Temptation

SALOMÓN BRIANSKY (1902–1955)

Translated from the Yiddish by Moisés Mermelstein

Salomón (Shloym) Briansky was a Zionist from a Hasidic family in Poland. In 1934 he immigrated to Bogotá, where he published three volumes of fiction, all written in Yiddish. "Temptation" is a wonderful psychological tale with a Hasidic sensibility.

NATHAN, THE SHOEMAKER from Porisov, a small Jewish village in Poland, came home one evening shortly before his departure for Colombia with a Torah scroll under his arm. With a slight shiver, he lay the holy object down on the table. His wife, Tzipporah, who at that moment stood skimming the broth, froze with the spoon in midair. "What can this mean?" her staring eyes asked in silence. What was a Torah scroll doing in her house? But Nathan—tall and broad shouldered, with a dense, pitch-black beard that framed his full, fleshy cheeks—hardly paid attention to his wife's wide-open eyes. He took off his frock coat, wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, and asked if supper was ready.

"I was about to set the table," Tzipporah said, coming out of her stupor. "But where are we going to eat if a Torah scroll is on the table?"

Nathan quickly picked up the scroll and placed it in the cupboard. Only when husband and wife sat at the table, eating their kasha and broth, did Tzipporah ask whence the holy scroll had come. At first Nathan did not answer, but when his wife repeated the question, he said that an opportunity had arisen to buy it at a reasonable price.

"What is a reasonable price?" asked Tzipporah with amazement. "Since when have you, my husband, become a dealer in Torah scrolls?"

"You've gotten quite good at picking on me!" snapped Nathan. "What a plague of a Jewess you are! You were already told I got it for a reasonable price; now stop pestering me."

From the way the words were uttered, it was clear he could not explain why he had suddenly spent a whole hundred zlotys on a Torah scroll, especially on the eve of such a long trip.

Such were the circumstances that had led to the unexpected purchase: a notification from the post office had arrived that afternoon announcing a certified letter. It occurred to Nathan that this must surely be related to his departure, because the mail he received—such as it was—always had to do with some momentous occasion. He took off his apron, put on his frock coat, and went to claim the letter. It consisted of a thick stack of papers regarding his trip. But they were written in gentile letters, which he was unable to read. He did not trust his daughters to decipher them, even though they had some understanding of the language, so he decided to go to Mordechai Mezritsher, whose son was versed in gentile matters and spoke many tongues.

Mordechai Mezritsher was a small Jew about fifty years old with a pair of lively black eyes that darted around like birds in a cage. He was pleased that Nathan had come by.

"Ah, a visitor. Have a seat, Nathan. What's new?"

"To be frank with you, Mordechai, I have not come to see you but your son. I would like to have him read some papers I have just picked up at the post office. People say he is quite the expert in such matters."

"I wish he devoted his mind to the Talmud instead of immersing all his senses in those heretical books. Then I would have a learned son," sighed Mordechai. "Come in, you are needed to do a favor," he called.

Mordechai's son was a comely, dark-skinned lad with sparkling eyes who sewed bootlegs on a machine all day long and studied during the night. Everything became clear to Nathan after the boy deciphered the papers and explained the details to him.

In the midst of their conversation, Israel-León, the tailor, stopped by. All three of them prayed at the same synagogue, where many craftsmen gathered. The arrival of yet another guest pleased Mordechai, a joyous and animated fellow who did not frown at a drink with close friends. He asked them to sit down and wiped the sweat from his face. "It's terribly hot outside," he

remarked. "A cold glass of beer would be a delight." So they sent the apprentice to fetch some bottles of beer.

"What do you think of that, Israel-León?" Mordechai said. "Nathan is fleeing from us. He just got all the papers." He asked Nathan when he planned on leaving, but instead of waiting for an answer he went on.

"Tell me, dear Nathan, what kind of place is that Colombia you are off to? Do Jews live there? Do they have a rabbi, a kosher slaughterer, a synagogue to pray in? And, finally, dear Nathan—may you ever be healthy—how does a Jew like you, close to fifty years old, decide to escape to the devil knows where?"

"Well, what can one do, Mordechai? It's hard to make a living here. And besides, I have daughters to marry off," Nathan said with a sigh.

They remained seated for a while in deep and heavy silence. Nathan's simple words went right to their hearts. The bitter present and uncertain future of all the Jews in Poland were clear to them. Suddenly, Israel-León's voice cut through the silence: "Why should we add more weight to the heart of a Jew who has decided to throw himself into such an adventure? Anyone who wishes to remain a Jew and follow Jewish law can do so, even in the desert. A Jew like Nathan would not undertake such trip lightly. Do you know, Nathan, what has just occurred to me? It would be a wonderful thing if you could take along a Torah scroll. You're setting off for a land where there will be few Jews, if any. Even if a congregation could be gathered there, who knows if they have a scroll? And perhaps God has appointed you to be the first Jew in that faraway land to assemble a quorum for prayer."

"It certainly would be a wonderful thing," agreed Nathan. "But a Torah scroll could cost several hundred zlotys, and where am I to get the money?" For a long moment the wrinkles on Israel-León's brow deepened. Then his face lit up.

"You know what, Nathan? In our small synagogue we have several Torah scrolls. We could give one of them to you, and with God's help you will someday send us money to pay us back," he said.

That very day, between afternoon and evening services in the tailor's synagogue, some ten men gathered. At first, these simple Jews could not grasp what Israel-León was asking of them. Just think, to take a Torah scroll out of the Holy Ark and send it off to a remote place! Israel-León explained that this would be a good deed of which each of them would partake, and they

owed no less to one of their members who was about to set off on such a long journey. At that moment, Berl Israel, the main trustee, intervened: "Listen to me. Nathan is one of us. He has worshiped among us for over twenty years. Many of his hard-earned zlotys lie in these walls and in the holy books we have here. I propose that we ask him for a down payment of a hundred zlotys, and with God's help he will mail the remainder to us later."

Hirsh Odeser, who had been Berl's rival for years, grumbled that a general assembly should be convened to decide the matter, but Berl objected that this was not the time for politicking. They resolved to give a Torah scroll to Nathan and celebrated with a few drinks. The blessings and well-wishing lifted Nathan's spirit; true joy, the finest wine of all, warmed his heart. He, Nathan the shoemaker from Porisov, might well have the honor of being the first Jew to bring a Torah scroll to a distant, foreign land.

Half an hour after taking leave of his friends and starting home, his merriment began to wane. The three digits making up the number one hundred appeared suddenly before him in the dark. They danced before his eyes and mocked him with questions: "When did God name you his envoy in charge of supplying Jews with Torah scrolls? It's just a foolish notion that some religious Jew—and an idle one at that—has put into your head. Go back right away, return the scroll, and get back your hard-earned zlotys. It would be a far greater mitzvah to leave that money to your wife and children."

He stood there for a while but suddenly panicked. "Nathan the shoemaker," a hidden voice warned him. "Who are you to play with such a holy object? Do you believe you are purchasing mere leather and thread?"

A shiver of dread ran through Nathan's body. "It is wrong to regard such holy objects lightly," he muttered to himself, trying to apologize. He pressed the Torah scroll to his chest and strode home.

So that is how—along with Nathan's shoe lasts, rulers, hammers, pliers, and files—the first Torah scroll, wrapped in clothes and bedding, sailed over the stormy waters of the Atlantic to that distant, foreign land, Colombia.

The glowing sky hanging over the suburbs on the Atlantic shore poured fire overhead. The burning sun shone on the half-naked black and bronze bodies of porters carrying huge loads. Shopkeepers kept wiping sweat off their faces. Crowds beset kiosks that sold cold drinks. The sound of car horns blended with the loud cries of people hawking lottery tickets and newspapers. Amid this multicolored mass—black faces, curly woolen hair, white pupils of the eyes, and thick hanging lips—one could discern the occasional tourist. Tall, blond, clad in a white suit, with a colonial hat on his head, dark glasses, and a camera hanging from his shoulder, around he walked, contemplating the scene from above, like a wealthy relative attending the wedding of poor kinsfolk.

Under the radiant sky, on the hot steamy asphalt, into the midst of this multicolored cluster, the Master of the Universe had also thrown some fifteen of His chosen people: Jews from towns and villages in Poland, Lithuania, and Bessarabia. Instead of discovering the legendary El Dorado, where gold is raked off the streets, they found fiery climes that fry the brains and a frosty cold that ices the heart. The longing for their homeland gnawed and devoured them, but the way back was cut off. So they trod the burning sand in the streets of the poor neighborhoods. They knocked on doors, and with the aid of a few words of broken Spanish peddled merchandise on the installment plan. Slowly, very slowly, they adjusted to the new surroundings.

The narrow and sandy street was crammed with single-story houses, small shops, and workplaces. Shoemakers sat on low benches by open doors. The sound of sewing machines, sanding planes, and wood saws could be heard throughout. The hoarse, drunken voice of a man trying to drown his bitter fate in alcohol issued forth from a liquor store. White, black, and bronze women trudged about, disheveled and shabby, and bought from odorous groceries and butcher shops. Naked children played in the hot sand, their dirty faces covered with flies. Dogs, tired from the heat, lay about with outstretched paws and hanging tongues, not even caring to chase the clouds of flies away from their bodies.

In this little street, in one of the workshops, bent over an old shoe, sat Nathan the shoemaker. His shirt, damp and open, showed a mighty, hairy chest. True, only a vestige of his once dense beard remained, a tuft barely covering the point of his chin. Still, it was the same old Nathan, the same full, ruddy cheeks, only tanned a little darker. Hardly a year earlier, shortly after treading for the first time the earth of his new home, Nathan had met the few Jews there. He was shocked to discover how they procured their livelihoods.

Two of them, who befriended Nathan, advised him to become a peddler. Among the wares they sold on credit were not only ladies' underpants and slips but also crucifixes and holy images. When Nathan saw such

merchandise, he fell speechless. Upon recovering, he stammered: "How can a Hasid like you, Meyer-Ber, ordained as a rabbi, and a pious Jew and a Torah scholar like you, Simon, even come close to such an impurity?" In the old country, Nathan, a typical shtetl Jew, would actually shut his windows to avoid hearing the impure chants of Christian processionals passing by. He could not grasp how others like him could bring themselves to make a living by selling such things.

"Well," said Meyer-Ber, smiling, "making a living may be compared to saving a life, and that is permitted even on Yom Kippur." Nathan still could not fathom this. An infinite distance separated him from such objects; generations had carved out an abyss between him and them. A voice at once within him and from far away in time commanded him, "No, no, never shall you draw livelihood from *their* holy objects."

After some sleepless nights, Nathan reminded himself that he had brought along his shoemaker's tools, stacked away somewhere at the inn where he was staying. He counted the dollars that he had sewn into the shoulder pad of his coat and decided to return to his old trade. It was not hard to find a workshop, and a year passed by as he set on his bench, mending the worn-out shoes of his poor neighbors in the barrio.

One cannot say that the beginning went smoothly. No, it was not easy for him to adapt. First there was the problem of the language. And the craft itself was different here. But Nathan stubbornly overcame all difficulties. Most of all, God's Holy Name stood by him, helping him to succeed. The poor folks of the neighborhood took a liking to the foreigner with the athletic build, who sat on his low bench from dawn to sunset, smiling goodnaturedly with his shining black eyes. The quality of his work was good, and he was willing to lend a few cents with a smile. True, he would not become rich this way. But he made a living, praised be God's Holy Name, and always had a few dollars to mail back home. Nathan had even managed to send some zlotys toward the debt on the Torah scroll. He also deposited several hundred pesos in the bank. Some time later, he would return home and live as God had ordained. "Because," thought Nathan occasionally, "what kind of a life is this in this strange land, far from wife and children, bereft of Sabbaths and holidays, without a synagogue, a rabbi, or a kosher slaughterer?"

At other moments, Nathan thanked the Eternal One for bringing him to this new land. Mostly he did so in the evening hours, as he was about to close his shop. The burning sun would start to shrink, becoming a blood-red disk sinking quickly into the pleasant waters of the sea. At such times, Nathan would sit at his bench, unable to avert his glance from the fiery disk that had already reached the horizon. Slowly, the disk would sink into the water. Minute by minute it descended; soon it had dived halfway into the sea. Only a small part could still be seen, resembling a human head trying to peer over the horizon. Then, suddenly, the entire disk had vanished. Only a faint gleam, like a dying flame, remained to color the sky dark blue. Alone, the edges of the horizon reflected the fiery disk, as night arrived in this part of God's earth.

Nathan stayed seated, unable to take his eyes off the Creator's wonders. Serenity enveloped him, especially when he had had a good day. How much would that day's income amount to, converted to zlotys? Nathan reckoned some thirty zlotys. Wait a minute, he thought, as he recalculated. He had never had a head for figures. Why thirty? More than forty. Back in the shtetl he would have been satisfied to earn that much in a week. He thanked the Eternal One for the favor shown him, and his heart swelled with joy and hope. In one more year, he would be able to marry off his two eldest daughters properly, and with God's help, all would turn out fine.

Sometimes, however, he was seized with remorse. It started some two months after he had set up his small shop. One evening, a darkskinned woman about thirty years of age came into the shop. She looked around as if searching for something. When Nathan asked what he could do for her, she asked in Spanish if the maestro could make her a new pair of shoes. He stammered in his broken Spanish that here he only resoled shoes, but in the town he came from he had been the best craftsman, and his shoes were sheer adornments.

"*Muy bien*," said the woman. Nathan asked her to take a seat. She sat down and Nathan prepared to take her measurements. Not a believer in the new fashion of measuring with a tape, he looked around for a piece of paper. The preliminaries lasted all the longer as his glance began to slide along the stranger's fleshy body. It took him a while to find the right piece of paper, and when he did, it ripped. One could not say that happened intentionally, but everything simply slipped from his hands. His glance fell upon her high and firm breasts, delineated by her tight dress; upon her partially bare back, her round shoulders, and naked arms. When he was finally ready,

he asked her to remove her shoe and began to trace her foot on the paper. He felt the warmth of her slight foot on his wide, bearish paws, and a flame rushed through him. His hand started to slide up her leg, higher and higher. Strangely, the woman did not discourage him. Her full body just twitched nervously.

