school bus was closing. Will watched as the school bus accepted what seemed like the transplantation of thirty more people than should have been its maximum capacity. There was scuffling and readjustments as the man with the bony frame and important belly negotiated the too-small space. His left arm, the one that didn't hold the bird, had to be raised over his head and packed into the space just above a little girl's head standing on the step above him. He twisted around, bumping his right elbow onto the door, just as it closed on the neck of the bird. Immediate blood trickled from the once-live bird onto the window pane of the bus's door.

A wave of nausea. He'd avoided getting on the bus, which he thought was a good thing. But he still had no idea where to go next. He wanted to find out more about Norlan. How big was the city? Where was the plant? It was supposed to be pretty big. How many big American corporations were down here employing over 20,000 people. He walked towards the city's center, not knowing anything about what he would find. Once he got there, he didn't know what he would do. Ask about Norlan. Why would that matter? What could they possibly say to him? What exactly did they want for them to say to him? He walked on.

A stench of decaying flesh found his nose. A dog in some stage of decomposition was bloated on the side of the road. Another wave of nausea. He thought he might vomit, something he had grown considerably accustomed to in the last week, on the side of the road. Right there, just a few feet from the dog. He couldn't hold it down anymore. Thinking about the pigeon, the dog. He vomited the small breakfast of rice and beans Marbelys had made for him.

Of all the things he had brought with him, one item he wasn't embarrassed about packing were the overpriced hiking boots he had purchased – the ones that now had been splashed with his own bile and bits of cheese. In all this walking, despite the blisters, he felt they would be well-worth the purchase. He wondered if he would ever again spend that much money at one time. He walked in the direction of the volcanoes on the horizon for it looked as good as any other direction. And here he needed no better reason.

Ext. Between Masaya and Managua, 1984 – Early hours

Norlan had been walking the rest of the night. Away from home. He really didn't care which way he was going, just not home. He didn't want to deal with Marbelys and her drunk cousin who had taken over his bed. He didn't want to see Danilo and Santi. He walked past house after house. It wasn't yet daybreak, but close. He heard roosters threatening their morning calls. Just scratching around the yards, still a little sleepy too. Norlan wasn't sleepy. He was somewhere in between sleep-deprived and physically exhausted, but not sleepy. He was hungry. He didn't eat much last night. The cost of beans had gone up again. Sandinistas were losing hold of the economy and prices kept increasing, and he kept making the same money. He had been taking less and less, so that Marbelys would not notice the supplies were dwindling. Maybe it would have been better to be Santi and Danilo. No worries. Just to stay a boy when all the around you the world was fucking going to the birds. In some way, it was probably easier. But in the deepest darkest part of him, he thought maybe he could still make it. He hadn't yet asked Francis, if he could go to university. He had missed the last opportunity, when Francis had taken him to dinner that night, he was too scared to ask. He wanted to work for him, for a while. But he knew that when things settled down, he could save and save. Maybe he could save half the sum of the university and Francis could pay the other half, if he promised to work for Congranja again after he graduated. When the boys had come to wake him up, he had not been asleep. He had been dreaming of days of books and studying and, who knows, maybe even a girl. A smart girl at university too.

But since the revolution, nothing had gone as expected. They kept telling people, in their speeches to the churches, that it would have to get worse before it got better, but

that it would get better. They promised they would fix the roads. The blamed the slowness of all the progress on the Somozas and how they couldn't govern until they were sure that every sympathizer, every paid off employee was gone. They were too busy avenging all the deaths of their brothers, to notice the country was poorer, hungrier, and lazier than it had ever been. How much worse did it have to get?

He was lucky. He was still lucky, he kept telling himself. He could go to work. He had a job. He had Congranja.

He picked up a stone and tossed it from hand to hand. A bus passed him and he ran after it, with new energy, flagging it down. It was taking the first few workers to their fields, and probably an equal number of drunk people back to their homes to sleep the holiday, the day of celebration away. The bus slowed.

Norlan ran to catch up with it. Thinking he could make it to one *pulperia* and buy a fifth for his mother. Marbelys only ever drank on November second. It was a tradition. The last couple of years, it had fallen on Norlan to buy the alcohol. She would drink half of it, and pour the other half on his father's grave after placing new artificial flowers on the newly cleaned burial plot. It was all part of the march. Housecleaning.

Norlan boarded and paid his fare. The seats were less packed than he had suspected. Most of the men drunk and old. He sat down next to a harmless man he'd known from church.

“How you going to march like that, hijo? *Qué paso?*”

Norlan realized he must have looked like he'd been in a bar fight. He was dirty, his hands covered in nicks from the fall. “How you going to celebrate like that, borachito?”

Norlan had either hurt the old man's feelings or he had fallen into another stupor. He mumbled a half-hearted and slurred retort back to Norlan: "What's there to celebrate?"

The bus had just got going again when it screeched to a halt. Buses were always breaking down or getting stuck in the potholed roads. Norlan worried how much longer the *pulpería* his uncle Pedro ran would stay open. He would definitely have to close up before the sun came up and it was just peaking over the horizon when a rash of Sandinistas raided the bus like ants out of a hill, angry and frenzied.

W–

I'm mildly appalled at how my last letter would have been received. Which, incidentally, is the only reason I am writing to you again. But, then again, there is some comfort in knowing that I'll never have to read that again – an obvious advantage of actual pen and paper letter writing to email correspondence.

This will most likely be the last letter I'll write.

Where are you this Christmas I wonder?

I've spent the Christmas holidays here in Ohio. I couldn't take the time with Dak and his dad. Maybe it was the tuna noodle casserole. Maybe it was pops and his petting my head every time he walked past a chair that I was sitting in, maybe it was my mother's infernal collection of snowglobes on the same table in the entry hall, and the one she still keeps: Thomas and I were horsing around when Thomas was three–or four tops–and we broke the globe. But Santa still stands there amidst a pile of plastic snow bits that Evelyn seals in a plastic baggie and tapes to the bottom of the pedestal. Maybe it was all of those things.

This Christmas the block on Three Pines Blvd decided on their Christmas theme early. And Evelyn has been planning since September. I have yet to admit to Dak that I'm actually having a good time here. A move you would consider so cliché you'd have already known it was going to come out of my mouth. This year was "A Child's Christmas in Wales," inspired by the Dylan Thomas children's story. (It had been Evelyn's proposal for years. I guess the association finally failed to come up with a better option. She wore them down. I'm not sure, but maybe it had something to do with the thirty-five-page Word document she had notarized outlining the three-month

production and implementation plan. Whatever. It was a glorious success. Each house on the block displayed a page from the book in their front yard along with a scene that depicted the page.

I am somehow thankful for the civic association and their exasperating hoops that kept me busy for at least some of the day (you're never more than a daydream away – even all these years later.) You must think I'm mad.

Ar.

Int. On the bus, 1984 – Just before daybreak

Norlan was still making alternate plans for obtaining the whiskey – maybe from Santi, maybe Santi could let him into his dad’s cabinet – when the old drunk man ended up on the floor with a boot on his back and a face wet with grease paint came at him. Since the Sandinistas had taken over, everyone was required to carry identification cards. These cards were not issued to former members of the guard, and those without cards were not allowed to be out past certain hours. Congranja had struck a deal with the government asking that their employees be allowed to carry employee cards that identified them as workers and taxpayers, since like all the businesses, Congranja paid a portion of their earnings back to the government of Nicaragua – whichever government happened to be in power. And they paid handsomely, Norlan knew, because Francis had told him the price had nearly caused them to pull out. But once they had operated for a year, with those strange new seeds, it turned out to be highly profitable in the end. Well worth it. Funny the thoughts he had running through his head as he was digging through his pockets for identification. Lobster. Suicide seeds. Marbelys’ alcohol. Yelba. Francis. University. Where was it? His mind was working more like a dream, like pudding, like a baby’s mind must work. Nearly just grasping concepts of things. That is mother. She makes me happy. But not yet knowing possession. Not knowing that that mother belongs to me. And I belong to her. He could only respond with visceral reactions. He had fear. And unknowing. But not enough time to examine anything more deeply than that. Was this his fate or someone else’s?

“Your card, man. Your card. Show it goddammit.” Norlan looked him in the eyes. Wondering if he knew this kid. He could smell the beer and the night on his

breath. In the dawn light, Norlan saw the bus driver get off and run. Gun shots. No echoes. The sound was weightier than the gun shots he had heard come from Santi's gun. Two men, also with painted faces, led a line of riders with their shouts and guns as prods. Like cattle they filed out, with the same looks in their faces. The old man on the floor, they had thrown him around as if he weighed as much as a sack of grain or beans they might be pulling off the roof of the bus. Norlan couldn't see past the man in front of him. He couldn't tell if he'd gotten off the bus. But there had been blood on his face, the last time that he saw him. They had exploded his nose on the back of a bus seat.

"I don't know where it is. I don't know. It's at home. Let me take you. My house isn't far."

"What the hell good will it do you at home?"

"I mean just let me show you."

"Just let me show you?" The boy, Norlan could tell, could not have been any older than himself. Norlan took in the old man and glanced behind him towards the back of the bus at another shape slumped forward in the seat.

"Show me now, or we'll, you know. Or we'll have to make other plans for you."

"Get up faggot."

"I – who are you? You got some nerve little boy." The old man couldn't figure out what was going on.

"I'm sorry. Are you the one with the gun ol' man?"

He was still drunk. Everything was happening simultaneously.

"Fuck you." Norlan thought the sound of the curse word was strange coming from the man with the grey mustache, balding head and pot belly. It was as if he had aged another twenty years all at once. Frail and used up.

Most of the other passengers had left. He looked over at the drunk man and the last man still sleeping or, maybe passed out, on the back of the bus. His mind still had not wrapped itself around all the concepts before him. Dark, dusky fear. Edgy anger. Black rage.

“What are you looking at? Where’s your fucking card? Do you not understand?”

Norlan was caught. The card he had proving he was an employee for Congranja was in a different pair of pants. Three fates split by one mob. Us against one. The boys in their sweat and warm glow of the morning blended together. They looked so young and child-like.

He saw Yelba’s face in all this. The soldier wiped his face, where the blood had hit from the old man. A smudgy mess of black and red. He wiped his hands on his pants, and his nose on his sleeve.

“Get up! Get up!” The boy was losing control. There was fear in those shouts too. Was this some initiation? Is this what Danilo and Santi had done?

The man staggered to his feet. His pants were wet in the seat. He shook violently. The boy laughed at him. He shoved the butt of his gun into the old man’s crotch and pushed him into one of the seats.

“He fucking peed himself,” the boy had soldiered to the window and shouted at the crowd of his compatriots that had gathered there, after the other riders had showed their cards. They laughed too loud and fired their guns into the sky.

“Come on, man. They’re going. Pump him, man. *Vamos.*” Only now the old man hit the back of the seat, nose first. It exploded. Blood splattered onto the face of the boy.

