

TRASH



SYLVIA AGUILAR ZÉLENY

TRANSLATED BY JD PLUECKER

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Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny

Translated by JD Pluecker



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*For my son Juan,
just because,
and because I can.*

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Trash don't know the meaning of use.

Just like you kids.

—Dorothy Allison

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1

The house was tiny. One of those houses with a steady supply of food. With four walls. All of them sturdy. With windows, a door, and a lock. A functioning lock. It had two small beds, three chairs, a table, and a little stove. Also cups, plates, spoons, knives. The house had a lock.

I lived with her in that house.

If I close my eyes, I see her. Her face as if freshly washed. Her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Her apron always atop her clothes, the pockets in the front packed with keys, coins, twenty-peso bills, a prayer card with the virgin on it, thread. A needle pierced through the thread's bobbin.

She worked cleaning houses on the other side, over there, with gringos or for Mexicans who lived like gringos, I'm not sure. I just know she crossed the bridge downtown every day to get to gringolandia. It's shit going back and forth, but the shit pays well, she'd tell anyone she ran into. Her apron tucked away in her bag so the migras wouldn't think she worked over there. Sometimes she'd push a cart like the ones from the supermarket that she grabbed who-knows-where. A little cart crammed with stuff. The gringos or the Mexicans who lived like gringos would always give her food, clothes, shoes, whatnot. It was strange for her to arrive empty-handed. And it didn't matter what she brought, it always made me happy.

Because if I close my eyes, I see myself there too, not like I am now, but how I was then: little, an idiot, a dummy, with one eye fixed on her all the time, worshipping her. Fucking idiot.

Some girls lived in one of the houses where she worked. I know because sometimes she'd come home with things just for me: shoes, toys, books, shirts with Barbie's face on them. The girls don't wear this anymore, the girls don't play with

this anymore, the girls don't want this anymore, she'd tell me. They give them everything, I mean everything. Just stick out their hands, and they get whatever they want. Just look, they get rid of brand-new things, it's like you're the first person to wear it, Alicia, look, try this on, put these sneakers on, I'm telling you, they're actually new.

I didn't care too much one way or the other about the clothes, but what I loved were the books she'd bring me. And I was happy, happy because in the books there were fairies, frog princes, rabbits with clocks. I also brought toys, she'd say, look, it doesn't look like they've ever even been touched. The toys weren't toys, they were board games for two or more players, things that would make you think, puzzles practically impossible to assemble on my own. But the books, the books don't need anyone but me. Books are read on your own.

All week long, she'd move between the houses on the other side and a house or two on this side as well, rich people's houses. A long way off from our part of town. The two of us lived off the money she made from cleaning and then some extra things she'd do. You're lucky, she'd tell me, at your age I was already working. Sometimes she'd come home with clothes she had to iron, to press smooth, like new. Or clothes to mend, a hem, a seam over here, lots of buttons. Whiling away her afternoons and weekends with these tasks. Sewing, ironing, and then all over again, from the beginning.

In the evenings, after laying out my school uniform and cleaning the stove, she'd sit down and ask me to rub her feet, and I'd do it happily because I loved the smell of her foot cream. I loved to squeeze out a little squirt of the cream and then slather it over her arches, then the soles of her feet, and afterwards between each toe. Pull em for me, she'd say, crack em for me. And very obediently, I'd do just that, mainly because she requested it, but also because I loved the sound, the creak and crack of each one. She'd close her eyes, smile. I felt like I was giving her some pleasure by massaging her feet. I'd do it, moving slowly, soft and tender, like with love.

I was such a fucking idiot.

I don't know what she did with me before I went to school. It's like my memory starts in the first year of kindergarten, her taking me by the hand and me in a blue skirt, a white blouse, and an apron with those little squares all over it. I have other images from later on: the two of us walking shoulder to shoulder. By then, I was no longer one of those little girls who dart away and run across the street without so much as a glance. Behave, study hard, pay attention, she repeated to me every day before saying goodbye. And I did it: I behaved, I studied hard, I paid attention, I raised my hand to answer questions, I turned in my work before anyone else. I read out loud better than anyone else.

It was rare she'd pick me up from school, since, like I said before, she was working. So she had a neighbor woman look after me, along with her own kids. I had to stay with them until she came to pick me up. I entertained myself watching TV with the other kids or doing homework. My stomach growled, I remember, but I didn't have permission to eat with them and, besides, I liked eating with her, not them. Handing her a tomato, peeling off the outer layers of skin from an onion, sprinkling salt and pepper into ground beef, setting the table. Two plates, two cups, spoons, forks, just one knife that she used to cut the meat for me. I've never eaten a fideo like hers since. Her chile colorado with meat and potatoes. Her albóndigas.