In the course of the few days required to finish her shoes, she came in often. She stayed a bit longer each time, asking innocuous questions. At first, Nathan could not understand why she ordered a pair of shoes from him rather than from one of the big stores. The more he pondered this riddle, the more his imagination presented him the succulent silhouette that ignited his blood with passion. One night, around ten o'clock, as Nathan sat half-dozing in front of his shop, she strolled by. The street was deserted. He greeted her, and she stopped in her tracks. He took her by the hand. She looked around, entered the shop, and stayed until dawn.

As it is written in the Talmud, one sin leads to another. Nathan's blood streamed with turbulence, like a violent river that has destroyed the dam that restrained it, leaving the waters unchecked. After all, no hindrances stood in his way. The women of the neighborhood were drawn to him like flies to honey. Especially the dark-skinned women, who invented all kinds of excuses to come to his shop. The radiance of his pitch-black eyes and his steely arms inflamed their blood.

And Nathan? He drank from this well like a desert wanderer who cannot quench his thirst. He felt as if he had cast away half his age. His sins, which lay like a load on his back, would frighten him from time to time. But that fear was no more than a shadow that vanished as swiftly as it had appeared. Back home, a Jew was held in check by a wife and children. There, he had been a craftsman who worshiped in a synagogue and fretted about livelihood. But here, where there were no obstacles, a man could do whatever he liked. At such times, Nathan would gladly have welcomed a miracle that would cause his strong body to shrink suddenly and become small and thin.

Days, weeks, and months passed. The Hebrew month of Elul approached. True, in the new land, no signs reminded him of the impending Days of Awe. No one blew the ram's horn or knocked on his shutters at dawn, calling him to worship. But looking at his calendar one afternoon, he realized with a start that in a few days it would be time to attend the first services. He panicked. "Master of the Universe," he sighed, "the Days of Awe are upon us, but no preparations have been made." Indeed, it was no surprise that the few Jews involved in prostitution rings should not care about the Days of Awe. But what of Meyer-Ber the Hasid and Simon the rabbi? Had they also forgotten the High Holy Days?

Nathan removed his apron, in preparation to go downtown, seek out Simon and Meyer-Ber, and discuss the matter with them. Just as he was about to leave the shop, a customer came in with some work that had to be done immediately. Soon night had fallen. The store where Simon and Meyer-Ber were likely to be found had already shut. Nathan, dead tired from the day's work, decided to leave the matter for the morrow, when God willing he would attend to it. At that moment, accursed Satan—who will stick his rotten snout in the way whenever a Jew is about to perform a mitzvah—stole into Nathan's heart and gnawed on it like a worm.

Satan demanded an explanation: "In what holy book is it written that you of all people—Nathan the shoemaker—have been appointed by God to organize a Jewish congregation? You brought along a Torah scroll that you had purchased with blood money. If you approach them meekly, you will never recover a single peso. When will you get back the hard-earned money you poured in? How do you plan to repay the debt? If pious Jews like them can trade in images of Jesus and crucifixes, surely you can exploit the situation to recover your money. Don't rush. Take it easy. If they can do without High Holy Day services, so can you."

And because the lust for money is so strong, Nathan heeded Satan's counsel and failed to seek out his coreligionists. Two days passed very slowly, two days that seemed as interminable as the very wanderings of the Jewish people. Nathan's unrest, mixed with helpless anger, grew with each hour that Simon and Meyer-Ber did not appear.

On the evening of the third day, they entered his shop, along with a huge man with a thick, red neck. Nathan recognized the man. Everyone in town knew of his shady dealings, but nobody dared say a word. He was a bully and an informer. On the other hand, he performed favors for his fellow Jews, such as intervening with the authorities on their behalf. He would go down to the port and greet immigrants as they arrived, helping them get the official papers they needed. He also lent them their first pesos. Behind his back, he was called Reuben the Rat, but to his face he was called Don Roberto. Nathan stared at the man with curiosity and surprise. He reckoned that

Meyer-Ber and Simon had come about regarding the matter that weighed so heavily on his heart, but what had this character to do with it?

The three of them sat down. Meyer-Ber spoke first. "As you well know, Reb Nathan, the Days of Awe are approaching. Two years ago there was no possibility of organizing services. Last year, we had the requisite number but no Torah scroll. Today, however, we have a quorum of Jews—may they multiply—and you have a Torah scroll. Therefore it would be a sin not to conduct proper services. So we have come to borrow the Torah scroll from you."

At that, Don Roberto took out one hundred pesos and rasped, "I contribute one hundred pesos from my own pocket."

Nathan listened but did not answer. For a while there was deep silence, during which Israel-León's tightly drawn face appeared before Nathan. His sad and cloudy eyes spoke mutely to him: "Nathan, God forbid! Do not dare profane the great honor the Lord of the Universe has bestowed upon you. He has charged you with bringing the first Torah scroll to a distant, foreign land, so that Jews there might properly worship during the Days of Awe." Nathan harkened to Israel-León's sad voice, and said: "Thank you very much, my fellow Jews. I appreciate your gesture, Don Roberto. You may take the Torah scroll. There is no need to pay." And the first time the melodious call to the Torah was heard in the distant, foreign land of Colombia, Nathan's heart swelled with joy. Silently, he thanked the Eternal One for the privilege granted him: to bring the first holy scroll. And a silent happiness warmed his soul, for God had helped him withstand the temptation to trade for money this very great mitzvah.

CHILE

Asylum

ARIEL DORFMAN (b. 1942)

Ariel Dorfman, born in Buenos Aires, wrote about his upbringing in the memoir Heading South, Looking North *(1998). He teaches at Duke University and is the author of plays, poems, stories, and novels, all—like "Asylum"—with a political bent. His play* Death and the Maiden *(1991) was staged on Broadway and made into a movie directed by Roman Polanski. His other works include* Blake's Therapy *(2001),* Other Septembers *(2004), and* Feeding on Dreams *(2011).*

BARRERA LIKED TO tell everyone that he hardly slept at night. No more than a few hours, a few winks, that's what he liked to report to his son each morning, with a smile on his face, almost triumphantly, as if the persistence over the years of that alleged insomnia were a bizarre medal of honor, proof of some strange superiority over other mortals. That's how he'd gotten to where he was in the world, that's how he'd crawled out of poverty and *abandono*, by working more, by sleeping less, not at all, hardly a wink.

But now it had come true with a vengeance.

Si quieres que esto se termine, ya sabes lo que tienes que hacer.

Ever since that initial message in Spanish had appeared on Ricky's screen, ever since then, Barrera wasn't sleeping at night. Not a minute, not an hour. Nothing, nada.

"What does it mean, Dad?"

He had stared at the words on his son's computer, automatically translating them in his head, not quite ready to articulate them out loud, something warning him to beware, but beware of what?

If you want this to end, you know what you need to do.

Ricky looked at him quizzically. "If I want what to end? And what is it they want me to do, these people from this—this Comando Anesthesia who are sending me this—this—? Who are they?"

Barrera shrugged his shoulders. "How should I know?"

"C'mon, Dad. Look at what it says. ASK YOUR DAD. In the subject of the e-mail, see, ASK YOUR DAD."

"Yes, Ricky, I read the subject of your e-mail, thanks, that's why I'm here, that's why you dragged me away from my work, I can read it, I have read it, I still don't know what it means, probably it's just spam, or maybe one of your friends at school thought it would be fun to play a joke on me, a prank . . ."

"You think it's a prank?"

"Spam or a prank. What else could it be?"

And then Barrera had reached down violently over his son's right shoulder and then past Ricky's hand hovering on top of the keyboard; Barrera jabbed down and pressed the delete button, watched the message disappear from the screen, erased, gone, gone forever.

"Hey, I wanted to answer that!"

"No, you wanted *me* to answer, you wanted me to—what?—what were you going to suggest that I translate? *Dear Comando Anesthesia, exactly who the fuck are you? And exactly what the fuck do you need me to do?* and then they respond, *Te dijimos que le preguntaras a tu papá*, and if you studied Spanish like I've been asking you to for—but that's not the point, the point is they'll insist again that I have some sort of answer, and then you'll respond that—though no, in fact, it'll be me doing the work, responding for you, I'm supposed to be the go-between here, right? *Mi papá no tiene la menor idea, my dad hasn't the foggiest idea*, and so on and so forth, back and forth, *mensajes estúpidos* come and go, somebody laughing their heads off at us, at me, wasting my time, wasting your time, even wasting their time, whoever the hell they are, the bastards."

"OK, OK. I don't see why you're so upset. If it's only a joke, like you said . . ."

Ricky was right, of course: Barrera had overreacted. Later on, in his room, unable to close his eyes even for those few winks he always bragged about, Barrera had berated himself. Hadn't he been feeling for months that he was being locked out of his son's existence? Hadn't he been lamenting to the

mirror just this morning that the boy no longer seemed to need him, rarely came seeking advice, seemed to be growing more distant as his seventeenth birthday approached?

If you want this to end, you know what you need to do.

Maybe he should follow the advice offered in that silly message. If he wanted *this* to end, this discomfort between father and son, then he did know what he *needed to do*: apologize to Ricky, offer his help, open wide the door he had just so rudely and imprudently slammed shut. He'd take care of it in the morning, at breakfast, after having made the kid his favorite, the buckwheat pancakes *tan norteamericanos* that Cynthia had taught him how to griddle to perfection, a subtle gift from the boy's dead mother, one more remnant of her aroma in their town house; yes, Barrera would execute that plan, he'd—no, better still, he'd retrieve the message on his own, rescue it from the deleted items, and reply to it himself, explain that he would love to know what this was all about, even if it was a hoax or some such *tontería*, perhaps even confide in this Comando Anesthesia that he wanted to surprise his son with a detailed account, maybe the anonymous sender would commiserate with this father trying to impress a wayward son.

It was four in the morning, Ricky was asleep, now was the time.

Barrera logged into his son's e-mail, slipped in the purloined password, waited for the in-box to fill up.

Another message from Comando Anesthesia was waiting.

IF YOUR DAD PRETENDS HE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO, THEN SHOW HIM THIS.

Barrera hesitated.

Erase this message.

That was the first thing that flared up in his mind—to be replaced quickly by—*no, I can't, I can't do that. One thing is to read his mail to keep tabs on the boy, keep him out of trouble, but this, I've never done anything like . . . not like this,* and immediately: *Even if I did, if I could, who's to stop this madman? Who's to stop them from sending the message over and over again, sending it when I'm not there to delete, when I can't eliminate the damn thing?*

He was saved from a further flood of panicked thoughts by the shadow of Ricky behind him. And then Ricky's voice.

"Open it, Dad."

Not even reproaching him for sneaking into that oh-so-private e-mail account, not even angered by his father's refusal to cooperate before, by this betrayal of trust now. Merely matter of fact, merely *Open it, Dad*, only that.

Barrera double-clicked obediently, almost sheepishly, and there it was, there it was.

Te vamos a matar como a un perro. No, como a un perro no, porque los perros merecen mejor suerte. Te vamos a matar como se matan a los seres humanos: lentamente, para que sepas lo que te está pasando.

"Tell me what it says."

"No."

"*Perro* means dog. Is it about the dog you keep saying you'll buy me."

"No."

"... the dog you promised to buy me if . . . ?"

"If you studied Spanish. Which would have been helpful, right? You could be reading this nonsense on your own, right?"

"You want to know what I think, Dad?"

"I'd love to know what you think."

"I think this Comando fellow—whoever is behind these messages—I think they want you to read it to me, that's why they sent it in Spanish, even if the subject is in English. I think it's meant for both of us, that's what. So—don't force me to show it to somebody else, Dad. It said to ask you."

"We are going to kill you like a dog."

Barrera heard his voice translating—*isn't that how I make my living?*—what he had spent his *puta existencia* doing, the one thing he did well since he was a child, well enough so that he wouldn't have to do it forever in some godforsaken consulate near the stinking coconut oil–infested docks of Buenaventura, or close to the dangerous streets of Medellín, or even in air-conditioned quarters in Bogotá. Adroit and exact and rapid enough so he could graduate to an office in Washington and then to another more spacious one and ultimately a large room like the one he now occupied. Head of translators from and into Spanish at the department, head honcho, his job now and then, pressing and crushing and cornering each word in Spanish until it exposed the nakedness of its meaning, squeezing all peril and murk and ambivalence out of the language of his mother as he transferred every sentence into the quiet, clean certainties of his father's gringo tongue. That was Barrera's job as a kid, building a daily channel between the dark woman from that port city who had given him birth and the tall blond foreigner who left them when Barrera was eight, making

that man who was his father, had been his gringo *papá* for eight years, making him understand what the alien mass of sounds and syllables really meant, just like now he was going to make sure his gringo son understood, and just as he had helped her understand, the *hembra espléndida* who was to be his gringa wife, who had once been his wife. Barrera had been doing this all his life, and now here he was again, one more time, automatically translating those words that he should not be uttering, that he had not heard for almost eighteen years, that he did not want his son to take to someone else, that Barrera wanted to keep under wraps, domesticate, make those words safe, anodyne, and under control, yes, anesthetize them.

"We are going to kill you like a dog." Barrera's voice was neutral, almost remote. "No, not like a dog, because dogs deserve something better. We are going to kill you like a human being should be killed: slowly, so you know what is happening to you."

Ricky didn't react. Just like his mother, just like Cynthia to not give away her hand, tip anyone off to what she was thinking.

All they could hear in the silence of the night was the sullen whir of the computer, stirring codes or clicks or memories inside its spotless metal frame, deep inside its metal frame or maybe not that deep, maybe on the surface, all shiny and gleaming spotless.

Barrera knew that he was supposed to explode at the suggestion of this threat to the family, swear that he would call the police, call security at the department, hunt down the perpetrator of this madness, of this—that's what Ricky expected of him, that's what any father would do, that's what he couldn't bring himself to—not a sound, he who was so good at words and with words and at ease in two languages, abruptly transformed from head honcho into resident deaf-mute. That's what he was.

"What's going on, Dad? What in hell is this? Who would want to hurt us?"