Norlan was frozen. The gunmen raised his gun and shot the last man slumped in the back. The machine gun's repeated report radiated through his insides, from his gut into his ear canal, making Norlan feel like there could not possibly be room for anything else in the whole world. The body jerked as if shocked by electricity. The bus was momentarily illuminated by the spark from the rapid fire. He was all that was left. Norlan could see the indecision flicker in the eyes of this little god. Then it was gone. Yelba's face burned there instead. The Soldier turned, leaving two bodies, one alive, one going. Had there been more time, he might have given himself over to tears, or anger, or something else. But he couldn't think of his own fate. Only of Yelba's, and the soldier's. The rubber soles of The Soldier with Yelba's face fleeing the memory he had just made, but it was like glue. He would never outrun it – it would be the last thing that Norlan would see. In the waking world. And then she was all there was left.

Running to catch up, two souls fleeing faster behind him, The Soldier bent over to waste his breakfast on the side of the road.

Up ahead, someone called back to him, still drunk.

He wiped his mouth with his hand, cupping his chin that felt different, that felt more like a man's face and took off after them. He was no longer drunk. He felt different in all ways. His legs as he ran. Even the way his body worked. And in his own head he felt different. And as he ran, as he ran into his new body, in his mind he saw the picture of a young girl. With dark eyes and a serious face. She sat on a single stair. This was not his sister, not his mother. It was not the face of anyone he had ever seen. This

was the elusive ghost he would see every morning, in every kiss, even in the face of the children he would grow up to have with a woman who also did not have this face, he would see it. He would see her every night just before he fell off to sleep. And he would look for her. Long after his own wife – whom he did not, after all, learn to love – even after she died, and he was old and useless – he searched for the person in the flesh who matched this visage. Long after the day when his chin felt newly made of a harder substance, he would be haunted by this face.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN'S EDGE - CONTINUOUS (BLACK AND WHITE)

Anna and the Boy are both spread out in the sand just as Anna was in the scene earlier. They watch as the sun slowly disturbs the night sky with its orange and yellow streaks of light.

BOY

I can draw too.

ANNA

Oh, yeah?

BOY

Yes. I am very good. I am a writer and a draw-er.

ANNA

Will you draw me a picture?

BOY

No. I'm tired now. Maybe later.

ANNA (V.O.)

He was so impetuous. So sure of himself. It had been so long since I had felt like this... and on this day.

The Boy closes her eyes to sleep.

ANNA (V.O. CONT.)

I remembered when I could do everything, too. I wanted to do everything. I think that some people just fall into compliance, and some don't. You can be anything you want. Except, once you have grown up, you can never be a child again.

As Anna watches the sky morph from dark to light, a huge flock of birds flies high overhead. The Boy suddenly wakes up.

BOY

Anna? Do you think those birds
can see heaven up there?

ANNA

(after a moment)

Yes, I think they can.

BOY

My Dad's pretty smart, but I
think birds know more than he
does.

ANNA

You know what? I think you know
more than I do.

BOY

Well, my Dad's a really good
teacher . . . Maybe he can teach
you.

ANNA

Maybe.

BOY

He's good, but not as good as
those birds.

As she begins to draw on the pad, a feather caught up in the ocean breeze, floats by her. Anna nervously glances back at her sheet. It has been blown open, and large feathered wings are exposed.

BOY

What are those?

ANNA

They're wings.

The Boy runs up to the wings and caresses them. Anna follows close behind.

BOY
Wings? Did you make them?

ANNA
Yes.

BOY
Wow. They're very soft. What
are you gonna do with them?

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. ANNA'S CAR - DUSK (COLOR)

Anna drives down the road. She now looks the same age as the Anna on the beach. For several moments nothing happens but the perpetual passing of asphalt under her tires.

ANNA (V.O.)
From my childhood until now, it
all sort of blended together
into a mess of grey mush. One
moment was just as grey as the
next, whether I was making
mashed potatoes or making love.
There was a spectrum of emotions
within that greyness, but it had
shortened significantly since
those days when my father was so
much bigger than I was.

Suddenly a large mass smacks into the windshield with a loud thud. Anna jumps and jerks the wheel. Luckily, she's the only car on the road. She slows, checks her rear-view mirror. Something is flopping around. It is a large bird. Anna pulls over. She reaches for the door handle, but can't.

ANNA (V.O.)

I hit a bird... It was all I could think about. I just remember looking in my rear-view mirror and seeing it sort of flip and flap... I don't know. I couldn't really tell if it was the wind or the wings. If it was dying or dead. It came out of nowhere.

INT. ANNA'S BEDROOM - THAT SAME NIGHT

Anna works diligently at adhering large, beautiful silvery-grey feathers to a wire-mesh frame of some sort. There is nothing frantic in her work, only determination. When she is finished, she wraps the gorgeous wings in a white sheet.

ANNA (V.O.)

One of Chekhov's characters moped around the stage for the entire play dressed in black. She said she was in mourning for her life. That's not me. I'm not mourning my life. I love what my life was as a child. It was wonderful.

BACK TO SCENE:

EXT. OCEAN - DAYBREAK (COLOR)

A pile of clothes are laying on the beach next to the piles of organized shells and the empty white sheet.

From far off we see Anna in the ocean. Attached to her naked body, we see two beautiful feathered wings. She wades further and further into the ocean. What she had been constructing the night before is now illuminated by the faint rays of morning sunstreaks. She is waist-high in the water and her wings appear almost animated. The wind dances through the feathers. A few are blown off the mesh frame and dance through the air behind her.

ANNA (V.O.)

I never met God. I wasn't ever re-born. I'm pretty sure that you're only born once and you have the privilege of doing with that what you want. Whether you think it's what you should do, or it's what you have to do.

As she floats out, her wings begin to dip into the water.

ANNA (V.O. CONT.)

There is nothing inevitable in life... but Death. I don't have to do this. I choose to. Some people let it come on them, like my grandmother. Some people choose it. I wasted all this time waiting for some tragedy, something tangible that I could hold on to. That could make me feel... here. Not the constant pretension of being a part of this place. But it never happened. Until I hit that bird.

Anna's feathers are no longer tickled by the wind. Their beauty is weighed down by the depth of Anna's decision as she swims further out. Just before she is overwhelmed entirely, Anna turns back to look at the shore. Something of a smile floats across her lips. And she is gone.

A single feather that has managed to fly from her wings, slowly descends upon the water, and bobs along the surface.

Back on the beach, the Boy is gone. There is no trace of his bucket or satchel. It seems he has completely evaporated.

Then up to the sky. A sparrow playfully wings across the wispy clouds.

FADE OUT.

Ext. At the foot of Mombacho – Day

Will sat at the foot of Mombacho. Today his journey, his searching, led him to a trail that Marcela had told him about. He contemplated the beauty and the desolation. The destruction and the smoking smelling earth created steam propelled along by forces initiated in its bowels in epochs of time long before humans had sat in awe at its base. Will remembered a brief moment, a flash of memory – light and streaking – an experience of being a child again. Instantly and one that he hadn't remembered, hadn't thought about for ages. How they hit like a blow to the stomach. One time, in grade school, he asked Rivina Stubbs, the one black kid in their uppity neighborhood – her Dad was a heart surgeon who'd studied under DeBakey – he remembered that too because he, the father, had come to class to give a presentation on heart transplants, and how some patients are actually stronger post-operation. They experience strengthening of their muscles and even increased flexibility due to the stronger younger hearts of the donors. And off that he and Rivina got into some discussion about strength and he asked her to hit him in the stomach as hard as he could. Rivina had reared back and wailed on him. Just once. But it was enough to knock the wind out of him. Sucking in. All he could do was suck in. Heaving gulps of gradeschool playground air chaffing his lips, drying his tongue. Hot and dry and only in. An inhale without its partner.

But it was with this sort of violence, without the stunning pain, that the notion of his past, his mother's past, Figueres' past, met his present. Right in the stomach again.

Will-

I received your script and the hammock. Is this your return letter to me? Are you not receiving any of these letters? Or are you receiving them all and absorbing them in your very Will way?

It matters not, I suppose. May I just say thank you. I received the script on the eve of its release here. They're lambasting you in the papers here. The ultimate failure of your films these days, gives me some hope. For when they were succeeding, I hate to say it, but I'm certain no one knew what they hell they meant. They were just so damn lovely. In their starkness, the color you managed to find in the gradations between black and white. (A metaphor, perhaps, explaining the distance between you and me – dare I say it.) I understand, despite never having heard from you, that you appreciate it too.

I suspect you wonder (I still believe you must be capable of dreams somewhere for you to write the work you're doing), or allow yourself to wonder in quiet moments, even if only briefly, what it must be like, that maybe there are two people out there, maybe watching what you've done, and coming to know something more of the world, more of each other. At least I hope you do.

At any rate, you'll be consigned to the art houses from now on. Marginalized as you always thought you should be. That that was the place that true artists lived, and they'd only be appreciated fully after they were long gone.

Maybe you're too greedy. Maybe that's why you've left. (I'm really not still thinking about the why's of this situation. For that is so tedious, and a pregnant woman cannot afford to indulge in "what if's" for too extended a period of time and possess the presence of mind to fend off the onslaught of suicidal urges.) I'm only considering your

life as it stands now, not your life as I was once a part of it. Not that at all. (It never would have worked.) Your career, your trajectory, your maddening need to be headed in some direction. I think I get it now. I want to “be here now.” And you were always somewhere else. So now that you’re really somewhere else, how must it feel? I imagine we must have switched places. Maybe you’re unbelievably happy. Maybe you have a dog. Maybe you’re writing non-stop in the rain forests, counting the days you’ve spent in hash marks on the wall of some adobe hut.

Maybe. I always hated possibility. It always seemed like such a burden.

Ar.

Ext. Outside Marbelys' Gate – Day

Marbelys told Will the address of one of her friends she thought he should meet. She said she would help him get to know the people, the smell, the life of Managua – if he wanted. He'd been here six months, and gradually Marbelys began to treat him less and less like a guest and more and more like a member of the family. She told him she couldn't go today, because she had too much to do. He was supposed to bring her a bucket of lemons and some mangoes. "And don't let Gisella give you the old green ones either. She'll try to give you those shit green ones and you don't take them," she had called after him as he set off in the morning. "And don't eat anything Gisella calls '*pollo negro*.' Stick with the beans."

He took a break from his work. He had been fairly prolific after the sickness had worn off, so a break to travel around the city was welcome. He carried the lemons all through downtown Managua. He walked past huge houses made entirely out of slate and glass. With yards full of fountains and quartz rocks.

Even with the new administration, with tons of foreign aid, with the newly cancelled debt, Nicaragua was still clawing her way out of poverty. He had made his way through different parts of the city in the early days, exploring, on his own the different villages of Nicaragua. They had names like the sounds birds made or the titles of whimsical story books. Tipitapa, Masaya, Mategulpa, Sabana Grande. And still, the people who had the big houses, the people who had educations, were the lucky ones, the few. And they usually had some political ties. In Managua he had seen the hotel where

his mother had met his father on the day of her leaving. He had seen the university Marbelys told him Norlan never got to see built, but she knew he would have gone. Maybe some day, with the money buried under the lemon tree, she would be able to send Marcela.