First thing was always to burn the corn tortillas. We liked them like that. She'd slather butter on them with a little salt. I'd eat one or two before the food was done. Because there was always food. Hot home-cooked food, made fresh.

Burnt tortillas scare away hunger and cold. That's what she'd tell me. She also said it was a lie that eating raw Maseca could hurt you. I remember I liked to help her make tortillas, mixing the warm water with the corn flour, squeezing it with my fingers. And then as she flattened out the tortillas, she'd sing a song, how'd it go? She was singing all the time, sometimes I still think I can hear her singing at night when the world quiets down. As she cooked or ironed or cleaned, she'd

sing and sing. I loved her voice, the latest hit songs came out of her mouth, but they sounded different. Not better, just different.

In her favorite songs, she always repeated words like love, guilt, oblivion. There was more feeling in them when she sang, like she was the actual one feeling love and guilt and oblivion. There were songs she didn't sing. They'd come on the radio and she'd say: turn it up, turn it up more. Her mouth said the words of the song one after the other, just without any sound. I don't know what songs they were or who sang them, but even today, when one of them comes on the radio, I see her so clearly. That old-ass bitch, maybe I even miss her. It wasn't that she sang well, but she sang with passion, like everything else disappeared when she gave herself over to her songs. Whenever she caught me listening to her sing, she'd turn off the radio all of a sudden and say: that's enough wasting time, come on, go read out loud.

She's the one who got me into the habit of reading. I'd read to her and she'd sew: a hem, a seam, buttons. Or she'd iron: a dress, a shirt, the outer seam of a pair of pants. I don't know if I already said it, but besides cleaning and taking care of kids, she'd also work as a seamstress, all kinds of little jobs mending her clients' clothes. Those people. The kind of people who pay other people to do everything for them. She didn't teach me how to wash or iron or mend. You're too small. That's what she'd say. There'll be time later on. It looks easy, but it's not. You have to know how much soap, how hot the iron should be. You have to blind stitch. One of these days I'll teach you, she repeated, because you never know when you'll need your hands to get you out of a bind.

I don't wash or iron or sew, but my hands sure do know how to get me out of a bind. That's because she taught me how to scavenge. Thanks to her, I learned where the best things were, things everybody wanted, almost new stuff. High-quality trash, she called it. She'd look at her watch and say, come on, niña. Niña, that was her name for me. Let's go

hunting. There's no one out there at this hour. Hunting, that's what she called it.

My name for it is work.

I'm off to work, I say to nobody, right when I get out of bed.

Hunting? Other people do that. They do it for me.

Back then, we didn't do what I do now on a daily basis. We didn't spend the whole morning out here waiting for the garbage truck to pull up. We didn't crowd around the truck as it emptied its load, straining under the avalanche of stuff to get first dibs. We didn't get in fights over this thing or that. We didn't grab stuff to sell later on. No way. We'd head over to the trash dump in the afternoon, when hardly anyone was there anymore, when nobody cares what you take. When there's not much to pick from and you can take your time scavenging.

As soon as we got there, she'd roll out her own particular method. First walk and walk, nudge one mound of junk with her foot and then another. See whatever tumbled out. Walk some more. Suddenly, stop. She scoured the horizon from left to right, up and down. A pirate searching for her own treasure island. And when she found it, she'd point with her index finger and say, there, right there, niña. And there, right there, we'd open up a bag and then another, one of those big kinds of bags, or dig and dig, and we'd find something, a frying pan, a bedspread, clothes, a pair of mismatched or matching flip flops, cans of food. Treasure.

Unbelievable what people throw away, leave behind, forget. Even the most private things from a house end up here. Other people's half-used things make us whole.

She was a canned food expert, like she could smell the cans and always knew where they were hiding. Cans have their own seasons, as I'd learn later. Sometimes you'd barely get one or two a week with no labels. Later in the summer, you'd find lots of cans of tuna. Battered cans that gringo supermarkets would trash. You find everything here that gringos and

Mexicans throw in the trash. Around November and December, you find a ton of those cans of what I learned they call “sweet potatoes” in English and jelly-like cranberry sauce, ingredients for the holidays on the other side. I don’t really know what it is, but I know you can spread it on some bread and it makes your belly all sweet and happy.

She didn’t sell what she found. All of it was for us. So a shitload of our stuff came from her housekeeping clients’ closets or from the city trash dump. We lived off other people. Yes sir, even back then I was already living off someone else’s scraps. In fact, I was someone else’s scrap.

She wouldn’t even touch the soda cans. It was like she didn’t know what everybody around here knows now: those cans are easy money. She wouldn’t pick up any plastic bottles either. All of us in the know call them PETs. She didn’t know how valuable they were, how much you could get for them. Once she wasn’t around anymore, I discovered all this about the soda cans, the PETs, and the metals. Well, I didn’t just discover it. Don Chepe taught me. Everybody around here is scared of that old man. But once you get into his circle, he takes care of you and looks out for you.