And before Barrera could answer, another message flashed into the in-box, another letter from Comando Anesthesia, another subject heading:

THIS IS NOT A THREAT. YOUR DAD KNOWS THIS IS NOT A THREAT.

Now it was Ricky's arm that reached over his father's shoulder, stretched a hand out and down to click twice on that message, revealing new words in Spanish:

Que tu papá te diga lo que sucedió en Colombia justo antes de que nacieras.

Ask your father to tell you what happened in Colombia just before you were born.

Barrera didn't translate it right away. This was crazy. Lots of things happened in Colombia, everything had happened in Colombia: his own birth, his bifurcated childhood, his fatherless adolescence, his tentative employment at the consulate in Buenaventura, his work ethic, his genius for interpreting, his hours at the US-Colombian Friendship Institute reading every book on every shelf, his—that's how he'd answer the inevitable question Ricky was about to unleash, his whole life before his son had been born. That's what—though not what—Barrera was thinking, not what he'd been thinking ever since the word *perro* had come up, *no, not like a dog, because dogs deserve something better.*

"What happened in Colombia, Dad? Before I was born?"

As if Ricky no longer needed a translator, as if that word, *Colombia*, that country where Barrera's parents had miraculously met and fallen in love and conceived him, as if that one word were enough for the boy to suddenly read and comprehend Spanish, as if he had not refused to learn it, to speak it, to acknowledge its existence.

"Nothing," Barrera said quickly, too quickly. A mistake. It was a mistake to deny anything that soon, when you're in a hurry all sorts of blunders have a chance to surface. What Cynthia had told him as she sorted out those who sought asylum legitimately from those who were faking it: *Always be suspicious of the ones who answer right away, who don't take their time.* But Cynthia was not around to counsel him about what to do now, not around at all, in fact, and Barrera couldn't help himself. He needed to slip out that one word, *Nothing*, before *la mujer* who was sending these e-mails interfered yet again, continued her harassment and—but it couldn't be that woman, *esa mujer*. She didn't know English, she wasn't even—maybe the computer, something inside the computer itself? Had the computer itself found a way to—? *Wait, wait, that's even crazier, this makes no sense, stop it, I've got to end this.*

End this. If you want this to end. Si quieres que esto se termine.

They waited, both of them, father and son, like twins caught in a mother's twisted womb. They waited for guidance or a revelation or something else, anything else, a truce, maybe a truce.

It was dawning outside.

It was dawning outside and there were five days left before Ricky turned seventeen.

"I have to get to work and you—"

"Yeah, school."

"I'll drop you off."

"No need to."

"I'll drop you off."

The first thing Barrera did at work, before he had even stripped off his coat glistening with snow, before he tasted the coffee his secretary had poured for him, piping-hot Colombian Juan Valdés java always there when he arrived at precisely 8:45 each morning, before he even said hello to her, to anybody, the first thing was to log on and scuttle into Ricky's e-mail and—

There it was.

On his screen, floating like an eye in the sky of his screen, on his screen like an eye opening and closing.

Antes de que cumpla los diecisiete, lo tienes que hacer antes.

Before his seventeenth birthday, you have to do it before then.

He logged into Ricky's e-mail account. *Was it also there, had she found a way to—?*

It was there, also there in the subject: SOON HE'LL BE OF AGE. And the same words in the message itself in Spanish, which the automatic translator inside Barrera kept repeating: *Before his seventeenth birthday, you have to do it before then.*

He clicked savagely on the reply button. *Quién eres?* he wrote, and then he deleted the words in a rush. He knew who it was, who it had to be on the other end of the e-mail, the one person it couldn't be, that woman was—.

Barrera drank down the coffee in one gulp, burning his throat, happy to feel his mouth and tongue and throat scalded, throbbing, proof that he was alive, that Ricky was alive somewhere in the same city and the same galaxy, even if he was probably looking at the same words right now, *Antes de que cumpla los diecisiete, lo tienes que hacer antes.* And Ricky wouldn't show it to any of his classmates who spoke Spanish or any of his teachers, and he wouldn't mention it to Barrera when they met that night for dinner, not then, not ever. Ricky would make believe, just like his father, that nobody was sending these messages, nobody was erasing them.

Because Barrera did erase the next message, over and over.

The number *2,516*.

When it appeared, at three in the morning, with Ricky slumbering in the next room and Barrera watching his son's in-box, as if it were a wild animal about to leap out of the machine. One second after that number flickered inside the new message from Comando Anesthesia, his finger was there, stabbing it: obliterated, gone, gone forever. Though no, it came back, it returned from who knows where, the e-mail reappeared on the screen each time he erased it, and now, now, now the number was reemerging directly on the screen. It did not come in a message, it did not tumble into the in-box, did not have a subject, not from anyone, not with a reply even feasible, just flashing on and off the screen, invading his screen and Ricky's screen, *not a wink*, he responded to his son's unasked question the next morning, *I never sleep, you know that.*

Except this time it was true.

And this time Ricky was the one who pretended that everything was normal, everything was fine. This time it was the boy's turn not to say anything.

Not a word.

Not even to remind his father that his birthday was coming up, three days from now.

Barrera called in sick.

He heard Ricky puttering around the house, sitting at his computer and then getting up noisily and then sitting down quietly again. And Barrera didn't tell his son he should be going to school, didn't tell him anything, both of them secluded in the house as if a blizzard had descended in the garden, right there outside the door, a plague seething just beyond the threshold if either one of them dared to open the door.

Barrera looked at the empty screen, waited, tried not to close his eyes, closed them and instantaneously opened them again, because that woman was inside the in-box of his eyes, in there and out there and in here somewhere, *esa mujer*. He wasn't going to fall asleep, he couldn't afford to fall asleep.

His eyes strayed to the picture of Cynthia. Her last photo before she became too ill to go out, not a sign of what was gnawing away at her bones, a smile like heaven on her lips, and underneath, the words she wanted him to remember when things got rough, the words she had written in her flawless, tight script, *Don't ever look back.*

"Easy for you to say that," he said to her. And then shook his head. No, no, he wasn't going to start speaking to Cynthia's photo as if it were a person of flesh and blood and limbs and ears. What came next? Talking to the screen as if it were—asking what would happen if these messages started to appear in every screen, everywhere, for everyone, if—*A todos, no*, came the answer on the screen. *Sólo a tu hijo.*

Not everyone. Just your son.

Barrera tried to rub that one out as soon as it materialized, get rid of the son of a bitch. It didn't go away, it wouldn't go away until it was good and ready. Those words came and went of their own accord now, regardless of what he did, regardless of the fact that now only two days remained until Ricky's birthday, neither of them mentioning this, calling in sick, father and then son—*yes, a bug is going around*—eating up the supplies in the fridge and the pantry, not venturing out even to retrieve the *Washington Post*, watching the papers accumulate outside like a dead dog in the snow, hardly acknowledging each other's existence, except at breakfast, except to say *thanks for the pancakes, Dad*, except to answer *just like your mother used to make them, hijo*, not mentioning that one day from now, tomorrow, it was going to be Ricky's birthday. The only difference between them: that the son slept at night and that Barrera had not slept for five days, for five nights. Not a wink, not for a minute, not for an hour. Now truly *nothing, nada.*

Staring at the night, staring at the night as if it were a screen, staring at his wife's photo as if it were a window into day.

Antes de que cumpla los diecisiete.

Four hours to go before his son turned seventeen.

Si quieres que esto se termine, ya sabes lo que tienes que hacer.

But he didn't, he didn't know what he needed to do.

Dime qué tengo que hacer?

What if he did ask the photo what to do, what was needed?

Don't ever look back, his wife's only answer, then and now.

Dime qué tengo que hacer, qué quieres de mí?

He didn't know anymore if he was thinking those words or saying them out loud, *What do you want from me?* The glimmer of a whisper that nobody present or faraway could ever have registered. Not even Barrera could have heard those words, so faint, so quiet, not with a tape recorder, not with a secret camera. Ricky couldn't eavesdrop on those words—that's how hidden Barrera's thoughts had become.

What do you want from me?

The screen said nothing.

Do you want to take my boy, is that what you want?

No answer, not a shimmer on the screen, before his mind foundered for lack of sleep, faltered into a sea of confusion, unable to distinguish anything anymore, having to comfort himself with those words written so many days ago they seemed a mirage, *This is not a threat, your dad knows this is not a threat.*

What do you want from me?

"What happened in Colombia, Dad? Before I was born?"

It couldn't be Ricky who was asking that again. He went to his son's room, and Ricky was blessedly asleep, smiling; the kid was smiling into the softness of the pillow, smiling as if hell did not exist, as if he would not have to awaken to his seventeenth birthday a few hours from now and find out that hell did exist.

"Nothing," he whispered to Ricky. "Nothing happened."

He left the room and went straight to his own computer and opened an e-mail addressed to his son. He typed in what he had just murmured to Ricky, spilled the black and quiet milk of denial onto the screen, a last desperate attempt to keep at bay the other words, the other words that had been simmering inside him since the message about the dog, the *perro* on the screen—*we are going to kill you like a human being should be killed: slowly, so you know what is happening to you*—since then.

"Nothing," Barrera wrote. "Nothing happened." And he heard his voice say, "That's God's truth," and he began to write those words as well and then found his fingers erasing them, all of it. He discovered the blank screen once again there, the cursor blinking on and off and once again asking him to—asking him to . . . what, what did that woman want from him?

"Ricardo," he said those syllables out loud and then wrote his son's name down on the screen. "Querido Ricardo, Ricky mío," my Ricky, my Ricardo. And then he was about to write: "We all do things in our lives that"—but no, it wasn't that. And then: "There was a woman many years ago who"—and it wasn't that either.

It was, it was . . .

It happened before Ricky was born.

"This happened before you were born, Ricardo. I like to tell myself that it happened so you could be born, so I could marry your mother. So I could come to this country and live a decent life without violence, escape from the fate of the father who abandoned me, the mother who made her living by selling what women sell. I knew that I would never leave you alone. I knew that I would stay by the side of the gringa I loved.

"I met her at the consulate at Bogotá, your mother. You know that much."

Barrera read over what he had written.

Yes, what he needed to do.

Si quieres que esto se termine.

His hands were commanding themselves, were flying solo, were flowing word after word onto the keyboard and through the screen and into this letter to his son.

"She liked me. I realized that she liked me because—well, there are things that men know, that women know, that don't need to be expressed with words. But she made her case, so to speak, by always asking that this new mulatto interpreter from Buenaventura by way of Medellín, that this man Barrera be the one to translate for her whenever there was a particularly complicated situation, a complicated person, someone whose visa we would have to deny, some pain that was being inflicted and which she couldn't avoid and wanted to share and I was the employee she chose for that sharing. I was the one . . . An ally, someone who would understand, even approve, perhaps forgive her hard choices.

"That morning, we . . ."

Barrera stopped. He erased the last three words.

"That morning when that woman came in, she . . ."

And again he stopped and again he removed the phrase.

"It started—what happened, I mean—it really started the night before. Your mother and I, we'd been out for drinks and intended to go dancing after dinner. She was trying a *sancocho de pescado*—but not me, no fish stew for me. Buenaventura had cured me of the sea—I was a steak man—and I can remember the precise moment when everything changed, when what was to happen the next day was set in motion.

"We were at a table on the sidewalk and two gamins—you know, street kids—they were watching us from behind a parked car. They'd been shooed away by the waiter and then the maître d' and then some burly security guards, but the boys—waifs, really—kept on popping up, peering at us. One of them, well, he even winked at me and sort of smirked, a leer perhaps I'd call it, but his teeth were perfectly white, straight and perfect, as if he had been well nourished at home, as if nobody had ever beat him or punched him or raped him or forced him to roam the avenues of Bogotá. I knew that kid. I could have been that kid when my father left us in Buenaventura. I think that if I hadn't been blessed with English, with the certainty that I belonged elsewhere, I'd have taken to the streets myself, and I'm sure that my mother wouldn't have come after me to bring her son home. My mother was too busy sniffing for a substitute for her vanished gringo, my vanished gringo dad. So when the gamin winked at me, I knew what his lewd gesture meant. It was a wink of encouragement, that said, yes, I should ask the gorgeous redhead home with me, I should show her a good time, promised me that she would say yes—and how strange that I should need his approval, from that lost child not older than eight, because I turned to her and said: *You know, I never sleep, but I think tonight will be different. Tonight I won't sleep due to another reason.* And she answered, as the street urchin had anticipated she would, she answered: *We'll see if you're right.*

"My response to that acknowledgment had been unexpected—not what she or I had been planning, I think, but maybe not unexpected for the two gamins. Because I stood up with my plate—half the steak was still on it and all the potatoes and remnants of a lovely béarnaise sauce—and I carried it with me to the kids and just gave it to them, plate and all, a reward for their witnessing of my triumph, what I had not dared to do or ask or dream of up till that moment, and somehow also a way of telling them, *You can also make it this far, like I have. I educated myself, I read every book in every library, I found a way. I'm going to make love to this wondrous gringa and then we're going to leave this stink hole of a country, and I did it all on my own. You don't have to stay behind. You can come along too. You can also change your life.*

"And I waited a bit, while they tasted the steak, munched at it in a much too leisurely way for two famished scamps so I asked them how the meat was, if it was good, and the kid who had winked at me, he repeated his perfect smile with his perfect teeth, so out of place in that grimy, bedrugged

face, he said, in Spanish of course, he said: 'The steak up the street, at El Barranco, it's better, free-ranging cattle, more tender, juicier, you know.' And he deciphered the surprise in my eyes and added: '*Sobras*.' Leftovers. He and his pal had been scrounging in the garbage. They knew where the best meat could be found, and now he was acting as my culinary guide to Bogotá, my gourmet gamin.