He found Gisella's house. She, like Marbelys, was a survivor. She was a mother that had made it through the war, through all the fighting. She had lost her only son, Danilo.

Will was nervous knocking on the door. He felt boyish carrying the bucket of lemons to this woman's house. Though Marbelys and Gisella were around the same age, when Gisella answered the door, Will realized how young Marbelys looked. This woman cut a haggard shape in her doorway. She saw Will and took him by the shoulders, kissing him firmly on both cheeks. Her breath smelled of garlic, and her skin had a flaky, grey rash.

"Come in Will, Marbelys told me you were coming."

"I guess, well, here I am." He shrugged, feeling as though he'd never had a conversation in Spanish before. He stumbled over the appropriate things to say to her.

She was enormous. She grabbed the bucket of lemons and invited him in. She sat him down at a table covered in picture frames with the stock pictures of other people's children still in the wrapping. A mighty arrangement of fabric flowers with fake dewdrops on them marked the time by the layers of dust they collected in the table's center.

"Please stay and drink some Coke with me. Or a coffee. I've just made a pot."

"Marbelys said something about some—"

Before Will could say one way or the other, a cup of coffee, near white with milk and a jar of sugar were placed before him and the chair where he was supposed to sit pulled out for him.

“Mangoes, I know. Don’t get too far ahead of yourself mister. Sit and listen to an old woman talk at you. You’re supposed to humor me. This is how this works. Now, drink up. I’ve already sugared it, but there’s more there if you like it sweet.”

The skin under her chin jiggled as she spoke.

Seemed like Gisella was glad to have somebody in the house to boss around and Will was more than happy to have someone tell him what to do.

It was three in the afternoon and Will was certain Marbelys knew this would be an all-day affair. Will had no sooner finished his coffee then a plate of steaming meat and rice appeared before him. She called it black chicken and laughed. It was something she had learned to cook in the dump, and now she couldn’t bear spending the money on the real thing. Will didn’t ask her exactly what kind of animal it was. And did his best to pick around it.

She moved from one story to another, apropos of nothing. She would talk about Marbelys and her as children and then quickly turn to her son Danilo: “He chased those men right into the mountains. Right into those volcanoes. And he never came out.”

Halfway through the story about her son, for a moment she looked like she might begin to cry. Will was examining the tiny spot in the corner of her eye when he was pulled from his chair and they were out the door.

“I need you to help me. I’ve got a new shipment that I need to take into my shop. Will you help me carry some boxes?”

It turned out Will was to carry all three boxes. That weren’t too heavy, just kind of awkward. He wondered what was in them. Still, she could have easily carried them herself.

They left the house. Will noticed that the door was secured by only a padlock and a sliding bar. Gisella pulled the hot-pink t-shirt at the neck and dropped the key into the crevice between her breasts.

“The city has changed. We’ve got a big-time school, with big-time students who go there. I hear we even have some teachers who teach there from New York. Marbelys tells me all the time.”

“She tells me that’s where Norlan would have gone.”

“That’s one thing she’s right about.”

They walked a few blocks and pretty soon the houses stopped. A stench, worse than the bloated dog he had stooped over a few days ago, hit him. Hard. There were still children occasionally. A group of three little boys played ahead of him. “Norlan was going to go there. I loved my Danilo. God bless his shitbird soul.”

They only had to walk a little to her store, she said.

The houses got further and further apart and the lots between the occasional houses started accumulating more and more trash and weeds as they neared the stench of something that was definitely dead or dying. Something that must be like what the end of the world smelled like. The children Will had seen playing earlier in the street were still outside.

“That’s it. Here is the place where we made our lives. Where we had to.”

Two kids, dirt on their faces and both naked from the waist up, played with a brown ball in the middle of the street. Will watched them. One boy was significantly smaller than the other, and the ball looked nearly too big, too heavy for him to handle. Will was stuck interpreting the kids and this small scene as it unfolded before him. Where were these kids’ parents? Why were they playing in the middle of the street? If things were getting so much better here in Nicaragua as Gisella and Marbelys and a whole host of other people were claiming, why were they not wearing any clothes? The sun was making him a bit dizzy, as well as the hike up what had proven to be a steeper incline than he had noticed before. Gisella was still muttering on, but his mind had grown too full with the picture of these children. As they drew closer, he couldn’t quite determine the sex of the children. He wondered if it was his whiteness, his naïveté, his wide-eyedness that allowed for all this shifting from what he saw first here, to what he saw on closer inspection. It seemed things changed immensely from first glance to the next. The children were in their underwear; they couldn’t be more than five- or six-years-old.

Behind Gisella and Will, who had been walking up the side of the road, a truck carrying a heavy load, downshifted and sped past them, in the children’s direction.

Will worked hard not to be alarmed, not to be too freaked out, because Gisella appeared unalarmed.

The background was stark white raising up behind the children, dwarfing them in the landscape. It didn’t appear that the truck was slowing in the least; it was having to

work harder to climb the hill. Will froze. Gisella took a few steps further, before turning around to watch Will watch the kids.

They had a plan. The children. The larger of the two children grabbed the ball from the younger, who then placed both arms on her – Will just assigned her her femaleness because she was the smaller of the two – she placed both her hands on her knees in a decidedly adult pose and watched eagerly. The larger of the two, perhaps the boy, stood ready with the ball, and at just the right moment, he hurled the ball right at the truck's tires. He proved to be an adept thrower, and the ball cracked under the truck's back tire, splitting in two.

For a moment, the kids were eclipsed by the truck's profile as it turned in front of them.

Will was surprised to find the two children cheering, arms raised in the exaltation particular to children whose plan has been executed to perfection.

Gisella looked on. Will could sense her glancing between the scene of the children and the recognition that must have been creeping across Will's face as comprehended what had happened.

The ball was not a ball at all. It was a coconut. And that coconut might have fallen off another truck that had barreled past moments before Will and Gisella had made the walk. The children rushed to the coconut, after the truck passed. Each took a half and greedily scooped out handfuls of the snowbright meat. Lunch had arrived.

Gisella and Will walked past the children and they skittered away from them, giggling at their own ingenuity. Were they afraid of Will? Or just shy? Gisella squeezed Will's shoulders, the gesture of someone who had way too much caring and love and

hope bundled into one moment. Her features looked somehow fake when she smiled. Everything a little too pointed, a little too vibrant, like they were each – her smile, her nose, her mouth – too big for her face.

“I am a businesswoman Will.” There, that sealed the deal. It was a saleswoman’s grin, a saleswoman’s face. They were heading up a steep, dirt incline now, in the direction the trucks had gone. “I want to show you how I fed my children, how my children had to grow up.”

Okay. “You were Danilo’s mother?”

“Yes. And he was a good boy. He and Norlan used to play together. Norlan was very good for Danilo.” They approached two gates that must have risen fifty feet into the sky. The smell, like fish and the oversweetness of fermenting fruit, even the smell of your own body after being ill, that smell that is sex and sickness and sewage and too much. It was what surplus smelled like, and luxury too, in some ways. They continued up the hill, reached the summit and peered into a vast mass of trash. And people. Amidst the junk, the things everyone throws away, there must have been two hundred people.

Another truck pulled up behind them, like the one that split the coconut for the kids. Shrill calls that bordered on angry and hysterical issued from the tall bed. There were men on board, riding the trash into the dump.

“Assholes,” she called after them. “They’re jealous I have a new boyfriend.” She poked at Will’s cheeks.

Will was sweating and sick at the smell and growing increasingly tired of Gisella’s ideas and conversation. But his interest to see where in the hell they were going was overriding his basic survival instincts that were telling him to go the other way. He

had heard of the dump one time from his mother. He knew that people lived there, and that whole villages existed off the refuse, but was still unprepared for the sight.

He felt awkward for having had everything he had ever had in his life. For everything that he had ever thrown away. At his immediate shock of reaction that he couldn't disguise. And at his being watched.

Gisella directed him over a couple rivulets of liquid that resembled something like antifreeze both in color and viscosity. "Careful of Lake Managua." Will didn't get the joke. Because of Will's box-carrying he didn't have the full view of the landscape. He had to be careful to see where he was stepping, and if he could see that he had solid footing for a while, he could take a glance around the sides of his boxes for a second or two, but mostly he was taking stock of the things that cluttered the ground.

He had passed many plastic bags of *leche dulce* – a milk powder. Maybe a trash bag from some school cafeteria had exploded. He passed rotting meat – mostly fish. He stepped over old toys too. He kicked a doll's head. It came to rest at the foot of the shack with a single opening and another padlock on the side.

"This is it." She unlocked the door, a piece of aluminum siding, and motioned for Will to drop the boxes. When he did, as they weren't taped shut, one of the lids opened, spilling loads of maxi pads individually wrapped in pink plastic.

"A good find, for sure. All these Catholics here, nobody uses tampons." She grinned, showing no traces of embarrassment. Will wondered if he was able to conceal his own.

"Where did you get these?"

“I make friends with some of the trash haulers and they pull out some stuff that gets tossed from some of the factories and businesses around town that throw away perfectly good stuff. They drop it off at my house, and I pay them a cut of whatever I can sell. That’s why my house is so close to the dump.” He realized he had smelled the first indication of the dump in her house, when she cooked. The smell was probably in all of her clothes. All of her food.

“And you sell it to the people who live at the dump?”

“Yep. *Chureca* people need some things – like sanitary pads – that you can’t rummage for and they’re too poor to buy. Diapers. I get some snack foods and candy sometimes – those go the fastest. Tang. Shit that’ll keep the *niños* quiet. Hair spray. Sometimes I can smuggle in some liquor, but I don’t like to sell that. Makes the men extra mean. Still, it pays well.”

“Hair spray?” Will was having trouble putting it all together. “Who the hell are you selling hair spray too?”

“People still got some pride, Willito.”

“You kidding me? They can’t pay rent but they’re buying hairspray.”

“Joking. Joking. They get high off the aerosol. Sure, they can get lucky and find some in the dump. Plenty. But every now and then, they like to buy some full bottles. Get real high.”

He couldn’t think of anything to say.

“My boy did it too. He learned it as a soldier. Sometimes we’d have a whole squad walk through those gates at once, carrying guns on their backs and high as kites

within minutes. Then they'd fall asleep. I used to go poke at them after that and tell them to get the hell out and do something useful. Danilo and Santi too. God rest them."

"Santi's gone too?"

"I don't know where he is. No one does. He and Danilo both disappeared into the mountains, shortly after Norlan died. Made it look like they had some part in it. Danilo's daddy thinks so. Said he's gotten nothing but me in him. But I know they wouldn't do that. They wouldn't hurt nobody. I think they went away to grieve. Or whatever it is that they do. Alone in the mountains."