"When I returned to the woman who was going to be your mother, she listened to my story and nodded in that birdlike, wonderway of hers, just like you. From the moment I met her I was so taken with her ability to stop what she was doing, like a *chachalaca*, a bird you'll only see if you were to finally come back one day to Colombia with me. Think of a bird that can dance the cha-cha and then cease suddenly, Ricardo, well, that's how she looked at me, entirely still, as if she were wary of some assault from nearby. The very first time I laid eyes on her I realized how vulnerable she was underneath that show of toughness. And it wasn't just that we had to be cautious—in fact, as employees of the US government in a country torn apart by civil war and narcos and the FARC and bombs, we'd make a nice morsel for anyone intent on kidnapping, her especially. I wasn't worth anything, not then, later yes, when I became a citizen, took on the country of my dad. Now yes, if someone were to kill me now . . . But I was telling you about that look of hers, which came, I said, from somewhere other than fear of the immediate violence that could be done to us. No, it came from some older tremor, something else we shared. She looked at me when I came back from giving away my steak and said: 'You're too good to be true.' And then: 'Mañana.' One of the few words in Spanish she ever learned, knew before she was sent to Colombia, the word everyone associates with Latin America and siestas, everyone assumes I represent when I tell them I was born way down south. Your mother repeated it in English: 'Tomorrow. I'll come home with you tomorrow night. Because, first, in the morning, there's something I need you to do, first you have to do something.'

"A test. That's what she had in store for me.

"It was a woman. Maybe you won't believe me, but I can't remember her name. Someday we can look it up, there must be files on her somewhere. Her husband was called Esteban, Esteban something. And he had been killed, headed a trade union, a coffee worker I think, maybe textiles, food workers?

And his wife was seeking asylum, or a visa if asylum couldn't be granted. One for her, one for her son. Her seventeen-year-old son. Yes, seventeen."

Barrera stopped. He reread the last paragraph. He erased the *Yes, seventeen*. Then he erased *Her seventeen-year-old son*. Ricky didn't need to know the age of that boy.

"That boy, that young man—name of Luis? maybe Lalo, yes, Lalo I think it was, from Eduardo—Lalo had received a death threat. I had read it in her file. They were going to kill him like a dog. No, not like a dog. Yes, that's how they were threatening to kill him. Slowly.

"Before the woman came in for the interview, your mother left the room. Left me alone with her. On purpose. 'I want to see how you handle this, by yourself,' Cynthia said, stepping out the back door, adding, there on the threshold, almost as an afterthought, that I'd been selected for a training program back in the States. She'd recommended me, the sky was the limit. I remember those words, the sky being the limit, everything open for me, her and the country and the future and someone like you, the sky. She'd recommended me, your mother reiterated, but she wanted first to observe me, in action, she said, *one last crack*. I also remember those words, just as I can still remember, have been repeating to myself all these years the word for word of the death threat.

"That's what I was examining attentively when that woman entered the room and sat down without my invitation, just sat down and pierced me with the black coil of her eyes as I read the message written on that crude piece of paper scrawled by someone who did not mind if an expert analyzed the handwriting, if the criminal's fingerprints were smudged all over that scrap of paper, a person who was an expert himself, an expert at creating fear in others, not concerned about his own fear, that's what I understood as I read.

"'Have you denounced this to the police?' I asked in Spanish.

"'2,516.'

"'Perdone? Qué dijo?'

"'2,516,' she said. 'The number of trade union members who have been murdered in the last ten years, 2,515 plus one, my husband.' And she pronounced his family name, the one I can't remember now, she said Esteban, Esteban and that surname. And before I could comment, offer my condolences, say something, anything, she added: 'Do you know how many

arrests there have been, how many culprits have been arrested?' And she answered her own question: 'One,' she said. 'One man has been arrested, a policeman, a policeman who should have been protecting people like my husband and instead was killing them. One person, that's all, and he'll be out on bail soon and then he'll be up in the mountains with the *paras* and never be seen again.'

"Inside your mother's big broad desk, I knew a tape recorder was turning, registering every word of hers and mine, I knew that in your mother's office a security camera always recorded everything, every whisper.

"I answered: 'You can't expect us to take in every person who's threatened, who says she's threatened, who offers no more proof than a piece of paper whose origin we can't substantiate. Surely you can see that, ma'am. *No podemos aceptar a todos.*'

"'A todos, no,' she said. 'Sólo a mi hijo.'

"*Not everyone. Just my son.*

"And then she winked at me.

"It wasn't really a wink, more like the flutter of an eyelid, a shuttering, the rapid deployment of a butterfly in her eyes, closing them just enough so I wouldn't catch even a glimpse of the promise of tears, because she was not going to give me or anybody else the satisfaction of seeing her cry. *She's cried so much there's nothing left,* and then the opposite thought, *She hasn't cried for years, is scared to start because she may never stop, like my mother never dared to let herself go, not ever.* And then that woman stood up, refused to sit down again, though I insisted.

"She didn't explain why, just stood there, brusquely said one word. 'God,' that's the word she said and added: 'God often comes to us from behind, remember that. He comes when we least expect him, from behind.' And again her eyes that opened and shut rapidly.

"And I don't know why—yes, I know why, of course I know why—I confused that fluttering again with a wink. It joined me and her to the gamins of last night, that night before the night you were conceived, and it wasn't me answering her, I forgot where I was, who I was, what I wanted to become, forgot who was listening to me from the other side of the back door. I forgot how often in the past I had taken the files and folders and papers that your mother would pass to me, how often I had closed them with a snap. And now it was open, that file, the death threat was lying in there, calling to me,

asking me to read it again. And when I picked it up because I could not say no to it, deny it one last appraisal, what revealed itself, what had been hidden below that death threat, was the faded photo of her dead husband and also the prettified visa photo of her living son, one next to the other, her two men, and then, if only for a minute, it was just me and my sad beating heart, if only for a minute, and I said:

"'*Naturalmente*, of course, we'll give you asylum, a visa, ma'am. *No le quepa duda.* Don't doubt it.'

"'That's a promise?'

"And I said yes.

"And she said: 'Swear it on your son.'

"'I don't have a son,'

"'Swear it on the life of your unborn child.'

"And that's what I did, Ricardo. I swore I was telling her the truth, swore it on your life.

"I never saw her again.

"Because your mother came into the room as soon as that woman had gone.

"She looked at me. 'You really are too good to be true.'

"She did not say anything else. Just waited. Like you do, so often, let the silence grow until somebody like me, somebody who feels uncomfortable with stillness and has survived by filling the universe with words—since I can recall I would jump into the space yawning between my father and my mother. I would leap in, vault in, rush in to see if I could bring them closer, because I could tell they were going to separate, that I was the one who had kept them together. My existence had done that, my birth had made my father stay, and I spent the first eight years of my childhood going back and forth between them, saying in English to my dad what my mother meant in her Buenaventura Spanish, extricating from my dad's Ohio accent what he wanted from my mother, back and forth, *ida y vuelta*, giving them refuge in the common territory of my tongue, holding them to each other as I felt them drift apart. Their home, I had to become their home if they were to stay by each other's side, and your own mother knew this, merely by instinct and cunning and command, that she didn't need to do anything other than let me dangle in the silence of her puzzlement, her challenge that I explain myself.

"And I did.

"It took me less than a minute, not even a minute to close that file, snap it tightly shut.

"'Asylum denied,' I said. 'No visa for either of them. Not clear if they have terrorist connections.'"

"She didn't say anything, again she just let me swing awhile in the dark sun of her gaze.

"'I just didn't have the heart to tell the woman,' I said. 'To her face, I mean, I just didn't have the heart.'

"And now Cynthia answered. 'Yes,' she said. Just that one word. She said yes to me.

"So that night . . . I like to think that was the night when you were conceived, Ricardo, I like to think that something good came of this, not just our marriage and my training and my promotion and my future citizenship and my new country—you, I like to tell myself that you were born because I did what I did, because of what happened in Colombia, what the messages demanded of me, that I tell you. That's what I have to say, what I need to tell you before you are seventeen."

Barrera stopped.

Behind him he sensed his son, told himself that the boy had been there for who knows how long, reading over his shoulder for who knew how long. And somehow this time Barrera found the strength not to turn around and address Ricky. He found the patience to swallow any word of welcome or of dismissal, was given the strength by someone, perhaps his wife, perhaps his mother, both of them dead. He discovered the strength to wait and let his son say something first.

"So who is it?" Ricky asked, finally. "Who is sending us, you and me, these messages?"

Almost as if he were a child asking a magician to explain how the rabbit could disappear, be cut to shreds and then reappear, one last moment of innocence before he outgrew it, one last chance.

"It can't be the husband," Barrera said, taking his time, "because he's dead, that man called Esteban."

"And the woman? The woman whose name you can't recall?"

"Not her," said Barrera. "And not her son, Luis or Lalo." And then he added: "They were executed. The night before your mother and I left Bogotá."

"How did they die?"

"Not that," he said. And then, still without turning around to look at his son: "There are things you really don't need to know. Not yet."

"I don't need to know what was done to their bodies?" Ricky asked. "How slow it must have been?"

"You don't need to know."

Ricky didn't speak for a while. Barrera could barely imagine him there at all, thinking all this over. Then: "Alright. So who else knew what happened in that room, what you promised? A colleague, someone, anyone?"

"Only me," said Barrera, "I'm the only one who knows. From time to time, I ask your mother, ask her picture—not with words but with my eyes, you know, I suggest that maybe there could have been another way, that maybe we could have found a different . . . Even if I know that she was also acting under orders, only following protocol. This Esteban had been fingered as sympathetic to the guerrillas, was a subversive. The son had been videotaped chanting slogans against the US, was a rabble-rouser at the local high school. And above your mother in the pyramid of power there was someone else, and then the head of that department and the man above them, and somebody upstairs would have eventually seen the asylum granted and would have reprimanded her, maybe demoted her, maybe denied me my transfer or my residency or my citizenship one day. It was me or that woman, our son or her son, that's how things are—" and by now Barrera was speaking to the computer, straight to the screen or what was inside the screen or beyond it. "All of us, just doing our job, just securing the border, just keeping our children safe, better to be safe than sorry. That's what I say silently to your mother, have said to her since she died."

"And what does she answer?"

"Nothing. Not a word. What could she tell us? What could she answer?"

"Unless . . ."

"Unless . . ." Barrera said.

But neither of them dared to add another word, tell each other what they were thinking, what they were both . . .

This was as far as he could go. This was the end.

Barrera sensed a sudden absence, was certain that his son was no longer behind him, that Ricky had decided to return to his room before dawn

arrived, that's where he wanted to greet this day when he would be seventeen, when he would be of age.

Barrera waited. He gave the boy time to cross the corridor, open the door to his room, sit down in front of his own computer. He waited until he was sure Ricky was ready, and then, without looking one last time at the letter he had written, without correcting one word of it, he pressed the send button.

It was on its way, his response, what he needed to do.

He prayed it would be enough.

And he wondered, Barrera also managed to wonder, as the sun began to rise into that foreign sky, if he would sleep well that night, if he would sleep at all in the nights to come.

PERU

The Conversion

ISAAC GOLDEMBERG (b. 1945)
Translated from the Spanish by Hardie St. Martin

Used as the opening door to Play by Play *(1984), the writer's second novel, this story narrates the physical and spiritual plight of Marquitos Karushansky, like the author half-Jew, half-native Peruvian and "injured existentially" by the discovery, during adolescence, of his ambiguous ethnic identity. The protagonist's identity and history—narrated with verve, irony, and playfulness—are symbolized, most painfully, by his ritual circumcision. Goldemberg is also the author of* The Fragmented Life of Don Jacabo Lerner *(1976), among other works.*

FIVE THOUSAND SEVEN hundred and thirteen years of Judaism hit Marquitos Karushansky like a ton of bricks. At the age of eight, shortly after coming to Lima, classes in Hebrew and the history of the Jews at León Pinelo School; bris at the age of twelve; bar mitzvah at thirteen, when he was a brand-new cadet at Leoncio Prado Military Academy. *Bris* was the little word taken from the Hebrew and used by the Jews in Lima to avoid saying *circumcision,* which left a bad taste in the mouth and made them bite the tip of their tongues, as if to spit it out. "Never you say *circumcision,* correct word is *bris; circumcision* is from Latin *circumcidere,* 'to cut around,' and has no historical weight. But *bris* means 'covenant' and is in Bible from time our father Abruhem sealed pact with Adonai." That's how Rabbi Goldstein, with his weeping willow beard, explained it to him. *Adonai,* of course, was also a word Marcos had recently picked up. Saying *God,* which seemed to have a cholo, half-Indian ring to it, was absolutely out of the question. And it was really something to watch him swearing, *Chai Adonai* here and *Chai Adonai* there! Whip 'em in the front and whip 'em in the rear! Chahuee!

Chahuaa! Pinelo, Pinelo, rah, rah, rah! First you've got to promise not to tell. I swear to God, who is my shining light! What? To God! No, that doesn't count. C'mon, do it right. Chai Adonai! You're a liar. Let's see if you can swear it's true. Chai Adonai! Swear you didn't steal the ballpoint. Chai Adonai! Marcos gradually became used to the word, it was like not swearing at all, and he got a big kick out of it.

Marquitos Karushansky's circumcision, or rather his bris, took place on the same day as the opening of *The Ten Commandments* at the Tacna movie theater. What's more, Dr. Berkowitz's office, where the operation was done, was only half a block from the theater. Marcos was operated on in the afternoon, sometime between five and seven, and the show was to start at eight. But he and his father missed the opening. The saddest part of it, old Karushansky said, was not being able to see the film together with the rest of the Jewish community of Lima. They had to see it four or five days later, sitting among Peruvians, and it wasn't the same, it wasn't the right atmosphere. What did those cholos know about the Bible anyway?

It had all started when his father announced, like a patriarch in the Old Testament: "Next year you be ready for bar mitzvah but first is necessary you have bris." Marcos remembered his eyes wandering to the smudgy windowpane and then his voice, mocking and at the same time trying to reassure him, he shouldn't worry; they had also snipped off the foreskin of Jesus the Jew.

They showed up one day in Dr. Berkowitz's office, where the physician, very professional, very freckled, explained: "Bris is an extremely simple operation. All it amounts to is cutting off the prepuce, the end of the skin that folds over the head of the penis and covers it. Then it's much easier to keep the glans clean. No sebaceous matter collects around it, and this reduces the risk of catching dangerous infections." Marcos didn't know what he was talking about and went back with his father to the doctor's office the next day. The nurse had already left, and they were greeted by a silence like the Sabbath's in the homes of Orthodox Jews. Before he knew it, Marcos was stretched out on his back on the operating table. Dr. Berkowitz was standing beside it, scalpel in hand, arm poised, and his father, sweat running down features drawn tight in pain and disgust, his father was lying across his chest, pinning his arms, papa's chunky body on top of his. Would he ask him for a camphor ointment rubdown later? Every night at bedtime the ritual of the rubdown would begin, and Marcos would massage him furiously, as if he wanted to tear off his skin, as if he were trying to draw blood from the heavy body with an oval head. He would pass the palm of his hand down the slope of the thick short neck, up the incline of the shoulders with their overgrowth of hair, matted like the fur on a battered old grizzly, his body stripped of every shred of nobility, letting out low grunts, soft moans of pleasure.

His penis had been put to sleep but not enough to kill the pain from the clamp holding on to his skin as if it would never let go. Then the doctor, warning him not to exaggerate, because too much anesthetic could leave him paralyzed for life, raised the needle to eye level to make sure he had the right amount in the syringe. His whole body shuddered when the needle entered his glans. His father pressed all his weight down on his chest, and on his lips and chin Marcos could feel the rough beard, soaked with sweat and tears. Now his penis was a soft mass, a spongy mushroom, an organism with a life of its own, capable of tearing free with one jerk and slipping all over his skin, looking for a way into his body, or capable of dissolving and leaving a smelly, viscous fluid on his groin. He knew his penis was already in the open, and he tried to imagine its new, hoodless look. In his mind, he compared it to the image he had of his father's member, its extreme whiteness, the perfect distribution of its parts, the scarlet crest topping the head of the sleepy iguana, with its vertical blind eye. He wanted to examine his phallus, to hold it above his eyes like a flower, to fall under the spell of the rosy calyx snug around its neck, to weigh it in his hand and stroke it warmly back to the familiarity it had lost. He was conscious of the small pincers clutching his foreskin tight: they were fierce little animals with fangs, beady eyes, and metallic scales on their backs. At the same time, he felt the pressure of his father's dead weight on him as a reproach, the embodiment of all the insults he had ever had to take. He thought about how, when he went back to school, he wouldn't have to hide from his friends in the bathroom. He would be able to piss casually now, to pull out his prick, take his time shaking it out, boldly pressing hard to squeeze the last drops out, and then turn around defiantly and show it to the others, to all his schoolmates at León Pinelo, proudly. Now let's see who is man enough to say I'm not a Jew.

The doctor left them alone in the back office: he told them he'd return in half an hour, they'd have to wait for the anesthetic to wear off, and Marcos

watched his father nodding yes. Then the old man started to pace with his hands clasped behind him. He marched up and down next to the operating table, eyes straight ahead, without bending his knees, swinging each leg sideways slowly in a semicircle, before setting his foot down on the tiles. The controlled stiffness of his body, the deliberate halt after each about-face, before he started pacing again, reflected all the misery and resignation stored up in him. But Marcos knew every detail of this tactic his father had used, over the past two years, to put a certain amount of distance between them, to make him understand that behind this temporary withdrawal, all the things he had ever silenced were crying out, louder than words, against his bad luck and his unhappiness. If he had had any hope of crossing into his father's world, he would have asked him to come over to the table, dry the sweat on his forehead, take his hand in his, and help him clear away the skein of solitude unraveling endlessly in his chest. But he was sure the old man would avoid his eyes, as he did whenever he pounded on him with his fists, only to feel sorry afterward and break down like a vulnerable Mary Magdalene.

His senses had become dulled. His father looked older now: his beard had taken on a grayish tint, and a hundred wrinkles had formed around his eyes. He tried to think of his mother, but he couldn't retain a solid image of her behind his eyes. He had closed them and felt himself rushing down a toboggan run, rolling over and over without being able to stop. Only his father was solid; all the objects in the room had melted into ribbons of vapor swirling around him, and only his father's presence kept him from turning into a gaseous substance too.

He didn't move a muscle when the doctor's voice burst into the room like a garble of voices and sounds, and asked him if he was feeling better. He nodded without unlocking his eyelids, and the doctor and his father helped him off the table. His eyes were still closed, he staggered as if whipped by a blizzard, and the weight of his nakedness embarrassed him. The mere brush of the doctor's gloved hands on his member, the slight pull of the threads sticking out from the skin under the glans, made him feel wretched and he had the urge to piss. He guessed the pain this rash move would bring on and stopped himself just in time; the doctor was fitting a jockstrap stuffed with wads of gauze on him, and he had the sensation that he was pissing inward. His bladder was tightening up and his inward-flowing urine

plunged through his ureters, was picked up by the renal tubes, flooded his kidneys like a winding current, and was pumped, bubbling and humming, into the bloodstream. He felt that he was burning up inside, explored by the fine probe of an intense blue flame. The doctor's voice jolted him back to reality. A sudden smile lit up the doctor's face as he put out his hand in an outlandishly formal way and made a big show of shaking Marcos's father's hand, saying, "Mazel tov, Señor Karushansky, congratulations, mazel tov . . ."

The lights on Tacna Avenue woke him all the way. Walking to the corner, they passed the Tacna movie theater, its front covered with giant posters showing scenes from the movie: a beardless Charlton Heston, dressed as an Egyptian warrior, was giving a wasp-waisted princess a he-man's hug; over to the right, Charlton Heston again, beard and wig, tunic and sandals, on a promontory, arms extended like a magician's: abracadabra, let the waters divide.

As they stood on the corner trying to get a cab, Marcos thought of the late afternoon when he had arrived in Lima, four years before. Through the smoke rising steadily from a charcoal pit, where some shish kebab on tiny skewers was roasting and giving off a tempting aroma, he saw his father with his hands in his pockets, coming toward the El Chasqui travel agency, where he and his mother were waiting. Then, like now, they had stopped on a corner, loaded down with bundles and suitcases, to get a cab. He looked out the side of his eye at his father, sitting cross-legged next to him; his arms were folded stiffly across his chest. Through the window on the other side of his father's aquiline profile, he watched the streetcars stretching, lumbering over the flashing tracks. Tall buildings loomed up unexpectedly, swaying like the carob trees back home, and then, with the speed of a fist coming straight at his eyes out of nowhere, the slender pyramid of the Jorge Chavez monument, like an airplane full of lights—manned by a crew of graceful winged granite figures taking off into the night.

He had seen pictures of the Plaza San Martín and the Plaza de Armas in his schoolbook and had thought of Lima as a ghost town where time had stopped without warning, freezing cars as they moved along and pedestrians as they walked. He liked to invent all kinds of stories about those unknown people suspended in midair like grotesque puppets. He had even tried to see if he could make out his father among those men in dark suits and hats. Sometimes he felt sure he had found him sitting on a bench reading a

newspaper, or spotted his profile coming around a corner, and he would run to the kitchen and point him out to his mother. Without hiding her amazement at her son's fancies, she would stroke his head nervously and always tell him no, with an understanding smile. But now, sitting on his father's right, he didn't have to imagine him anymore. The city itself seemed to have come out of its sleep, happy to open the night and show him his father's world. And with all his senses set on the course of this moment so new to him, fluttering around him like a playful butterfly, he accepted that world unquestioning, wholeheartedly, as if it had always been his by right.

The taxi plunged into the warm shadows of a Salaverry Avenue studded with lights. His father was still just sitting there, his face outlined by the pale flash of the car's window, oblivious of the clusters of trees reflected in his eyes as they shot past. On the right, the Campo de Marte spread out; deserted, bleak, it disappeared for stretches at a time behind groups of houses and reappeared, somnolent and hazy. Marcos was quiet too, afraid to shift a leg that had fallen asleep and trying with his imagination to lop it off from his body and stop the swirl of bubbles climbing to his groin slowly, noisily. He let the stale air out of his lungs and sank a little into the seat, thinking that old guy is my father, I can tell by the musty odor of his clothes. He smells like dirty synagogue draperies, old velvet, damp wool, like the moth-eaten cashmere and poplin remnants he keeps in back of the store. He's probably taking the annual inventory right now, setting bolts of cloth on the counter, running his hand over them like a shepherd fondly stroking the backs of his sheep; or maybe he's repeating over and over the words he spit out at me this morning, "In a few hours you be at last one of us, at last one of us, at last one . . ."

As the cab made a sharp turn, coming out into Mariátegui Avenue, its chassis seemed to bristle up like a cat; it went down the street, chugging along unsteadily, entered Pumacahua Street, and pulled up at the corner of the second block, where the houses came to a dead end, cut off by the Club Hípico's garden wall, a solid line of trees and wire. His father helped him out of the car. They walked the short distance to the project entrance and silently headed for the apartment at the rear.

In the bedroom his father helped him undress; he knelt to take off his shoes and then took them to the foot of the valet clothes stand, dressed up in the rest of his clothes and looking like a silly scarecrow. He knelt down again to help him on with his pajama pants and then stood up with a heavy sigh, seeming to come from somewhere far away; he turned down the covers, settled the boy in the center of the bed, and covered him with a rough sweep of his hand. "So if you want something, you'll call," he told him abruptly, going to the door. Marcos heard his father's footsteps fading down the hallway toward the living room, and now, as he lay submerged in the warmth of the covers, the silence started winding its way through the shell of his ears, humming like the sea, and he could feel the solitude he had been longing for begin to take root in his spirit. He swept the room with his eyes, pausing carefully at each object, trying to figure out what hidden common bond there was between so many disparate things. He sensed that the suffocating mishmash of furniture, spread through the rest of the house like heavy underbrush, summed up his father's horror of empty rooms. Landscapes and scenes of Israel, torn from calendars, lined all the walls: the Sea of Galilee (or Kineret, as his father knowingly called it), hemmed by a tight ring of hills; a street in Yerushalaim crammed with shops and pedestrians, exactly like Jirón de la Unión Street, right, Marcos? This is the capital of Israel; you wouldn't believe everyone in streets are Jewish, right? Blond-dark-redhead and even real black children in a tiny school in Tel Aviv; also the vast wilderness of the Negev with red red sand and where are located the mines of King Shlomo, who was very wise; do you know story of two women are fighting for same son and going to King Shlomo . . . ? And also many pictures of Kibbutz Givat Brenner, founded in year '28. I was one of founders, Marcos, see how beautiful, all people glad working in fields, look how happy everybody, and in fact his father had also worked in the kibbutz, intoning "Erets zavat chalav, chalav, erets zavat chalav," humming into the wind, land of milk and honey, "Erets zavat chalav, chalav ud'vash," and in other prints there were young patriarchs, hands twirling the udders of the goats, sinking into the labyrinthine nurseries of the bees . . .

Marcos remembered the first time he had set foot in the house. Startled by the jungle of furniture as he stepped through the door, he stood rooted to the spot; he felt as if all his bones were giving way under a sudden deafening avalanche of rocks. Then his father took his arm and almost dragged him inside toward his room, saying, "Come, don't be afraid." Left standing alone in his bedroom with his suitcase beside him, he could hardly stay on his feet, a weary taste of rancid almonds in his mouth. From the back of the

house his father's voice, as studied as a concierge's, reached him: "This is your room, here you will sleep. Bathroom is a few steps to your left; in front of bathroom is kitchen. You find everything there, unpack your bag, then fix yourself something to eat."

That night, as soon as his mother had gone to her room, the ritual of the bath got under way. "Am going get off all dirt from your body," his father said, rolling up his sleeves with an air of nostalgia for his ancestral past, like an old Orthodox Jew ready to wind the leather maze of phylacteries around his arm. He made Marcos climb into the tub and he let the stream of water out: it came on by fits and starts with a choking sound, then broke out in spurts till it picked up the steady murmur of an easy flow. Steam filled the bathroom with drowsiness, blurred the solid walls, and turned his father into a shadowy figure kneeling next to the tub and already beginning to soap his body with rhythmic skill, as if he were holding a newborn baby or a body not yet born, molding its form with the nimble fingers of a Florentine goldsmith. The scene was taking on the importance of a ceremony. The image of baptism in the son's mind corresponded closely to the rites of the biblical patriarch being officiated by his father: an initiation that would take the boy, cleansed of impurities, into his own world. Transformed now into an exterminating angel, his father seemed about to rend his flesh with the pumice stone, a primitive porous knife, without a grip, buried in the depths of his massive fist. The frenzied whirling of his father's hand had all the appearance of an act of martyrdom, and Marquitos saw himself being subjected to an ordeal but felt so sure he would come through unharmed that he endured the stabbing stone, held back his tears, and smothered his pain by biting his teeth down hard. Everything else afterward—scrambling out of the tub, scampering to his room, the comforting fetal position under the covers—took place in suspended time, on the hazy verge of sleep.

MEXICO

Like a Bride (excerpt)

ROSA NISSÁN (b. 1939)
Translated from the Spanish by Dick Gerdes

The author of two semiautobiographical novels, Like a Bride *(1992) and* Like a Mother *(1996), Rosa Nissán writes about Sephardim in a predominantly Ashkenazi Mexican Jewish community. Her work has been adapted into film. The following is the first part of* Like a Bride.

EVERY NIGHT I kneel down by the window and look at a bright star that just might be my guardian angel. Then I recite "Our Father" to God and say a "Hail Mary" for the Virgin. I hope that one of them will protect me like they do my classmates, even though my parents are Jewish. Today I prayed that I wouldn't have to change schools. They want to put me in one only for Jews. Where do Jews come from, anyway? Dear God, please help me stay at the Guadalupe Tepeyac School, and please make sure that I'll never leave this place, and especially now that I'm going to start the last and most difficult year of elementary school. Only here, and with your help, can I make it. I promise to do whatever you want—follow the Ten Commandments, go to catechism on Saturdays, and whenever I die, I'll be a guardian angel for anyone you want. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

At eight o'clock in the morning, just before beginning our studies, we pray. We put the palms of our hands next to our mouths, close our eyes, and recite the prayers together. I like the way it sounds. We make the sign of the cross with our right hand, and then we sit down to study. The school desks are neat—the part we write on lifts up, and we put all our stuff inside. I have

a little Santa Teresa picture glued on the top, in the middle, and other little flowered virgins are in each corner. I spend a lot of time giving them little kisses with my finger so they'll protect me.