"Alone? They didn't go with the Sandinistas?"

"Nope. They just left. Week later I saw the same shitbirds they used to run with back in the dump. Peeling back soles. Sniffing the shoe glue."

"What?"

"They use a lighter like this," she sat on the single chair and pulled her foot up to her face. "They hold it just close enough to get the thing nice and hot and it releases some fumes that makes their brains crazy."

"And so the guys came back in here and you asked them about your son?"

"No, I pull out my shotgun," she nudged it with her foot. It was just lying there on the floor. Will thought it strange that there were so many things in there that could be pilfered pretty easily. You could push the whole structure over with not too much effort. "I pointed it in their general direction and told them I was the queen of this dump and that the only way they could ever come into my dump and sniff some of my glue was if they came toting my son along with them." Gisella had begun pulling the maxi pads out to make neat pink towers on the floor – in no particular place, just there in front of the gun.

“Kidding me?”

“I shot one of them in the ass as they were running away. Shell to prove it.”

Will wasn't sure how a shotgun shell proved anything, but he couldn't help believing her. Gisella was just crazy enough to have shot a Sandinista in the ass. The shitbird.

Gisella had made short work of the box and broke it down flat. She walked out the door and tossed it in no particular direction. She came back in and there was a pause in the conversation, the first one of the whole afternoon. Will thought about Danilo and Santi and of Norlan. He thought about Gisella. He thought about himself a year ago and how different his life had been.

Gisella pinched her nose hard and made a kind of funny face, pursing her lips and raising her eyebrows, like she was fighting off something that required all of her muscles, even the ones in her eyelids. Her crow's feet multiplied into a legion of marching wrinkles.

Suddenly, Will was thinking about a conversation he had had with Arri. One of their politically charged routs about the “farce” that was socially-minded conservatives and liberal independent libertarians who weren't really liberal at all. They had had a tendency to quarrel about things even if they were squarely on the same side of the argument. She had said that the only reason we weren't stuck somewhere on the side of the road with a hobo bag and no food in our bellies was purely because of luck – not fucking providence, not Enlightenment bullshit, not because of anything other than our plan ol' white luck.

It probably was luck. But fuck it. There was such thing as changing that. Which is why he was here. And not for Gisella. Not for Marbelys – that was up to them. It was for him. He didn't have the burden of having to explain that to anyone. And that was weirdly, not making his heart lighter, it was making it heavier. He wondered what it was like, what a life was like spent in waiting. Or maybe she had stopped waiting. What must that have been like? To give up waiting. He guessed that is why Marbelys and Gisella still made it. There was no sense in such frivolity. In the absence of such things as varieties of food, of mattresses, of toilet paper, one also lost the luxury of indulging in pain.

She rose. Something new was in her movement. Grace, deliberation. She bowed slightly to Will, a move he found disconcerting and moving all in the same moment. He put his hands together, like praying. She pulled both of his hands into her, cupping them in her own and then hugged him. She opened the door.

“Let's go get some mangoes.”

W–

There was a small blurb in the paper today – (yes, I can't abandon the coffee and paper reading you started me in the habit of. All these years later, even with Dak. Decaf is not so good in the French press, but it's what I'll settle for.) Dak puts up with the early hours. Despite the fact that this isn't exactly how we had planned things, we're making it work. Every other day I hate him with a fiery passion, for some small sin, and then the next day I love him more than I ever loved or could have loved you. And I feel the same way about the baby. Some nights I wake up in cold sweats thinking about how I can't imagine actually loving this thing and being a mother and how I'd love to be rid of it and live on my own somewhere else where I don't know people and they don't know me. But other nights, I can't fall asleep happily poring over the list of names in my head I've given to the baby. Dylan (never Thomas). Theloniuss (that's Dak's vote, and I'm not necessarily averse to it). Even Will. I exist at any given moment on opposite ends of a very very long spectrum. I believe the truth lies somewhere in the middle.) At any rate, I read that Congranja pulled out of Nicaragua last week. It was only a small little blip in the News in Brief section buried at the end of Business. It mentioned two years of intense negotiations between American corporate stakeholders and the new Nicaraguan administration had finally reached what both parties called "a stalemate." Stalemate. Wonder what the origin of that word is – you could probably tell me. And that Congranja would subsequently "pull out" of any operations there, including the operating of the largest processed food manufacturing plant in Central America. And then, so as not to frighten the investors and stock holders, they added something about

how things were, “however, going very well” with increased production in their already established Guatemala facility as well as discovery meetings in Costa Rica.

Hunh. Wonder what would happen if you ever ran into your father down there.

Ar.

Ext. Marbelys' house – That night

The smell of the dump lingered in his nose like ammonia. It burned there while the image monopolized his mind. When he returned to the chain-link fence, the floodlight's yellow glare and the smell of the beans had grown familiar in a way that was satisfying. It was something about the way time moved here that sped things up and slowed them way, way down all at the same time.

Marcela's little girl ran up to Will. Marcela, Marbelys' youngest had followed in Marcela's footsteps and had her first daughter at the age of sixteen. This little girl, she named Yelba, like her older sister. But no one ever called her that. They called her Mama most times, or Vasito. She was a little cup they could pour all their sadness into. And because she was young and lovely and without care, she'd keep it away from them, so they might all be able to move on without feeling like they had to give it all away.

"Tio Willeeto! Tio Willeeto!" The first week Mama had been very scared of Will. He was too tall, and too different for her. But Will had sneaked her a couple of faces that had been successful with Ben once upon a time. She had warmed up to him. And now whenever he returned home from his daily travels, she would run home to him with hands pressed together. The first time she had done this, Will looked around hoping to find someone to explain this custom. Mama stared at him expectantly, with saucer-sized brown eyes. She had a short bob haircut of black hair that was straight and shiny. And he wanted not to disappoint this little face, and this moment, this opportunity to make progress in the new guy cold war that had been quietly waging for these six months. So he put both hands together and bowed before her. Low and slow. She had burst into loud cup-filling laughter, and then bowed too. Later, Will learned that the

appropriate response was to place both your hands on the outside of their hands. It was like a hug.

Now he and Mama shared their secret handshake/bow/hug. It wasn't much of a secret. But it made him feel like for a long time he had been pretending to be something like a man, but he was moving closer to something more real. But the feeling was so fleeting, that if he thought too much about it, it might change. Like standing on a sandbar. You could walk and walk out, get used to the water, start to know the environment, and then step too far, and sink into the deep.

Mama had taken to calling him Uncle as had all the other little kids in the Bojorge household. The dynamic of the house was changing around him. There were eight members of the immediate family that Will knew. The rest of the people who lived there changed so much it was impossible to keep track of everyone. He had felt bad about having Marbelys cook all his meals, and knew that some of the glances and cold shoulders he was getting from some of the other family members were due to his having become another mouth to feed. He had tried to cook, but Marbelys had insisted he not be in the kitchen. That was not the place for the guest. She also would not take any of the money he offered to her from his savings, and the little that started trickling in from the films he sold.

Marbelys was out in the yard, under the branches of the lemon tree, standing with a loom, making a hammock. Will brought the mangoes to her. She looked at him full-on without removing her eyes from the complicated push and pull of the weaving of the twine for the hammock. She moved slowly from one side of the hammock stand to the

other, like a slowmotion typewriter. “I see you insisted on the ripe ones. Good boy Will.” She made her way to the other side of the loom.

“And I managed to stay away from the *pollo negro*.”

She groaned.

“Marbelys. I want to find a home here.”

“You have a home here.” Her eyebrows got so close together they almost touched. Will wasn’t prepared for her to be upset.

“No, I mean, my own home.” He thought she’d be happy that he was going to stay here. “You know, where I can cook in the kitchen.”

“Fine. We’ll go look tomorrow.”

“Marbelys, I’m not going far away... I’ll still be here.”

“You never get used to the leaving.” He realized as long as Will was here in this house, it was like having Norlan and Yelba back too. In some small way.

He walked into Norlan’s old room, Norlan’s old pillow, that had seen several other heads since his. He screamed into it. Since he had gotten here, he had felt a range of emotions, and they had all been closer to the surface than they had ever been in the city. But with these emotions came work. For the first time, the blank page held potential and promise rather than dread and waiting. He had rage and direction. He sweat through his shirt, and it cooled in the night as he wrote clear into the middle of the moon and back.

Somewhere around one o’clock, the door creaked open. Mama peaked her head in.

“I heard you crying.” She looked like a woman, there, though she was only six. She looked capable and knowing. Her features weren’t childish, and neither was her voice. She had adult worry.

“I was. But I’m better now.” He couldn’t help but talk to her as though she were still the child he had known with the praying hands that asked for love every afternoon. He didn’t, in fact, know if he was better now, but that’s what you’re supposed to tell people.

“I don’t know about that Tio Willito. And I don’t think you do either. Don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“Okay. Here’s something I do mean: I want you to be in my movie.”

“Nope. I’m not going anywhere. I’m going to stay right here with my mom.

She left him there, befuddled and even more tired than he had been when he got home from the dump. But before she did, she walked into the room, the door and the light shutting behind her and kissed Will on the forehead. The lips he felt there in the dark, when she had looked more like an adult and his own body and thoughts had transformed to those of a child, had been Yelba’s, his mother’s.

She said to him, just before she opened the door again to leave, “You need to take a shower, Tio Willito. You stink.”

W–

Was I too abrupt in the revelation of my little news? You must think I'm nothing but a tiny shell. A little empty place where you used to be. But I hope you know that's not true.

You're telling yourself you would never have fallen in love (can I even say that with any confidence, Arri?) with someone that unstable, that angry. And you didn't. I was only a bit drunk in the previous letter. But do not be alarmed. I have sworn to Dak – we're engaged (Did I do it again?) – not to drink, but the occasional glass of vino. My obgyn says white, but I'm insisting red. And only occasionally, I know.

(Yes dammit, is the answer, by the way.)

Dak and I are pregnant. I was debating whether or not to tell you. But then, you're probably not getting this anyway(?) and this will most likely be the last letter I'll write you so how much does it matter if it's abrupt or not. Chances are, you're probably reading these (if you are) as you always were – with one eye on this and the other on everything else. On whatever project you've got cooking up. And I guess it's sort of flattering to think that maybe I'm a small part of it.

The cherry pits. Signed, Anna(?)

(Off to pee, yet again.)

Int. Norlan's old bedroom - Morning

Will woke to Marbelys' face in his. "Get up, hijo. Get up." She was saying this in broken English. He wasn't sure how long she had been there whispering to him. He wasn't sure what was dreaming and what wasn't. He had been dreaming about another landscape. Barren. But there was something off in the distance, shining and attracting his attention. He memorized the moment, committed it to a line of action in a screenplay – text that he could return to when he had a moment:

EXT. BARREN - DUSK

Again, the sky is pocked by large clouds the color and evanescent consistency of mercury. The quality of the light suggests dusk, though there is no sun in the shot. From the presumed vantage point of the filmmaker, who occasionally glances at his own black hiking boots, we see boots stepping over bits of trash – bags that once contained powdered milk. There is no sun. Only landscape, the silver clouds, and their shape-changing shadow. In the distance, just peaking over the edge is a large, military-looking vehicle.