After we do our lessons and finish our assignments, the nuns reward us with one more picture. Since I'm one of the best behaved, I have the most pictures. I have to hide them, because my mother doesn't approve of them. But she does see me make the sign of the cross every morning.

"I would rather you leave the room when they pray," she said the other day. But I don't want to. Then someone would ask me why I'm leaving the room, and besides, I like praying.

Yesterday at recess we were making sand castles, and when I moved to make mine bigger, I stepped on another girl's castle. She got so mad that she threw sand in my eyes and then yelled, "Jew! Jew!" at me. Her yelling frightened me, because most of the girls don't know. Then some other kids formed a group, and in a flash a bunch of them were screaming, "You killed Jesus," and then they made the sign of the cross right in my face as if I were the devil. And I yelled back at them, "That's a lie. I'm not a Jew. I pray and go to confession just like you do."

It's almost one o'clock in the morning and I can't sleep—I just keep remembering how they threw sand in my eyes.

Dreams of hell. I dreamed the same thing last week, over and over, my bed's on fire. Even though it's dark, everything's lit up with yellow, orange, and red flames. Tombs pop open like jack-inthe-boxes, and people rise up and start walking toward God. He's the one who's going to reward or punish us. I only see the lids pop off the coffins, and then the dead people start to walk.

"The Last Judgment . . . we'll all be there someday," said Sister Maria. "Then we'll know if we've won a spot in heaven, or if we'll grow tails and sprout horns."

I know that those who have gone to hell play tricks on children so they'll be bad.

Last night the neighbors on the second floor came over and we played "Chance." I got the devil and lost, because no one got the wicked card. That little red devil with the wicked eyes danced around in my dreams way into the night—grasping an iron fork, he stirs the ashes around, then he comes and goes, does whatever he wants, casts a glance at me, shows me his horns

and the red-hot edges of his pincers. I freak out when I imagine that this day could actually arrive. I hope it never does. Why would all of us who come back from the dead have to walk around nude? I don't like to be seen nude, and I wouldn't like to have to get up that day and have everyone see me like that. What a horrible punishment! I'll meet all those people from a thousand years ago—Benito Juárez, Napoleon, Miguel Hidalgo, and Costilla (my other grandmother), Cinderella, Cuauhtemoc. And how is he going to walk? They burned his feet. I'll bet he's going to rise up as good as new, everyone knows that with God nothing is impossible and . . . you know, it just might be fun, if I get to know so many people, but . . . nude? Oh, no! How embarrassing! And nothing to cover myself up with?

1. Thou shalt love God over everything else (I love him and I pray to him).
2. Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain (I'm not going to swear anymore, but when I do and I tell a lie, I'm going to cross myself, but not properly, so it won't be any good).
3. Thou shalt honor your father and mother.
4. Thou shalt honor the Sabbath and holy days.
5. Thou shalt not kill.
6. Thou shalt not fornicate (I'll skip this one, I don't even know what it means).
7. Thou shalt not steal.
8. Thou shalt not commit false testimony (I only tell a few lies, besides they're the worst thing that I can say to Mommy).
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife (I don't understand. Whose wife?).
10. Thou shalt not covet that which is not yours (that's easy, I never want anything that isn't mine).

If I can just manage to follow those rules, I'll go to heaven for sure, and I'm really happy that the Ten Commandments are the same for Jews as they are for Catholics. Whew! They share something in common! At least I can repeat them in school just the same as at home. It's easy to obey them, because the thought of going to hell is terrifying. I want to go to heaven. I'll be an angel like the ones in the pictures, and I'd like to be the one in the middle, invisible. Wouldn't it be great to be invisible! To be everywhere at the same time, flying from one place to another, without anyone seeing me? Then I could get close to those children and whisper in their ears, "Don't be afraid of the devil! Spend your time on Sundays helping an old person, loan your crayons even if some kids are mean to you and break off the tips."

They say the devil speaks to children through their left ears, telling them to play nasty tricks. And their guardian angel speaks to them through their right ears, advising them to be good. Those little blond angels, who are dressed in light blue and have transparent wings, live in heaven. They can see God, the Virgin, and all the saints. They talk to them.

"Cross, cross, make the devil go away and Jesus stay." Don't get near me, you ugly devil. Get away! Leave me alone! I know that these little devils are very insistent and they're always at your ear, saying, "Steal that pen, hit your brother, pull her braids, make fun of her." Sometimes they are so convincing, because the devil shows you how to be cunning. And they can be really mean.

My clothing will be pure white, I'll fly around from place to place, I'll teach children to be good no matter which country they're from . . . although I'm not sure I'd like to be an angel for a Jewish kid; maybe I'll adopt a Roman Catholic. Then one day I'll go to heaven. Wings made of a delicate material like a bird's skin will sprout from me, and I'll dump buckets of water from the clouds on everyone below so they can feel the rain.

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The girls in my classroom receive gifts and have parties twice a year—on their birthdays and their saint's days, but the Jews don't celebrate saint's day. The teacher asked me when mine was. The only thing I could think of was to tell her that I would ask my mother. I don't think there's a Saint Oshinica, but I'm going to look at a calendar and, if there's a Saint Eugenia, I'll be in luck.

Since we live right on Guadalupe Avenue, we can see the people streaming by on their pilgrimage to the basilica. They're always singing, dancing, laughing, drinking, hugging each other, carrying their children and sick ones, food, and blankets. Each congregation has its leader who protects them so that the following group doesn't overtake them in the unending procession.

As soon as we hear them coming, we run to the balcony. We never get tired of watching them, and sometimes the groups are as long as three city blocks. As they amble down the street, it makes us feel sad. Now that we're approaching the saint's day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, there are so many different groups passing by with their banners, all of which have the image of the Virgin—the mother of the Mexican people and their country—embroidered with golden thread.

They must enjoy it. They come from Toluca, Queretaro, Pachuca, everywhere. When they're right in front of our house they begin singing the traditional Mañanitas. They're happy because they're about to arrive at the place where the Virgin first appeared. Tears fill their eyes out of emotion, and they feel so close to each other. Some crawled on their knees . . . and they still have fifteen blocks to go!

The smell of hot tortillas invades the entire neighborhood surrounding the basilica. On just about any step you can find women heating up corn tortillas, the small ones that they sell five or ten at a time, wrapped in cheap colored paper. I wonder why all those candles are for sale everywhere around the basilica? They're slender and beautiful, and they're decorated with pink flowers.

Sometimes we would go into the church and listen to Mass. We'd walk through the street with all the vendors' stalls and then climb the little hill, which we can see from our window. There's a small white house on top with a cross on the roof. That's where the miracle happened to Juan Diego, an Indian. Wasn't he lucky! I hope that happens to me someday. If it really was a miracle, then it can happen to me too. Afterward, we'd go back down the hill, and in order to get home, we'd take the trolley that runs up and down Guadalupe Avenue. That way we wouldn't be late and my mother wouldn't find out that we had gone to the villa again.

I believed them, I truly believed my parents when they told me that the Jews didn't kill Christ.

"If they bother you again, just tell them that Christ was a Jew and had had his bar mitzvah."

"Oh, Daddy, do you think I would say that? They'd just get mad at me."

When my mommy went to Monterrey to see my other grandfather, Micaela quickly finished her chores and took us to the villa again; we ran into some of her friends, and we walked together. Then I heard one of them

say, "Listen, Mica, don't work there; the amount the Jews pay isn't much; they never pay much." I acted like I didn't hear anything, because I don't know what to think or do when I hear those things. And what if later on they start on this thing about the Jews killing Christ? Everyone already knows about it. Then we went inside the church on the hill for a while, and I just stood there staring at Christ crucified on the cross. Look what they did to him! A woman who was kneeling next to us just sobbed as she stared at the blood flowing everywhere. Poor thing. Well, who wouldn't hate the people who did this? They're bad! And it was so long ago, and she still feels horrible about it. If that woman who is weeping finds out that I'm Jewish, she might even kill me. The good thing is that Micaela likes me a lot, and she doesn't really buy all that stuff, and you really don't notice that I'm Jewish at first. Honestly, I'd rather be Jewish than a black person. But even I get upset and sad! Look how they nailed him to a cross! Can you believe it? What monsters they were!

✸

There's a fabric store at the corner where I live; Bertita and Bicha live in the back part of the store, and they're Mommy's friends. They make pastries and decorate them beautifully. I spend hours just watching them put layer on top of layer, and then there's always just one more. They make little doll-like figures, and using wire and icing they create the sweet little blue, yellow, and red flowers. Sometimes, when they finish a wedding cake, I say it's the most beautiful one they've ever made, but when they put the finishing touches on a birthday cake with the little figure in the middle standing on a pedestal, it always seems to be the nicest. I spend a lot of time with them, surrounded by vats of yellow, red, and blue icing.

The little figures don't look all that great until we make their clothes with little pieces of cloth and then stick them around the waist with some icing. We cover some of the folds with more icing, making it look like a waistband—then they look really elegant. Using some coloring, we decide if they are going to be dark-looking or fair-skinned, and they're just like we want them to be—poor things!—but they always turn out fabulous.

Bichita and Bertita are friends of a priest who teaches catechism at a church near our house on Saturdays. He teaches us to pray. A lot of kids go

there. Ever since I've learned to cross myself, I can use my right hand faster, because it's the one you use to make the sign of the cross. Afterward, they give us anise-flavored candies. I just love them. I never miss classes; the pastry ladies just tell my mother that I'm with them, helping to decorate cakes. So I go to catechism secretly, because I want to have first communion, and they're the only ones who can help save me at the Last Judgment; maybe, just maybe, by saving me, God will forgive my whole family too.

Several families from the old country live in this neighborhood called Industrial. They are my parents' best friends. They were already good friends before they got married. My mommy introduced Max to Fortunita, his wife. Now they have children too, and we're all very close. I'm the oldest. Today Mommy and some of her friends decided to go to a Hebrew school in the Valle district and see if the school could send a bus to pick us up where we live. When we got home from school, we found out they had enrolled us in that school.

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Did all of these kids also kill Christ? They all seemed so gentle. I thought: it doesn't seem like they would do it. How could they even remember? They play marbles, ring around the roses, and everything we did at the other school. Are they the same though? It's hard to tell if they're really Jewish. I don't know why, but I'm not interested in making friends with any of them.

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Wow! Third year is really different. I'm learning the multiplication tables. And we're beginning to write in ink, which has been hard for me. It was easier with a pencil. Now we get everything stained—our notebooks, our backpacks, our fingers, and our checkered school uniforms. We bring ink bottles and blotters to make our lessons look better. With pencil, everything gets erased. Ink is better. This has been a big change for us. They treat us like we're older—we use ink bottles.

Our teacher, Mr. Gomez, is the most demanding teacher in the school, and he's the meanest too. I'm in his room. For an hour, starting at eight o'clock in the morning, he makes us draw our circles perfectly. He imitates the action and then draws them all linked together on the board, telling us all the while that these are calligraphy exercises, and that he doesn't understand our scribbling. This is exactly the part I like best, and when we're working hard in class, that's when I'm not so afraid of the teacher.

My mother is really happy that he's my teacher. She says he's very demanding, and that's why he's a good teacher. Even if he is, he has an ugly face. That's why I sit near the back, half-hidden, so he won't see me when he asks questions. The other day he asked me three times, but I didn't respond, because I didn't even hear him. I remember that the nuns were great. Then he calls out our names with a gruff voice, as if we were soldiers. I'll bet he doesn't even laugh at home.

The bus going to the Condesa and Roma neighborhoods continues on to Indus trial. I've got a friend whose name is Dori. She's in my class and rides the same bus. We return to school in the afternoon to learn Hebrew, which is a strange language. You write it from right to left, exactly the opposite from Spanish. Now, whenever my grandfather scolds my father or my grandmother, I'll be able to understand him. Ah, I just remembered that at my grandfather's house they only speak Farsi. They use Hebrew for parties. Oh well, whatever!

Max and Fortuna moved to the Hipódromo neighborhood because they wanted to be closer to the Sephardic school and live nearer to their friends from the old country. The other families are looking for places to live around there too.

"What are you waiting for, Shamuel, don't pass this up! What are you going to do here by yourselves, wasting away alone? You and your wife who are still so young! Don't pass this up; let's move together, we'll take you there. There's an apartment on the corner near our house, it's not rented, it's on the fifth floor, and it's cheap! Come and see it on Sunday! It's great!"

I told Dori to check out the corner of Cholula and Campeche Streets because we were probably going to move there. She got excited, because it's only a block from her house and the apartment building was beautiful. I can't believe it: I'll be living close to my best friend. Now I can't wait for the day when I'll finally be her neighbor.

Now that they're building a movie theater near our house, we're going to move. It took them so long to do it that we didn't even get to go to the opening. The only time I've ever gone to a movie was when Max invited us one

Sunday morning. He took us to the Alameda. What a place! When it went dark inside, it seemed like we were in a dark street, and there were pretty little houses lit up on either side. I don't know if anyone lived inside them, I'm not sure, but maybe they were really stars on the walls. And what a movie! Max's children are so lucky to get to go all the time. My dad has never taken us to the movies. He's always working on Sundays, and then my mother shuts the blinds at six o'clock in the evening and puts us to bed, saying it's already nighttime and that no one goes out at night. I don't think I'll ever get to go again. If I could just see that movie over again . . .

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This is the first night in our new house, and I'm excited. I want it to be morning already, because Dori is coming to take me to see her house. She wants to show me how close it is to mine. We're so lucky!

The building is nice. It's pink, which is my favorite color—after all, I'm a girl. That's the only thing I like about being a girl, we get everything in pink; it's prettier than blue. We have the whole floor to ourselves, because there are only five apartments in the building, one on each floor. We live right on the corner, so we have balconies that look down onto both streets. On the Cholula Street side, we get the sun when it comes up. That's where the living room and kitchen are, and you can see the Popo store from that side. The bedrooms are on the other side: one for my parents, one for my three brothers, and one for my two sisters and me. Now we won't have boys and girls sleeping in the same room. Too bad! It was more fun that way. If only Moshón could stay with me. He's going to be bored with the two little ones. There are two bathrooms. One is small, and the other has a tub. The kitchen is so big there's room for a breakfast nook and the washing machine. And my mother put the banana tree on one of the balconies. The sitting room has a long balcony with flowers. When I look out the window of my brothers' bedroom, I can see the neon sign for a movie theater. It is divine (no one says divine, that's only for God, Our Father); I mean it's neat to have a movie theater so close. It's called the Lido, and it's already open. This is a fancy neighborhood!

I've got a bunch of school friends who live around here; well, they're everywhere. Maybe there aren't any Catholics here, I'm not sure. Now all

of us who used to live in Indus trial live here, next to each other. Even my granddaddy moved from his house on Calzada de los Misterios and bought one in the Roma neighborhood, on Chihuahua Street, near a park that has a huge water fountain in the middle. What a house! It's really something else. It has an indoor patio, and the floor and walls are decorated with smooth tiles, and there must be over one hundred flowerpots on the floor and hanging on the walls. The flowerpots that I like the most are the ones decorated all over with pieces of broken dishes. They're like the ones we have at our house—they even have the same designs. And, by the way, the dishes that my mommy bought in La Merced Market are a thousand times better than the old ones, because while you're eating your soup, all of sudden little animals—a bear, a dog, a duck—start to appear inside the bowl. It's fun discovering them while I eat! I hope these don't get broken very soon.

I don't know why my mommy's friends feel sorry for her because we live on the fifth floor. It's not too tiring to climb the stairs, and besides, we do little things to make life easier—if the mailman or the milkman or anyone comes with something, we just drop a little basket with a string tied to it over the balcony. That way we don't have to go up and down the stairs. When we get home from school, and before we climb the stairs, we yell up to the apartment to see if we need to buy bread or tortillas. On the days Mommy goes to market, she pays a little boy to help her because no one in the family can carry all those bags up five floors.

After having gone to the Sephardic school many times and eaten in a hurry while the bus waited downstairs where we used to live, it's been a relief to live in this neighborhood because when the bus drops us off, there are still a lot of kids on it. While they're taking them and then returning to pick us up again, we have time to play on the sidewalk with Dori and her two brothers, who come to wait also.

Mommy didn't set aside her usual routine even when Dori came to eat. She sits the six of us around the table together and she lets us know that the belt is just over there; we don't talk; we eat quickly; we don't even argue; then she sends us down to the street to play; and she doesn't want us to throw anything. Fortunately, we can play ball or skate outside; there are always a bunch of kids playing in the street. I don't understand how all these things can make that silly Dori laugh. She said my mother is very nice and it's nice to have a bunch of brothers and sisters. Nice? It's horrible! And it's even worse when you're the

oldest one and you have to stop them from fighting and they hit you really hard because you're the oldest. Look . . . she doesn't even have a mother. But my mother is nice? Well, she's even less than nice when she gets mad and digs her four nails into my arm, making it bleed. Now there are little scabs like fingernail scratches that were really visible last week, and when I said something to my dad that I shouldn't have, she did it again. How was I supposed to know that I shouldn't have said anything to him?

✸

Acapulco is really beautiful! And I never believed that the ocean could be so big! It never ends! I was lucky to be invited. I'm the only one of my brothers and sisters to go to the ocean. My aunt Chela and I slept in one room and my grandparents in another. And my aunt took so long to get ready! She puts on one lipstick, then another, looks at herself in the mirror, makes a face, touches up her eye makeup, looks at herself again—this time from another angle—smiles, looks again, makes another face, then looks at herself out of the corner of her eye. After this ritual, she remembers that someone else is in the room with her—that's me—and says, "Oshinica, I'm ready, let's eat breakfast. If we don't, your grandfather will disown us, he'll think something has happened to us, or that I spend too long getting ready. Actually, I've spent less time here than back at home, mainly because I didn't spend so much time styling my hair."

I had already put on my long, flowered beach robe, the one my daddy bought from Chucho in the store across from ours in Lagunilla Market. It covers my bathing suit. Finally, we're all decked out for our entrance into the dining room where my grandparents are waiting.

"Good morning, Daddy," she says as she kisses his hand, and then greets my grandmother in the same way.

"Oshinica, aren't you going to kiss your grandfather's hand?"

The hotel is on top of a mountain and you can see the huge, beautiful ocean from the dining room. And right now I'm thinking about my aunt, who looks so pretty this morning, knowing that she has an elegant bathing suit on underneath her robe, and another one that she hasn't worn yet in the closet. It has a picture on it, with a woman diving into the ocean and a bright sun in the background. I've never seen a more beautiful bathing suit! They

buy her whatever she wants. My mother doesn't find it very amusing. She says they spoil her so much that she's useless. But, with me, she's great! She likes me as if I were her little sister. My daddy, her only brother, is fifteen years older than she is.

✸

Shabbat always begins at six o'clock on Friday evening, just as the first star appears in the heavens, and it ends the next day with the first star. I sing in the choir at school because the teacher said I had a good voice; Moshón doesn't. That's why I go on Fridays, and if we don't, we won't be able to sing at weddings. They pay us to sing too. That's the only way I can earn some money, but I also like to go to the synagogue because we always have fun there. Since the bus picks us up before prayer time, we've got half an hour to fool around. At the corner of Monterrey and Bajio, where the synagogue is located, between the bakery and the store, a woman is usually selling hot tortillas, but she's not always there. Our big thrill is to eat. First we buy some bread rolls and strips of cooked chile wrapped in paper. Then we put them together and have a feast. We continue walking with fire coming out of our mouths, and then a little later we buy tortillas (if we have any money left).

At 7:15 we take our places in the choir. The prayer begins with our singing, well, our shouting. I don't know why the people like our toneless voices—it's so silly to say that we sing nicely, and that our temple is the best one around because of the choir.

I don't like taking baths with my brothers and sisters anymore, because Dori laughed at me. My mother gets the four of us older ones into the tub, sits on the edge near the hot and cold faucets, soaps my head, scratches me with her nails, goes to the next one, Moshón, and at the end Zelda and Clarita, then back to me. Every eight days each one of us gets scrubbed down three times. I asked if we could bathe separately, but she says it's too much work. The next step is even worse: brushing our hair and making long braids for all of us girls. We begin crying from the very moment she begins brushing out the tangles. It's frightening to have to take a bath, but the good thing is that once our hair is braided, it doesn't get tangled again. During the rest of the week she just undoes the braids and sprinkles lemon juice on them so they won't get tangled.

Every day my daddy gets up early and goes to Chapultepec Park to do his rowing. But he doesn't leave until he sees us safely on the bus, and the only thing I don't like is that he makes me eat two soft-boiled eggs, which is the only thing in life that makes me sick to my stomach. Just looking at them makes me want to vomit, but I swallow them quickly, after which I always start running toward the bathroom as if I were going to throw up.

Daddy has a lot of friends at the park, like Don Gume, who has a clothing store in the Escandon Market, or another, the milkman, who lends my dad his bike. They're almost always together in the park because they take the same bus line: Chorrito, in Juanacatlán. First they walk together for a while, and then each one rents a rowboat. We go there on Saturdays, Sundays, and every day during summer vacation. We always have fun with him; Mommy doesn't like to have fun. Mothers only like to clean house. I like going there because we get to row the boat, first me and then Moshón, and afterward he buys us fruit drinks and pieces of papaya at a stand on the edge of the lake. While we're eating, he rows us around the lake really fast. I can row fast too, and when we pass through the tunnel underneath the street—the long one that goes to the other side of the lake—I don't even hit the oars against the sides. Since Moshón can't beat me, he gets all bent out of shape. I can even do more pull-ups.

"Hey, Dad, why don't we rent two rowboats tomorrow and we can race to see who wins?"

I want to marry my dad because he's really handsome. Or even Moshón will do.

✸

"Like I was telling you, Ernesto, that's the way life is, my twentysomethingth child, first it was a girl, impossible; you know Oshinica, my granddaughter, I adore her, she has my mother's name, may she rest in peace. I didn't say a solitary word, you know I've got good manners, I don't stick my nose into things; in fact, I had called the hospital several times to see if the girl had opened her eyes yet. Two years later, thank God, a boy. I was his godparent, and it was my right. He was named after my grandfather because in our religion, as you know, it's required that the grandson carry the name of the grandfather. My daughter-in-law didn't go to the circumcision ceremony; if

the baby needed her, she was there, but she couldn't even give much milk; she has boys, takes care of them, raises them, and that's it. Anyway, to make a long story short, her third child was a girl. Only God knows what he's doing. And, eleven months later, lo and behold: another girl. She gave us a total of three of them. For the last two, the mother chose names from her people. Can you imagine? Three dowries! My son is going to have to work like a dog in order to get them married. Would you like some coffee? 'Hey! A cup of coffee for this man.' As I was saying, right now I would like for my daughter Chelita to get married, and I can vouch for the fact that she's a doll with a creamy-white face, a real sweetie pie, and obedient. We've had some real pests come around, because those Arabs are asking for hundreds of pesos—and if the boy is from a good family, even as high as several thousand pesos. Between you and me, that's the way it is. I tell you these things because you are my friend; I've known you ever since I arrived in Mexico . . . Ernesto, why are you getting up? It's still early; it's barely ten o'clock . . . wait a little longer!"

My granddaddy got sick, and I think Dr. Ernesto did too, because as much as my granddaddy wanted him to stay, he left there quickly. What horrible things he said!

What a neat green rocker! It's cool the way it rocks back and forth. But I don't think they'll let me try it because last Friday, after Moshón had gotten all comfortable in it, they said, "Get out of that rocker! Your grandfather is about to come home, and he'll get upset."

I know they'll never let me sit in it. So my five brothers and sisters and I sat all squished together on a couch and, once we got absorbed in a TV program, we forgot about fighting for the rocker. Grandfather makes his appearance. We all jump up at once, just like when the school director comes into the classroom. Tall, standing erect, one hand in his pocket and the other ready to tweak our little chins, we take turns giving him kisses. Chelita, my aunt, is also standing, hunched over a bit, and speaking like a mouse to show him how insignificant she is compared to the superiority of her father. She kisses his hand and puts it on her forehead as if to receive his blessing. He puts his hand forward, and while we kiss it, he looks the other way. That's his way of doing things. Next, he takes his hand out of his pocket and changes channels on the TV. Once he has decided which program we'll watch, he sits down in his rocking chair.

Sometimes I just stare at the photographs on the living room walls. They

all look so old. There's one I especially like of my granddaddy sitting at a table. I don't know how they took them, but there are other grandparents from different angles, some laughing and others very serious. What a funny picture! Next to the window there's a picture of us sitting together arranged by age: first me, I was laughing with my braids and a huge topknot, my mother really knew how to make those curls in my hair too. I was smiling and giving Moshón, who was always handsome, a big hug; then Zelda and Clarita. We all look great together! Next to our picture, there's a map of Israel, and a blue-and-white flag with a Zion symbol in the middle, and it reads below, "Israel, nation of Hebrews." In the next picture, Aunt Chela is wearing a green dress and a protruding hairdo; then comes my father when he was still single, and above the chimney, which has never been used, there's a Mason diploma with silver-and-gold edging that my grandfather is really proud of. He says it's a secret group and some of his best friends are Masons. No doubt about it, my grandfather is really pompous.

Today I went upstairs to his room and on top of the chest of drawers there were a million oddly shaped and different colored bottles of cologne; one of them has a little black ball on top, and when you squeeze it, a wet, strong smell comes out. I adore going up to his room because it's as elegant as a king's chamber, and so is my aunt's bedroom: it's all hers, and it has a dressing table and stool. I've never seen myself from the front and the back at the same time before. Is that the way they see me when they see me from the side? I didn't really recognize this new Oshinica, and I think my nose is too big if you look at me from the side, but . . . what a luxurious bedroom . . . .and it has a terrace with cane furniture. She has her own bathroom. It's violet with turquoise and white. Then I begin poking around in her chest of drawers. Wow! Is that neat or what? It's like getting inside my aunt's world. She has hose, invitations, spools of thread, little boxes; everything's a secret, but I just go about opening and closing doors and drawers.

Here there's plenty of room to store things; at our house all I have is the bottom drawer of the chiffonier. That's where my mom puts my folded underwear, so I can't really hide anything there. Oh, how I'd like to be able to lock it and have my own private space! Even if I just had a place to hide this diary, so I wouldn't have to live in fear that someone is going to read it. It's no one's business but mine.

A lot of times I hear the adults say they'd give anything just to be kids again. Being a kid is marvelous, we're supposed to be happy, not be in need of anything, and laugh at anything . . . and also, they begin gazing nostalgically. I don't understand it. What do they see that's so great about it? This is being happy? My mother yells at me, she spanks me, and at school they punish me. I still haven't finished writing "I must obey my parents and my teachers" five hundred times. For more than a month now, I've had to fill up page after page of the same thing. And they won't let me talk in class either. The only homework I have time for is to repeat this writing, and I like it, especially when all the lines are connected. I can do it fast and they look great. I think that those adults who believe those things about childhood probably couldn't draw those lines, or their parents didn't scold them. And if that's true, will it be worse when I grow up?

Do I want to look like my mom, my grandmother, or my aunt? No, I'd rather look like my grandfather, my dad, or even my brother. Those women are so boring, and they're dumb as well! Well, I guess my mom isn't so dumb, but she's not all fun and games either. My grandmother can't even go to Sears by herself, and it's only two blocks away. But she goes secretly with Uba. Women are supposed to stay at home; it doesn't even occur to them to go rowing. My dad is really nice; the men go out to work and the women take care of the children or the brothers and sisters, like me. At least I don't get bored, because I can go outside and always beat the guys at soccer or baseball.

"That man dressed in blue, is he the groom?"

"I don't know, honey, but I think so. The other one looks too old, but let's go to the park, because your grandfather doesn't want anyone to disturb him."

"Is it really possible? That ugly guy wants to marry my aunt?"

"I don't know. I'll ask your grandma later. All I know is that your aunt has been jumpy lately, and who knows what they're going to talk about?