He didn't know what it would become, but it was important for him to record these images he saw in his head. They would accumulate into something eventually, or maybe not. He'd always felt moved by images. And when they had dried up, he had a hard time writing back into things without images to move from. But since coming here, he had

more than he had known what to do with. Maybe he could get Dak to do some score work. He regretted not having paid attention to his music classes at Montessori.

“Get up, Will.” She was still there.

“What? What?” Cot. Aluminum ceiling. Dark. Marbelys’ face.

“We’re going to find you a house.”

Marbelys left. He could hear her noises as she prepared some breakfast for them to take. He pulled on some pants and a shirt, rubbing his eyes, the scene from his dream and Marbelys’ face finally extracting themselves into two separate entities.

When he went out towards her, he couldn’t find Marbelys. She opened the car door sitting out in the yard. “Will. I am here,” she said. Again, in English. Will found that as the family here had grown more and more comfortable with him, they had each in turn tried out what English they knew on him. Something about the new challenge made people nervous and giddy, like the day they had met Will for the first time, even though he had been around for over a month.

Marbelys was sitting in the passenger seat. Insistent. Will got in the car, put his hands on the steering wheel and looked at her.

“What? *¿Qué?*”

“I never learned how to drive. I don’t know how.”

She punched him in the shoulder and rolled her eyes. Marbelys made for the door handle and Will got out to switch sides. But Marbelys wasn’t moving. She sat back in the seat and folded her hands in her lap. She looked over at the driver’s seat and then back at Will.

Will was going to learn to drive, and Marbelys was going to teach him.

He turned the key and the engine of the old Chevy Joy wagon rumbled to life. She told Will to put the car into reverse and back out into the street. Trial by fire.

Norlan flashed into Will's mind. He saw Norlan walking into the green, but it wasn't towards mountains, like the story he had learned about Santi and Danilo. He was walking on that fiery ground with the clouds in the background silhouetting him so that he was made all one color against the bright mercury.

It was a little jerky at first. The whole driving thing. But this, like everything else he had done before in his life, was a bit like the rest: take hold of it, grip it and pretend like you know what you're doing. Do what you've seen the rest of the people doing. Because he had grown up in a city where it wasn't necessary to drive, he hadn't ever done it. But his father had. And he could remember watching him, as a kid from the backseat. He felt like an imposter adopting this posture in the driving seat because this was something that he associated with his own father.

“By God, looks like you fell right into it, Will.”

“Where are we headed, *señorita*?”

“Keep driving towards the sun.” They drove away from the airport and towards the mountains. He peeked at them when he wasn't watching the road. Thankfully there wasn't much traffic out due to the early hour, but there were still a fair number of overpacked buses on the road. Will gripped the wheel a little tighter each time another bus passed him on the opposite side of the narrow roadway. He could feel the pull of the cars, like magnets being pulled close, then forced apart. Close then apart.

Marbelys directed him to pull off the road. They headed north on a small side road of dirt for quite a while. Speckles of rain dripped on the windshield.

“Our trip is favored, Will. We never get rain this early in the day. You are being showered. It is right that you should find a house today.”

They rode on in silence.

When Marbelys and Will approached sand instead of dirt, Marbelys told Will to stop the car. And they left it there. Marbelys slid off her sandals and left them on the hood of the car. Will took her advice and left his boots behind too, but inside the car. It was still drizzling and his boots would be no good to him wet on the inside. They walked through a series of fences that must have marked off property before, but the brush was so thick, it didn't appear as though any of this land had been inhabited for quite some time.

“It was after the *hurricán* that everyone left this place.” They approached another outcropping of trees and passed through it, stepping gingerly through rotten mangoes and some pitaya trees that had long since stopped bearing fruit – pitayas needing more care the reason Marbelys grew lemons and not the pink fruit that yielded more money at market. “Stubborn, stubborn trees,” she had said to Will when she had first served him the pink juice one Sunday morning. She picked a green mango from an overhanging branch, palmed it, then placed it in the front pocket of her apron.

They crossed through the trees and Will saw the ocean for the first time in the distance. And a single house.

“We Nicas have forgotten this place. Nothing was left after the storm, but this house. There used to be three. They were owned by some former *guardia*. Two whole

families died. Drowned in the flood. It sneaked up on them in the middle of the night and carried the houses right off their foundations into the sea.”

“They didn’t know the storm was coming.”

“They thought they could beat it. They were protected by Somoza through all the troubles, even after Somoza was kicked out. They were untouchable. Even against the elements they thought they could make it.”

“What happened to the last family?”

“Fate. Spared them, I guess. After the storm they fled to Costa Rica. I heard they own some zipline company. Do Cloud Tours, or something like that. Selling a country they don’t own.”

The house was made of white clay. There were water lines on the outside charting the water’s reluctant receding. None of the windows bore any glass. It was small, but the view couldn’t be beat.

“It was ’98. Just before the new people came into power.”

“Before the Chamorro administration?”

“Yes. The Chamorros and then Chavez’s buddy. The only way we finally got out from under the big US. It’s sad that we had to do it that way.”

“Following Chavez’s lead?”

“He is a horse’s ass. The poets would never have gone along with his name-calling.”

“The poets?”

“Dario. Paz.”

Will made a noise of noncommittal.

“I suppose that’s why they’re not running the world. People like you and them.”
She paused for a second, her fingers fidgeting as her face went dark and serious. “You will be protected out here.”

“Why didn’t you ever turn those men in? Even after the Sandinistas were safely in power. Couldn’t you have gotten some reward? Or at least protection?”

“I don’t meddle in politics. That is for men to fight out. And it never got them anywhere. The closer you get to it, the further it rips you apart. I wouldn’t touch it. And they didn’t touch me. They knew I knew. And I knew they knew. That was all. Eat this.”

She dug her nails into the hard green skin, exposing stringy flesh underneath.

“This would be better with salt,” as though a little salt would alter the fact that the fruit had been picked too soon.

Will would buy the house.

W-

I suppose I've discovered I'm more of a romantic than I thought. I like the act of writing letters. So much of what we do is ticking away at computer screens, burning our retinas. (Do you remember that old Jim Henson scary kid movie, "The Dark Crystal" where the eyes of the little gnome-y creatures get fried and go hazy with little puppet cataracts because of the evil Skekses? This is how I imagine the whole of us. All of us drones. When the aliens descend upon us, they'll freeze the whole planet. They'll stop everything and walk among our frozen bodies examining our blurry eyes and even blurrier vision of the world. Wondering how a civilization could ever come to such ruin.) If my clients only knew what I was really thinking about every time I sit down to work. If only.

So I said my last letter was going to be my last. And I've said that several times, but I'm going to rescind all of that. I like this. I'm growing to like this relationship far better than I liked our flesh and blood. This is far less complicated. I'm going to recommend it to my therapist. (What would a therapist say to you, I wonder?)

Ar.

Ext. On the road from Masaya to Ojo de Agua – Ten years later

The dazzling green of the fields he had seen flying overhead here ten years ago still amazed him. They were greener close up. He walked by fields and fields of four-foot tall corn. The many rows seemed to converge in a vanishing point.

He reached a dirt road that split two fallow fields. The path was paved – a stark contrast to the gravel highway it intersected. He stood at the intersection. If Will had not seen pictures of the plans for the plants years ago in the papers (the papers Francis practically owned for all the advertising he bought), if not for that he could have mistaken this place for an amusement park. He couldn't explain why it had taken him ten years to come out here. He'd grown accustomed to the comfort he found here. Seeing Congranja would only have disarmed him. But now, on his ten-year anniversary in this place, he thought he'd see if he could handle returning to the idea of his father. He had not communicated with him at all since he came here. This would be the closest he'd ever get.

A huge wrought-iron canopy spanned from one pole to the next with the name in red block letters, signage like this he'd never seen in Nicaragua. Something instructed him, probably the years of his mother's "if you don't try, you'll never know" admonishments, to try the fence. He gave it a push, and the gates with the close bars yielded without much coaxing. He wondered if the bars were meant to keep people in, or others out.

Walking down the path, there was no sign that much of anything was at the opposite end. More trash and evidence of disrepair littered the walk. The place was abandoned. He must have walked a good 500 meters. He half-expected to see the spokes

of a ferris wheel rising in the distance, when he finally saw the plant. He felt somehow sympathetic whenever he saw empty buildings, even if this building had been his father's. It was expansive and flat. It looked like one of the old factories of the seventies. Apparently expense had been spared in this building's constructions. Not much to do here but create space for a bunch of production to be done. The walls were made of an ugly grey, industrial plaster. Windows were built into the tops of the buildings to take advantage of the eastern light for as long as possible, none at eye-level. It was all function, no form. No frills. Two men leaned against the side of the building, hats tipped over their faces like kitschy yard art.

Will was startled by their presence. He hadn't noticed them for all the taking in of the bland architecture.

"What are you doing here, buddy? This is not a place for you."

Will walked towards the side of the building. "Just looking around." He figured he had just as much stake in being here as they did. "What are you doing here?"

"Who the fuck are you?" One of the men had some sort of uniform on. It was green, and on his left breast was an insignia. This one stood up. The other one, who wore grey coveralls, seemed too drunk to do much more than belch.

"I'm not trying to make a deal out of this. I'm just. I'm just gonna look around."

"You think you can just come here and do what you want?" Will had not inspired much fear in this guy.

"Fuck off."

"Look," and before he knew it, despite the fact that he had engineered scene after scene of powerful dialogue, dialogue that served a purpose, that propelled the story to its

inevitable end, despite the fact that people had paid him thousand upon thousands of dollars to engineer a particular brand of tight, post-modern speech, he couldn't take control over this exchange at all. Words were coming out of his mouth before he even knew what he was saying. And faster than he could control them. "My father's name was Francis. He owned this--"

"I don't care two fucks who your father was. How 'bout that?" The man in uniform dropped a satchel he'd had criss-crossed over his shoulder. It looked standard-issue. The guy kicked his half-conscious drunk friend into action. "Get up man. We goin' to have a fight right now."

"All I came here for was--" Jesus. Will hadn't been in a fight since high school. He saw the scene freeze, special effects, spin to the POV of Uniformed Man #1 as he reared back with one mighty blow. Will couldn't be sure whether the blood he saw spatter on the graffiti'd plaster had been his own, or his imagination.

"All you came her for was for nothing." Uniform laughed. Coveralls rolled over on his side and grunted.

Will blacked out.

But he kept walking. Fallow fields sprouted right before his eyes. They got so close together it became solid green again. The periwinkle sky above met it like some kind of Dalíean landscape. When he reached the nothing part of the field, he felt for sure some drippy clocks and ants and mannequins with pheasant feathers would be soon to follow. He envisioned a short film where a bird's eye shot of a single tree centered in the frame. Zoom to extreme close-up of an iridescent beetle climbing up its trunk. Quick shot of beetle POV. The beetle reaches the end of a branch, does an about-face. With

beetle horn saw, he begins sawing through the branch he is sitting on. Maybe then a time-lapse. The beetle makes quick work. Then extreme close-up of the ground surrounding the tree cracking as it dries up, like the fallow fields. Fast, we follow one of the cracks, zipping through barren scapes straight to the ocean just as it evaporates. We see individual droplets evaporate back into the sky until nothing is left but mounds of bones. Then fast back to the tree, just as the beetle's finished his work. It and the branch tumble in slow motion, down to the ground. Then disappearing into the black nothing of one of the cracks. The camera follows. Would he remember to write this one down? He committed "iridescent beetle" to memory and kept walking.

W-

Re: "The Subject of Will"

I took Dak to meet my parents today. You should have seen Paddy's and Evelyn's faces when big old happy Dak walked into the room. Guess that makes it official. Two things really. Dak and I are official. (He proposed to me two days ago, so we figured it was high time to meet the soon-to-be in-laws.) And, according to my midwestern-Ohio parents, I've officially gone off the deep-end. They were both very pleasant in only the way people from Ohio can be when trying desperately not to look like their whole world has not just fallen around them and their only daughter has been the reason for it. Evelyn had to set, and re-set the table at least three times. I guess that's the trick. You know what they say about idle hands. In this case I think it helped her concentrate.

In a weird way I think they were glad for the distraction. In fact, I should have done something this "crazy" a long time ago. It might have gotten them off the our-boy-is-dead kick. Is that a little harsh? Maybe. But for Christ's sake. There's mourning. And then there's mourning. Mom still hasn't taken her grandmother's black curtains down from her bedroom, something she claims was an old Welsh tradition. (I wonder how much of that she makes up just to cling to some remnant of heritage.)

The night went rather well after the initial shock, I must say. And the 'rents looked actually happy to have something new to worry about. (How much worrying can be done about a child already gone? I am getting callous – perhaps one or one of many benefit(s) of your having gone. My therapist would say that last construction was significant indication of a persistent weakness around "the subject of Will." Fuck her. I'm getting

married. To a man that I love. AND who loves me. Isn't that "significant indication" of something? Apparently not.)

Ar.

Int. Old Congranja factory – Continuous

When he woke next, he was staring into a black light. What the fuck? Then two mouths with purple teeth appeared overhead.

“You went out like a light.” Uniform spoke.

“You have to excuse my friend. He gets a little excited when he has his afternoon drink before naptime.” Uniform grinned. “Me. I just get sleepy.”

Will’s face ached. He still hadn’t quite put it altogether. A bug flew in front of the light and landed on the wall behind the men’s faces that he only now figured was the ceiling.

“My name is Paulo.” Uniform. “And this is my buddy. We call him Aristotle.”

Coveralls laughed the laugh of a man for whom the same jokes never ever got old.

Will was gathering his wits. He sat up. He had been lying on a stainless steel table that looked like it belonged in some industrial kitchen. There were shelves around him and light fixtures, but big holes where he figured appliances had once been. He was in the cafeteria of the factory. His whole face ached.

“You see man,” Coveralls took the burden of explanation now, “we’re very protective of our hang-out. Him especially. This is the very middle of his route, and no one dares come on this land – I think people think it’s cursed. That makes it the perfect place for us to hang out. Plus Paulo had the key.”

“Shut up fucker. What you trying to do?”

The misguided synapses once again found appropriate places to fire. “You used to work here?”

“Not me. Just this guy here.” He pointed to Uniform.

“Jesus man. Why don’t you tell him about your only having one testicle. Get it all out there.”

“Fuck you, man.” Coveralls shoved Uniform.

“I did work here. And if anyone ever finds out I still have a key, I’ll kill you, man. Not Aristotle. You, Mr. Francis’ son. I should kill you anyway.”

Aristotle laughed again. This time a bit nervously.

Will’s feet dangled over the edge of the prep table and he looked straight into the eyes of an unsmiling Paulo. “I do not work for my father. I am not my father’s son. In that way.”

Will couldn’t help feeling like a kid desperately trying to pull one over on these two unlikely authority figures. And he noticed he was shoeless. They’d pulled his ragged old boots off after having loaded him onto the table. “What kind of uniform is that anyway?” In his ten years he’d seen a variety of state uniforms, but never one like this.

“Paulo here’s a mailman. The new president’s instituted some important mail changes. Ha I say to that. Fucking mail. This guy gets all the new jobs, lucky bastard.”

Uniform stuck his hand out to Will and smiled a genuine smile for the first time.

“Mucho gusto Paulo.”

Int. Pulpería – Night

That night Will brought his new renegade friends to a pulpería near Marbelys' house. Aided by beer, and giddy from the fumes of various things being burned and smoked, they sat around a decaying wooden table. Their excited plans were punctuated by the occasional abuse of a small TV someone had brought in for their own table.

The noise of the battered TV wasn't distracting to Will. It was the scene on the screen that pulled him out of the evening's festivities. There was a strange moment where Will tried hard to piece it all together. A garbage truck had pulled into the dump. A grieving mother was sobbing into the microphone, a look of extreme emotion, the likes of which he'd never seen on screen before, nothing so raw. Sure it was melodrama, at its height, but he recognized true pain in the woman's face. Will was surprised that the proprieties people observed in American media had not trickled down into Nicaraguan news. There was still sensationalism in the stories they ran. In the US, you'd never see an interview with the woman whose child had just passed, even on the worst of the worst stations, it was always a neighbor, or brother, or uncle who could manage to put together some sensible words.

“So, we'll keep meeting there at Congranja, if you can keep your mouth shut,” Paulo was saying to Will. “Can you keep your mouth shut?”

Will snapped to, away from his attention to the TV that was getting beat up again. The screen went squiggly, searching for a signal. “Sure, let's do it.”

“You'll get a job taxi-ing, and we'll all have jobs and meet at lunch. We'll pretend we're normal.”

The screen flickered back on, the shot angled over the shoulder of the weeping mother and towards a pile of cardboard boxes broken down, flat and soggy. And now a dirty-faced man began to explain the incident. Will recognized Gisella's shop in the distance. Maybe it was just because the country was smaller, and people were closer together, but he kept finding himself in the middle of coincidences like this.

"I think I could get you a job driving a taxi – if you've already got the taxi. You could do your camera work and drive at the same time. I would see that movie," Aristotle said.

The mother had covered her son with one of the cardboard boxes as he napped. "*El sol hace muy calor hoy. Muy calor.*" The boys had been playing and running around and when the truck pulled in, it didn't even slow down. It almost crashed into one of the boys still running. They scattered, but couldn't get to the boy taking a nap. He was crushed.

"And then you can make your crazy movies about us." Aristotle smiled with the wild look in his eye Will recognized from his earlier afternoon episode.

22 February

Will–

I write the date today because I read this morning in the obituaries (that tells you something of how we age, doesn't it, that now I'm reading the obituaries?) I read that your father died. Heart failure. "Survived by a son, Will Dante." It was strange seeing your name in print. And a survivor, no less. You're such a figment to me now, almost as though that whole thing that we had known, that whole strange life that we had lived, wasn't real. But then I see that another film has been released, or your name in the paper today, and I know I'm not crazy. Or maybe I'm reminded that I'm crazier than I thought.

You're probably thinking by now I'm not even writing these to you. By now you're thinking I'm doing this all for me. To remind myself that I'm real. That I'm a feeling thinking thing. And you know what. You're fucking right. It is for me. That I write Will at the top of the letter means nothing.

I've been stained by you. True, that much is true. But I've had a history of practicality, hmm, how appropriate – of survival – that prohibits me from wasting too much unnecessary energy on things better left alone.

I believe maybe your father is like this too?

Where is he now? What does he see from up there? From wherever he is. I think he and I had a lot in common.

Ar.

Ext. Cemetery, plot next to Norlan's grave – Day

Marbelys died 11 years after Will moved South and the day before his thirty-seventh birthday. Will had moved into the place on the beach, the one that Marbelys had taken him to when she taught him to drive the taxi. Will sold screenplays to a former producer-director with whom he had done some script doctoring. He left the funeral, where people he had seen many times over in the last ten years coming and going from the house, occupying space, filed by him. Many of them looked him in the eye for the first time on that day. It had taken these ten years to fully fold in. It hadn't bothered him. He was wholly loved by Marbelys and that had been enough. But when they filed past him and stared him in the eyes, taking him by the hands and shaking mightily, he realized it had affected him more than he would allow himself. Still in the suit that Paulo had let him borrow that was too short in the legs and too wide in the waist, he headed back to his house in Pedro's old taxi.

W-

Evelyn's a widow now. Just a year after your father goes, Paddy takes his leave. Dak and I went to make the arrangements, though I'm not sure why. Seems Paddy had been planning the whole thing for years. She gave me a folder with her own detailed plan as well, straight down to a sample program for the Methodist proceedings of the service.

She's not okay on her own. I'm thirty-eight years old. Have two children, a husband and make consistent trips to the Midwest trying my hardest not to notice (or make up?) tiny signs of my mother's failing mind. Did you ever think it could come to this? Here's the latest sign: Evelyn fails to make arrangements for the lawn service. When the Homeowners' Association wrote the tenth letter (awkwardly rephrased each and every time) in turns separated by seven days suggesting, then requesting, then demanding that something be done about the "dandelion dilemma," then the "wildflower experiment gone awry," then the "unsightly weed infestation of epic proportions" they then sent me a certified package with a file containing copies of all ten letters. I had to call a landscaping firm to take care of the yard and paid them extra to put out the yearly Christmas decorations "recommended" by the gleeful (albeit dictatorial) civic association.

This is my life now. That and preschool. I must be years and years away from you.

Dak saw a preview for the latest film. We might see it Friday. If the babysitter doesn't cancel again.

Ar.

Int. The New Aurora Picture Show – Day

Will returned to the city one time. Since having lived in Nicaragua, he had screened some of his films in a theatre in Managua. There was one place that showed some of his work. It was after he had done a documentary that showed the squalor of the dumps. Will had spliced it with actual campaign film of the blowhard Chavez copier – Sal “Cuchillo” Hernandez. Some small groups in Nicaragua had petitioned its showing despite the unfavorable portrayal of Sal. Once it had been nominated for an Academy Award, it was no longer shown. Too much American attention was not anything that Sal wanted a part of, especially if it meant garnering American sympathy. It was the most overtly political Will had gotten in his films. And the only time.

So eleven years after he had moved to Nicaragua, Will went back to the city. He hadn't thought about it much. Really at all. He thought it'd be interesting to see the reaction of Americans to the new direction his film had taken.