"When I brought the coffee, I heard them talking about the property in Polanco as a part of her dowry. But I shouldn't say anything; your grandfather would kill me. Let's take your little boat to the park, and we'll put it in the water; all the kids will be taking theirs. Didn't you bring yours with you?"

"Yes I did, Uba, and I like to come over here because then you always take us to the park."

When we got back, they were saying good-bye.

"That guy dressed in blue, the one with the straight hair," said my dad, "he's not going to marry your aunt."

I felt faint. Oh my God! What a shame! Everyone was mad.

And my poor aunt, she's so pretty and he's really ugly. She was so embarrassed that she locked herself in her room. My father doesn't have any land or even a car, so how is he going to get me married? When we were leaving, I heard my grandfather say, "They're crazy! Is that all they think of her? They can go straight to hell! They don't know what they want. Well, I dare them ever to find any girl as beautiful as my daughter."

I don't want anyone to know that I cried all night long, or that I bit my blankets out of rage. But what difference would it make if just one of us got mad? What did my aunt feel? What a shame, him rejecting her like that! How embarrassing! She had already gone out a few times with this guy, who had a beard and wore a black hat, and now, when they finally come to formalize the engagement, the deal is off. This isn't going to happen to Moshón. Maybe I'll just stay like a little girl. I don't want this to ever happen to me. It's horrible being a woman. If I'm stronger than Moshón and I can do anything he can, what's the difference? I don't want to even get close to an Arab. Yesterday, when those men arrived, my granddaddy, smiling with his gold teeth, said that I was his little granddaughter, and they said what everybody says: "Like a bride! A true bride!" That means good luck!

Why would I ever want to get married?

"Auntie, you're so pretty. Why would they want to do that to you?"

"Well," my mommy answers, "they're backward and stupid. They never let your aunt go out alone; they always hired a teacher to come to the house. They always made her seem like she was hard to get, and that's why she talks like that. Ugh! They didn't even let her have any friends. And those from Persia? They're all the same. What's the difference? Your grandfather has made a slave out of your father. See what I'm saying? Yesterday he told him to get the car out of the garage just as we were getting ready to go to the movies. That ended that idea. Heaven help him who doesn't do what he's supposed to. Everything will get ruined. And don't you see? If you're not high class, you don't have good clothes, and we're even without a car. In Istanbul, I used to go to the best schools, and our classes were taught in French. My mother's family, of course, was upper class."

✡

Two kids who ride the school bus to the Roma neighborhood began fighting; they had said a lot of bad words in Arabic to each other on the bus.

"I hope you swallow an umbrella and it opens up inside your stomach," said one of them.

"I hope you live 120 years in a hospital," said the other.

"A curse on the ship that brought your father here!" replied the first one.

I get scared when my daddy speaks Arabic to someone. He learned it in the Lagunilla Market and he speaks it from time to time, but not at home, of course—well, whom would he speak it with? Fortunately, no one at school has ever heard him speak it.

"Because of Queen Esther, we Jews were saved," said my mommy. It just so happens that the king of the Philistines, who wasn't Jewish, fell in love with Esther. As the king, he had all the young girls of the kingdom brought to him, and he chose her. Even though his prime minister did everything he could to prevent him from marrying her, it was her beauty that saved the people of Israel. And now we honor that marriage with the Purim celebration in March; at school we have a kermis charity bazaar with costumes; the mothers distribute bread and marmalade called hamantaschen, and they give us wooden rattles to liven things up.

They pick two candidates from each room to play the role of Queen Esther. On the day of the kermis, when they crown the queen, everyone really gets excited. Even the parents get drawn in to it—they buy lots of votes so that their daughter will be elected the queen. How fortunate the chosen one must feel! They've never even considered me; besides, my dad wouldn't ever buy any votes. But still, when they come around to choose the candidates from each room, I always get a little nervous because they just might say my name. But it's never happened. I guess I'm not that pretty. And it's always the same girls. Last year, Dori lost by one hundred votes to the daughter of the school president. After the coronation, I like to go to the charity raffle, because the parents who own stores or factories always donate neat gifts. Then they reenact the moment when the king chooses Esther. Out on the patio, we dance horas in a circle around a bonfire. Then we eat. My mommy usually makes a huge bag of popcorn because she was assigned to a food table.

✸

I wet the bed again, and my mommy had taken me half-asleep one last time to the bathroom. I still do it, and I don't even feel it. I guess she has gotten used to it, because she doesn't scold Clara or me; she just leaves the sheets on the bed all week and the stain begins to look really horrible. Whenever we get a new maid, I'm always embarrassed, but then I shake it off—there's no way I can hide in my own house, so I just act like nothing's happened.

My sister and I sleep in either of the two beds and when we realize that we're wet, we just change our pajamas and get into the one that's dry. Zelda just frowns at us and complains that our beds stink; she thinks she's unlucky because she has to sleep with us. We don't do it because we want to, and I'd never be able to invite anyone to spend the night, and I'd never dream of going to someone else's house. Just think what would happen if everyone at school found out! My mommy's right in loving Moshón more than us. He's really clean. These kids that don't wet their beds—how do they do it?

Freddy wets his bed too. We could try putting those of us who wet our beds together in one room, and those who are normal in the other. We can do it, if my mommy wants to; if not, Zelda will have to make sure she doesn't get her bedding mixed up with ours; then she'll have to stop bothering us.

I was going to say that out of the three closest aunts I have, the one I like the best is Chela, although my mommy's sister who lives in Monterrey is nice too. I was sent to stay with them during vacation. I even went to my cousins' school, which I really liked, because everyone wanted to know who I was, and my cousins would act like they were important, saying I was from Mexico City. Just outside the school gate they sell jicama, oranges, cucumber slices with chile, crisp pork rinds, yo-yos, *baleros*, *paletas*, chocolates, pinole, well, you know, all the things my dad says are no good for you—ah, and some caramel-covered apples that you suck on until you reach the apple part. Sundays are the same for me as for anyone else: I love to buy, buy, buy. But it's not the same in Mexico City. There's nothing to buy because when we get out of class, the buses are waiting inside the school yard, and even if they *are* selling things outside the gates, we don't ever see them.

Alegre is five years older than I am. She has a bedroom all to herself, and I like being her cousin. And she has so many friends! She does things the way she wants to, she wears checked shirts that have the necks and sleeves like a man's shirt, and she has a wallet for her money just like my dad's—ah, and she wears pants too. On Saturdays, she invites three or four friends over to spend the night; we haul mattresses, pillows, and blankets down to the living room, turn up the record player, and stay up as late as we want. What a great life! At home, if we make any noise after my mom turns out the light, she yells at us, "Enough! Be quiet. Or I'll give you all a good whipping."

Aarón asked me if I wanted to swim; I thought he meant in a swimming pool, but no, he meant on the terraced roof behind the kitchen. We put a board in front of the kitchen door to keep the water from leaking inside. We started filling up the patio at eight o'clock in the morning, and by eleven it was up to our knees. Even though it was freezing cold, we swam in our underwear. I can't believe I even opened my eyes underneath the water and I could see the bottom. It was a fantastic day! When my aunt came home, I got scared, but she didn't get mad. She just laughed, put a towel around me, and said, "Girl, you're so crazy. Just look at you! Really, you do some of the silliest things."

Before I went to sleep, she said to me, "Tell me, have you heard the stories about crazy Ishodotro of Yojá? They used to tell them to us when we were little kids in Istanbul." I adore the way my aunt laughs. And she has that mischievous look in her eyes. It seems a little strange to me because grown-ups don't do pranks. I wanted her to tell me the stories, even though they're the same ones my mom tells us.

What a strange aunt! If she lived in Mexico City she might get along with my mom, and then maybe my mom would be easier on us.

✸

This year, I'll finish sixth grade. It's the year when they start taking most of the girls out of school—this is the year they begin to live at home with their mothers. They take sewing lessons, they learn how to cook, make desserts, and who knows what else; but all of a sudden they become pretty and get married. The boys are allowed to continue their studies. Oh, heaven forbid! What if they do that to me? What am I going to do at home all day long?

There are two bakeries near our house, but we always go to the one on Nuevo Leon, even though it's farther away. My mom likes their bread better. The only bad thing about it is that to get there we have to walk past Rosi's

house, and every time her mom's standing at the window, and when she sees us walking by, she yells out, "Are you going for bread, honey? For the love of your mommy, get me a couple of loaves too."

And there's no way you can say no to her, right? So she's always taking advantage of my brothers, or me, and as a result, she always gets fresh bread brought to her door. And yesterday, when I brought her the bread, she had even more nerve: "Honey, dear, could you please help me move this table, and that plant, and this pot?"

And she asked Moshón to bring her some soft drinks from the store across the street. We're definitely not going to walk by that old bat's house anymore. No wonder they call Rashelica the brazen old . . . I mean, well, she has some nerve! Even though it takes longer, let's walk all the way around the block, and besides, why doesn't she send Rosi dear, as she calls her, to do those things?

Sitting at the window that looks down to Piedad Street, Aunt Cler helps while away the hours. She is accompanied by the sounds corning from a large oval-shaped radio. This afternoon we listened to the comedy programs on Radio XEW and XEQ. Between programs they play songs by singers such as Avelina Landin and Amparo Montes—"I'm walking down that tropical path / my eyes are full of passion and my soul feels like crying"—or something like that. And at six o'clock, *Doctor Heart*. It's a neat program that helps people solve their problems. I love hearing about things that I never knew existed. I'd like to write her an anonymous letter with a fake signature so that my mom wouldn't find out, but I bet they'd never pay any attention to an elevenyear-old.

"So long as you've got your health, the rest is unimportant; you should be thankful to God that you're not an invalid, blind, or an orphan," says my father. "The people who write to her have nothing else to do; they're just vain."

And do they have problems! I'd like to ask her what I need to do to quit wetting my bed or to stop my mom from yelling at me.

"Dear Friend . . ." she'd probably answer. But what a lovely lady! How I wish someone would say that to me sometime! My father says people who talk like that are hypocrites and he doesn't trust them.

Is that really true? Maybe so.

While we listen to the programs, I watch Aunt Cler sew and sew, and I see that she's concerned about what's going on in the soap opera—if they had caught Esmeralda or if the daughter had deceived her father. Silently she changes the color of the thread, finishes the last stitch, and happily admires the juicy purple grapes that grew from her hands on the throw pillows that will adorn her couch in the living room.

My mom goes into the kitchen to fix that tasty dessert that old Aunt Cler makes from rolled orange rinds. Her maid is off on Mondays, that's why we go to see her on those days.

"She can't be left alone; what would she do if someone comes to the door or she needs to go to the bathroom? If no one is around, what would she do? Heaven help me if something were to happen to her. And, to top it off, she's in a wheelchair. Poor thing! She can wheel around a bit. Uncle David, thank God, will come this evening."

And that's the way it's been for two years, and ever since her daughter died, she's been paralyzed.

This Monday my mother couldn't visit Aunt Cler, so she sent me with the keys instead.

"That's very nice of you, child. Stay for a while! Let's talk, take your mind off things, you poor dear."

As soon as the train starts along Piedad Street, I try to spot her window from my seat. In that building, there's a window curtain with that starched pride and the elegant hand-stitched lace, behind which I spot aunt's little face with straight hair. I climb the stairs, taking a short rest on each floor; the stairwells and hallways are so wide that you could dance a hora in each one. I think: once she walked up those stairs for the first time, and she'll go down them on the last day of her life. I get the keys out and I'm in the living room. I look around everywhere, there are embroidered doilies all over the place, and you can see the work of her hand in every throw pillow, in every corner. I cross through the sitting room and reach the door of the little room where the sound of the dark wood radio fills the house and my aunt's life. I know that she'll be surprised to see me because she never knows which niece has been designated to visit her that day.

"Ah! Is that you?" she says without cracking a smile.

Those big, deep eyes that I thought would light up just stare at me, giving me the shivers. I don't appreciate her not saying something nice about me coming—not willingly, but here I am. I sit down in this small armless

chair, directly in front of her, and I look toward the street. The sun is strong, but it's partly hidden, so we put the blinds down. I like to leaf through her embroidery magazines while we listen to the radio programs. In one of the old magazines, *Family Magazine*, I run across a beautiful cross-stitch and she says she'll show me how to do it. When she sends me to get the orange-rind dessert, I stop and linger in the living room without bothering her. My mom told me that Auntie cleans all of her decorations on the glass shelves herself. She doesn't trust the maids, everything has to be carefully dusted, right down to the last little corner and crack; that's why she gets them out. I take a peek into the bedrooms: I see a picture of her daughter, then a girl younger than me, and I get sad for my aunt who lost her daughter and for the girl who, had she lived, would have inherited the responsibility to take care of her sick mother. That daughter is with her when she's embroidering, watching other lives from the window, listening to the radio, and watching the trains coming and going up and down Piedad Street.

The Invisible Hour

ESTHER SELIGSON (1941–2010)
Translated from the Spanish by Iván Zatz

First published in Indicios y quimeras *(1988), this story can be read as a study of Bergsonian time or as a surrealist vision of eternity. Seligson manages to deal with several layers of time: clock time, calendar time, psychological time, and metaphysical time, thus the quote "Time is either an invention or nothing at all." The anonymous narrator, the owner of a broken quartz watch, takes it to be fixed at a store unlike any other. What follows is an examination of life in and beyond time—a journey through a metaphysical universe in which the experience of time itself is abstracted.*

Blindness is a weapon against time and space. Our existence is nothing more than an immense and unique blindness, with the exception of those tiny bits transmitted to us by our miserly senses. The dominant principle within the cosmos is blindness. . . . Time, which is a continuum, can only be escaped by a single means: to avoid observing it from time to time. Thus can we reduce it to those fragments we can recognize.

—ELIAS CANETTI, *Auto-da-Fé*

"WELL, YES, SIR, we'll have to keep it for observation."

"But how come? The only problem was that the glass fell off."

"We are a serious company, sir. We are specialists. Our obligation is to return it to you in perfect condition."

"There's nothing wrong with it."

"The hands appear to be a little loose, and the face is somewhat dusty. It's only logical, since it had been exposed for a while."