He walked the familiar street. Fairview. Thought about the dog. Jesús, of all things, the dog. And the cracks in the sidewalk. Then Arri. He didn't hold any delusions about going to see her. But couldn't fight off the feeling that any minute he might just catch some coincidence of her passing. Maybe a vision of her. Would she recognize him? Suntanned and yes, maybe thinner.

By the time he had made it down the street to the theatre with its vestibule and grandish marquis, though the viewing was scheduled for eleven o'clock in the morning, the moon stubbornly held its place in the sky, a wisp of an orb, almost nothing against the bright white heat. He had remembered feeling even back then, when he had been here, the place always seemed as though it might be just on the verge. Just being worked out

of the system. The ancient free-standing popcorn machine still stood there, looking older than ever, greeting people with its archaic, over-festooned gold painted details of curly-cues and elaborate stenciling.

He went into the theatre. Thinking about his past. How he had met her in this place. He had told himself it never would have worked. In the long run. It never would have. But he couldn't help thinking about what might happen were she here, in the theatre. He banished the thought as soon as it leaped forward. This is not why he had come back. He had only wanted to witness the film here. For a last time. In this place. Nothing more. The dated houselights in their tri-color plexi-glass casings high on the theatre walls dimmed.

The end was not always what it seemed. Neither was the beginning. Kittens were born with their eyes closed, some cosmic blindfold protecting them from a reality too harsh, too caustic. Infants were first created in the darkness. Hatchlings. Webbed fingers and toes petting the warm goo in slow motion. Ideas too had stages of germination. Out of the blue, inception, percolation, fruition. Insects, animals, people; creation from darkness to light to darkness again. Film began with a fade out. The house came down; the dying of the light. Black. Pause. Disjointed flicker. Then, thwap-thwap. The theatre in Managua had just rid itself of their projector. They would not show celluloid anymore. The upkeep was too difficult, and the payoff wasn't worth it. Audiences had gotten used to the HDTV and HDV technology, and no could no longer abide the celluloid faces on screen. Will would not make the switch. And he wanted to see his film projected large. Other filmmakers were saying, and had been saying for years, that having to synchronize sound and video was too limiting. That it was ruining

the art of “film.” Video was the *only* direction film was going. That if you used video, then you were free to get one step closer in the art/life continuum. Less separating the two. Will didn’t think in these terms. Film was film. Video was something else entirely. He thought there was something sacred in the separation between art and life – and as soon as there wasn’t anymore, art became infinitely less interesting to him.

This is why he sat in the back. As close as he could get to the projector. Out of habit, manipulating the constraints of his shoulder and elbow joints, he shimmied his hand between the seats and placed it against the back wall, just to see if he could feel the vibration of the projectionist’s feet as he entered the room. For a stint, back when he had still been a script doctor, there was an especially large man who had a distinct shuffle. He never saw the man actually enter the projection room – his face, his body – for he was always watching the movie, but he could tell the man on *The Outside* in the grand foyer by his shuffle. The same shuffle he felt through the wall and into his hand, metatarsally. Tiny musculature, nerve endings, interacting with synapses to register vibration. Then interpretation. The imagined manifestation of a person behind the vibration. A person and his thickness. His feet. His shortlong, slide shuffle, step. What was it about being alone in the dark in this moment before *The Moment* that made him classify and organize even the smallest of memories, to watch them ephemerally enter him and pass through each stage of recognition, synthesis, and judgment, methodically, until it made lasting contact in some way that marked itself as a physical, fleshy part of him? Had Arri taught him to take off his shoes, and tuck his feet underneath him? Had it been with her that he first developed this habit? He could not remember anymore.

To thwart further distraction, he sat still, hands resting lightly on his legs, Beethoven on the verge of releasing the first chord out of its retreat in his very being. Deep breath. Still black. He always paused here to be sure he hadn't brought anything extra in with him. His hat on the seat next to him, some change in his pocket, knot in his left shoulder, these spoiled memories; rancid-milk-grip on his subconscious unfairly occupying space earmarked for his experience of the film, should he forget to make a deliberate letting go of it here in the dark. The last on the inventory was as tangible and present as the rock hard jingle in his pockets.

There was a distinct smell to the cinema these days. Not to the theatre itself, necessarily, although to that, too, he supposed, but a smell to the cinema as a whole. It was the smell of capricious idolatry. He used to have a certain sense that he could do just about anything he wanted on-screen and they'd forgive him for it. Even laud and magnify him for it. Forever, or until the winds changed. Whichever came first. But when he started his own films, when he started doing it, he thought, it'd only attract a certain kind. A voyeuristic-guilty-pleasure-I-like-it-but-I-shouldn't type person. The kind of person who'd be ashamed to admit he'd seen any of the films when small-talking his way through this winter's snobbish soirees. But now, he no longer needed it to be for the masses. For the by-products of the Industrial Revolution. For those whose lives were such that film and music and Black and White wasn't a part of their vocabularies. There was a sort of paradoxical principle at work, however. An ironic theory of opposites. The more he attempted to control for whom the film was, the less control he actually wielded. He'd found the more mirrors he held up to their faces, the more he began to construct, not the Truth, but a Funhouse Sort-Of Reality, that those people could simply discard,

another contribution to the Theater of Spectacle, right up there with the tight-rope circus bears and the Vaudevillian butterfly dancers.

It was in these moments, these black thirty seconds that existed between the dimming of the lights to pitch and the awaited forcing of light through the thinnest, strongest of materials, that he felt the closest to his Creation. Celluloid. The name itself sounded vaginal. A membrane of sorts projecting birth, sharp and fresh and wailing, onto the screen. And there was animal in it. He remembered a heated debate with Arri over the animal products used in the production of celluloid. Crushed and boiled cattle bones made up the gelatinous photo-sensitive emulsion coating. The title screen. He imagined the impossibly tiny letters on the film itself, the real medium, where the art existed in its most touch-able form, though one couldn't touch it. Another paradox. Each piece of film, twenty-four frames a second, signified something completely different in his head because he had seen, held, made each of the frames by his own hand. What the audience witnessed could not be the experience he had of the filmmaking. And likewise, it was nearly impossible for him, as filmmaker, to witness the films as they must have. Will looked across the few smattering of heads in the theatre. She wasn't there. Of course she wasn't there.

Frank Wyatt Production. Lapel Executive producers. Children's names. Costumes. Set design. Music. Lighting. The necessary evil of opening credits. All that is production. WD. 24, 48, 72, 96. Black.

In his mind he saw each one of the tiny letters. Double yu, aeck, ay, tee. He forced himself to see the frames on the screen as others would: *What Happened to Simeon Adams*.

Then gray. Another 24, 48, 72, 96, 120 frames. The careful casting of early afternoon shadows. Little gray figures tiny and outlined on the hallway wall framed in the perfect rectangle of a classroom door. There is another light source. The afternoon sun casts the shadows awkwardly against the wall. The score. Brilliant. He loved it still, to this day, even after hearing it over and over again as they edited; he'd truly come to love this piece and its precise synchronization with the action, no, the meaning of the film. Bittersweet foreboding. Playful clarinet. Woodwind: the sprightly instrument acts as the children's sweet voices. The cello hums its bass on a level somewhere near inaudible. Its masculine notes issue forth less like music than a machine, snoring its efficiency. It would later wake into Pain, seeking its opportunity, its staged entry, as if the last child late from recess. He had wanted something reminiscent of Ravel's *Bolero*, and he had found it in this lyrical row between clarinet and cello. The clarinet's alternating trill and staccato act as melody. It conducted the movement of the music, just as the children entering the schoolroom conducted the framing of the shot. They were all there, fifteen seemingly identical pied pipers. The camera shot them from low, tilted upwards depicting them as fine little men, little toy soldiers. Jaws and chins protruded at awkward angles. Their voiceless laughter was positively palpable. They were much larger than their shadows had hinted at, surreally so. They tumbled and hop over each other into their desks. Wanting to learn. Craving attention. Eager to be poured into. Clarinet in major key. Crisp and bright; an early September day. Underneath, the cello asserted its rhythmic, percussive presence. Soon, as Ravel's drums in *Bolero*, its fulsome tones would usurp the melody.

First intertitle: "Take out your school books, class! Quiet down!"

The children obeyed. Boys scurried to their desks. There was a manufactured neatness to their uniform collars and sweater vests that was magnified by the 35 millimeter. Fifteen children. Sixteen desks. Neat little rows. They swallowed up their composition books opening and turning the pages, clamoring to be the first. The kids had been the perfect candidates for just the overacting this would require. He saw now, in the darkness of the empty room, the large screen, that it had come off exactly as he had pictured it. The choreographed boys watched, as the teacher, in perfect penmanship, white-smocked in haloed innocence, listed answers, one by one. Newly shorn haircuts, bobbed up and down; determined tongues and furrowed brows confirmed the accuracy of their answers, collectively erasing the exuberance of the schoolyard.

His favorite two boys, Edgar and Simeon, were in the back. Cain and Abel. Two of the most skilled actors he had ever worked with and not yet eleven. Edgar, raven-black hair and beautiful. Perfect teeth. He had almost crimson red lips that never needed additional paint. They'd even made the other boys' lips paler to emphasize the almost bejeweled quality of Edgar's. And those delicate fingers. He had wanted a close-up early on, but could never justify the shot; he needed to emphasize the uniformity of the group. Simeon was all tow-headed defiance with that cock-eyed mouth and lazy eye. My god he was scary. Watching it now, he felt a little sheepish in his bold characterization. The Beautiful One condemning the wild-eyed boy to his lot in life. The Always Scapegoat, the predetermined target of misplaced ire. They gave their passionate, child frustration all to Simeon. Simeon's gloom and pain hadn't yet become the sixteenth boy. If you weren't meticulously scanning every boy, you'd never notice the just-a-little-off-quality of his presence, until, that is Edgar and Simeon are side-by-

side. Until they were there up against each other. Two stories high, it was the first medium close-up in the film. Simeon and Edgar. A beat. Just there. Then pan.

Edgar scribbled, his miniature school desk lop-sidedly rocking, warped from the summer days spent closed up and out of use. He ripped out the page and leaned over the shoulder of the vanilla boy in front of him to drop the note into his lap. He remembered not feeling quite right about asking the kid to let his perfect hand linger on the other little boy. But it had introduced the conspiratorial camaraderie, that almost sexual tension he needed in the shot. Next to Edgar, Simeon stared at his paper. An undeniably adult expression crept across his face. It began with the chin. Tension. An awkward purse of the lips. Some uplighting captured the callous angular arch of his eyebrows. The expression was unpolluted. No one could have taught this boy this look. It was inherent. In it was pain, anger, resentment and resignation. He never looked up at the teacher. Never saw his angel, his only intercessor.

The shot They had criticized the most, The Simeon Shot, they had dubbed it, was a little long, they claimed, a little melodramatic, and definitely boring. They were wrong. It was Beauty. He was discordant. Incongruous. His vest, a little too small, made the shirt underneath pucker awkwardly at the shoulder-seams. He had a weird cowlick in the back of his hair that made his head look misshaped and even disproportionate. His eyebrows curled unnaturally. He was Everything that made becoming aware of a truly ugly kid – an innocent kid that’s supposed to get every opportunity the beautiful Edgar gets, though we know he won’t because of the shameful reactions, bottom-of-the-ocean-creatures-that-don’t-have-eyes-kind of reactions lurking away amidst the cesspool of our grubby subconsciouses – that made us uncomfortable. It was hard seeing him up there,

writ large. And They said exactly what he thought they'd say, covering up their own discomfort, their own shame, their own instinctive revulsion, with academic assertions of "pace inconsistency" and an "unfortunate heavy-handed cinematography characteristic of his later work that evokes an era of Hollywood long dead: the just victim of cinematic Darwinism." How they could reduce Art to tight and volatile accusations, discarding all that it meant, all that he believed out the world's window? A painted canvas sliced open with a few choice words. As if a cogless gear, the victim of overuse, it had ceased to be effective, and therefore, was no longer viable in the world of machinations. Will had stopped caring about film critics back when the first dared to criticize Chaplin.

The cello began its issuance of dominion over the clarinet, though it was still audible, still impressive. The vibration of bow on string. Loud. He remembered asking them to pull in the cellos even louder than the rest of the score to make the audience squirm. Horse hair on synthetic metal. White and animalistic on dark and tungsten. A subterranean timbre you could feel in your very marrow. Edgar took his fist below the desk. It passed through extreme close-up for a split second. Little black hairs blurred his knuckles. They didn't even have to move the setup; it was one of those accidents trapped on film that you keep. He rapped the back of his chair three times. Three harsh shrieks from the cello. The angel turned around. Not petrified, yet. Only curious, he told her. You're only curious, at first. All at once, the kids descended, like locusts; they seemed to multiply. Simeon couldn't even be seen. They began the pounding. The Angel ran out into the hall.

Second intertitle: "Headmaster Blackwell! Headmaster Blackwell! Come quickly!" She never returned to the shot.

Instantly, their cherubic faces transformed. All fourteen kids, ugly minions, surrounded him. The desks fell out of their neatness. Mayhem reigns. The tempo of the cello quickened. Simeon's blond head appeared under the throng. Edgar twisted inhumanly to maneuver his wallops around the knee of a boy who had somehow, in the melee, found himself between Edgar and his target. He pounded the top of Simeon's head, awkwardly, a machine horribly off-kilter. Other boys held down Simeon's shoulders. It was a pulsing heathen. It was Revulsion itself. Legs and elbows and fists and arms and Madness. Indistinguishable. A few boys at the top of the mess had received the un-choreographed elbow to the eye and fallen out of the frenzy. Near the nucleus, the pounding continued. Simeon's face was seen for the briefest of moments as his eyes go askew. One towards the ceiling. The other weirdly aimed at the camera. A puddle of dark syrup crept around his head. Extreme slow motion. Begin masking. Edgar's obscured the view of Simeon's face. Only half of Edgar's wretchedness, a frightening profile, was visible. The dark corona surrounding Simeon's head amassed the occasional kneecap and desk leg. All was still. One last pull; bow drawn across string. Painful. Long. Sorry. Black.

W-

I had my second baby yesterday. A boy. Thomas.

Something about the process of birth, of that last exhalation before it's done, that cleans you of all kinds of things. Dak and I had been fighting non-stop, as only the two of us can (followed by angry beautiful sessions of early morning lovemaking – you were never angry – I tell this to Dak all the time. You are a third presence in our life. Always. Now you're the fifth presence, less pronounced, sure, but we still both feel you). Then the baby came and the four of us cut a picture that you would not believe even if you saw us. You might even say we're normal-looking. No, well, maybe not.

(Can't you tell I'm happier?)

The baby was out and Dak cut the cord. Maybe it was the drugs, maybe it was blindness from pain, maybe it was a chronically overactive imagination that had me actually seeing the nurse step on the pedal and drop it into the bin AND maybe hearing the small but solid thump of it did it, but I can't erase the image of that purple thing leaving her hands in their surgical gloves. That thing that had sustained life for those days that I carried the baby. But I felt such a relief, that something was lifted from me, and not just the baby. It was all the anger I had carried with me, Will. I had been feeding it for so long by carrying this on.

And so I don't hope for you anymore.

Even when I married, even after I had our first child, even as I celebrated the years of success and bounty with Dak, I thought anxiously of some future date. Some date when I would give it away. In the car on the way to work I would work out the details of our split. Of your return and Dak and me splitting up. Even before I knew I

was doing it I would get lost in the planning of it. I decided on visitation days. I even allowed myself to think that Dak might be okay with it all. (And even now, I still settle that he would – he's so easy. Fucking jazz.) But I don't think or hope for you. I know you're not coming back. As soon as that thing was gone, and I let go of you, I could see you would stay where you are. And now I can be where I am.

I will still write to you. You will still be here. But it doesn't haunt me now. It doesn't haunt me.

Ar.

Int. Ojo de Agua, Will's house - Midday

All his life he had written screenplays that ended unhappily. Something tragic. Something ugly. Something not expected, but inevitable all the same. But on returning back to Nica, he carved out a different ending. People weren't without redemption. He believed in people, especially children, and their ability to change. To make something good of the world. It was the only way he could rage like he knew he should against the world. Against an ever-encroaching fading light that threatened to drown him, to extinguish him if ever he allowed that much complacency, that much indifference. As such, he hadn't found much of any value in happy endings. And now. Unbeknownst to him, unwilling, he found himself happy. His own happy ending. And he found he wasn't bored at all. Or unchallenged. It felt warm and nice and full. Not complete, to be sure. But good to know that things could be happy *and* somehow real.

He didn't know what was next for him, and he didn't care. Despite himself, his movies – entirely filmed, edited, and produced in Managua – had garnered some critical acclaim and a sort of cult following in the States. And Mexico too. Even now, Nicaragua had not made its way to immersing itself wholly in the idea of cinema, having only moved up eleven spots in the race towards industrialization. Having been the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere for over fifty years, this leap would have to be enough progress for the time being.

It was on the anniversary of Marbelys' death that he found himself answering the door. Since he had left her home last year on the day that she passed, he had moved out to a small field all by himself. It took a few months of adjusting. No children to wake him in the middle of the night crawling into his bed to be near the warm adult who they

had grown to love as a favorite uncle. No year-round bustle as the children prepared for school just after the rooster calls. No American pop from twenty years ago blaring while afternoon chores were completed. In his hand he held a cup of coffee, distracted by his thinking about a woman who had become one of the only women in his life who had ever made him unreservedly happy – even the thought of her in her weighty walk and thin-lipped gap-toothed smile – warmed him in ways that his love for Arri, or even for his own mother had been unable to do. He thought about this kind of love, whatever this was. Even though he'd learned so many things since coming here, even though he had grown content – finally enough – to have this place resemble in some distant unknown way, but still less distant than he had ever been able to manage before – something like home, he had never fully understood that strange power of the unknown she held for him. He reached for the doorknob. Every time he walked through this door, he considered its perfect symmetry. Five by five panels of square oak that held a doorknob directly in its center. He wondered at how Figueres himself probably would have approved of this tiny twenty-year-old little home, with its efforts at evenness, its attempts to be right, even in a world growing and bursting all around it in sometimes cancerous, sometimes, healthy ways. He thought about Figueres having loved his own mother. And wondered if there was not some of that untouched, untainted love, some of that unknowing in his love for Marbelys.

The day was also Will's birthday. The knock on the door might have been Marcela, who had a crush, he was convinced, on her too-old Uncle Will. Or maybe one of the guys from the market coming over to drag him early to the *pulpería* for some refreshments. But it was too early even for them. The door was heavy and his wrist

popped painfully under the weight of it. Will grimaced, opened the door and found no one there, but a package left on the floor.

Mi amigo,

I have found this package at the post office. We have never been very good at sorting, and soon the stack of all these letters began to overflow even the box where the misaddressed letters go (which is a pretty big box, my friend). I am leaving it here because I am too embarrassed that my laziness has meant you are deprived of so many letters. But then I am thinking that these will be the perfect present for you. So even though I found them in early May, I have kept them safe at my own house (a newly federal offense I am told) despite the wife's imploring me to read just one little note – just so that I might give them to you today on your day of days. Who would not love to read over all these thoughts from one's life all at one point? Who could they be from? What is my mysterious friend keeping from me? I might hope that you will forgive me and that we may still drink to your birthday together on this evening.

Paulo

The air of the morning changed immediately. Palpably. Arri's red hair. Her scent. A bird's eye shot of her peering over the balcony with that damned dog. Down on him. He smiled the smile of a man who had all of sudden tripped, but on nothing, finding that the ground under his feet had inexplicably shifted. A big change like gravity or the laws of force had experienced some sort of cosmic blip of inconsistency. He reached for the box that he attributed to this seismic shift,

this world moment. The box that was lighter than air – full of nothing but paper – but as heavy as the whole world. The whole world. He picked it up.

It was okay. He decided. Before he ever read them. (He hadn't even opened the box yet. He didn't have to.) He finished his coffee, sweet and milky just as Marbelys took it, tracing the dimensions of the sealed box. He knew Paulo had taped the box shut to prevent his snooping wife and curious children. Through his fingertip, he could feel Arri.

One of the effects of his time here, of his half-life in Nicaragua, were his new intentions never to act out of anything but quiet deliberation and the wondering eyes of the children he had met in his life. He had given himself fully over to the joy of superstition. Of mystic make-believe. Of the gall to believe in things that weren't provable.

He would finish this last cup, or maybe another. Then he would open the back door and in his bare feet, perhaps even naked, he'd walk out onto the small porch, step off the edge and allow his weight to sink into the sand. He would walk to the beach that was his backyard with the box. He would make his way to the sandy, changing shore and the water that insatiably drank from it again and again, again and again.

He took another sip and turned the box, wondering about Arri's handwriting and how it might have changed over the years. If it grew longer and less hasty in her aging. He felt the concrete wall of the Aurora picture show in

his fingertip on that box. He felt the cold concrete floor of the loft where he would wake early to make Arri French press before she left for work in the mornings in his bare feet. He could circle the ringlets of Arri's hair, right there on that box. And because he was calm (if not a little lachrymose) in his life now, he sipped the still-steaming coffee in the heat of the morning, tearful, awaiting the day full of remembering.

References

References

Much of the inspiration for Figueres, including some of his ethereal language, came from Santiago Calatrava. Several quotations were pulled from Calatrava's official website: www.calatrava.com as well as an article from the 31 October 2005 issue of *The New Yorker*.

Vita

This is Kate Martin Williams' first novel. She currently lives in Knoxville, Tennessee with her husband, their dog, and a little lima bean.