Don Chepe takes care of me and looks out for me. I’m part of his circle.

She’d only take the essential items from here. Let’s get this straight, we don’t need to be here. She’d say to me all the time. We do it just because, because it’s there, but you and I live better than these people. Why do I say that? Because I have a job that pays me and my income takes care of us. Don’t let anyone trick you into thinking you’re like one of those grimy little girls out there—look at em—scouring and scouring the trash all day to see what they can grab. And don’t turn around, don’t look up, just get done what you came to do. Not looking at the other people as we were scavenging was actually a way of making herself believe that nobody saw her, nobody saw us, nobody realized we were also taking stuff to be able to get by.

But I won't lie, the truth is we were also out in the trash scouring and scouring. Especially when she went out partying on a Friday or when she skipped one or two of the houses she cleaned. So then, yeah, since we had no bread, cheese, eggs, or tortillas, we ended up here. We walked through the empty lots on the way from our house to the dump, and we rooted around, scavenged, picked out the good stuff.

The hunt.

That's how I learned to tell the difference between something that still works and something that could be fixed. Between what you can still eat and what's not fit for a dog. Her lessons showed me how to live with nothing. They made me who I am.

Because of her, I am who I am.

And because of her, that old-ass bitch, I am where I am.

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The second phase of our research has been approved. My colleagues are astonished, because after closing down the mobile clinic, all signs were that the project would be eliminated. I knew it was just an issue of appealing to their sense of pride. It's a shame, but in this country the colonizer narrative still rules: we're going to save them from their savage ways. That's what all their actions show so clearly.

I told the members of the committee that our study of life in the Ciudad Juárez trash dump was a unique way to understand la frontera and its multiple effects on our community's health. That got their wheels turning. I appealed to the superhero living inside each one of that handful of investor-doctors by explaining that the results of the study would provide us with a better approach to health, the environment, and, therefore, their salvation.

“Investor-whos?”

“It's terrible, tía. They're half investor, half doctor.”

In the meeting, the main concern was for our safety and about the risks of working in a dangerous area with a population like that. Henry told them that, if anything, that danger would open up another avenue for research: The roughness of life in the trash dump must be a response to the circumstances in which people were immersed both inside and outside the dump. The violence was a consequence of the space: setting-based behavior.

“Henry said avenue for research, tía, but really it's an avenue for income.”

“Income you're giving those people at the hospital with all that volunteer work you're probably giving them for free,”

said my sister Norma, who hadn't even said hello yet and already was slinging her criticism my way.

"I'm happy for you, nena. It's in your blood. Did I tell you that your mother worked for a while teaching catechism in one of those barrios you're researching?"

"Yes," Norma and I both said. Neither one of us tells la tía that she's told us the same story a thousand times. That story and also the one about our dad.

"Your dad taught literacy. He would always say that day-to-day words had to come before the word of Christ."

"Tía, I'm guessing you didn't invite us over just for us to hear about Gris's trash, did you?"

Ever since I started to come up with this research idea, Norma has taken to saying random sentences with the word *trash* just to mess with me. Or to try to mess with me.

"No, no I didn't invite you over for that. Sit down, I have some news."

La tía glares at our phones, even though she doesn't go so far as to tell us to put them away or to turn off the ringer. And even without her saying a word, we both do it. Norma puts hers in her purse. I turn mine upside down and put it on the coffee table. We're in la tía's living room, with the exact same sofas she's had for years, still in perfect shape. We never sit here except for special gatherings or social events.

"I'm going to retire."

The first thing that comes to my mind is a series of images of la tía leaving the house at dawn or returning home late at night, just to work a little more at the dining room table. La tía always on the phone, always resolving some problem for someone, always busy. Like me these days.

"Estoy enferma. I've been sick for a while now. Up until now, I've been able to keep my life going, but it's getting more and more complicated."

Norma and I stare at each other. Then my sister looks la tía up and down, like she's trying to figure out what this sickness is that's forcing her to retire. Is it her heart? Her stomach? I fix my eyes on her, I should know what it is she has.

When she tells us what she has, I beat myself up for not noticing the little details that now make perfect sense. Her forgetfulness, those overly long pauses between one word and another. The way she repeats everything, repeating herself.

La tía adopted me and my sister after we became orphans. Not just because she was the oldest in the family, but also because she was the one in the best economic situation: she ran her own legal office, she'd bought a house for our grandparents in Juárez, and a little while later she'd bought her own place in El Paso too. Who else besides her could take care of the two of us? No one agreed. There were other aunts and uncles with kids our age, relatives who thought they were more capable of taking care of two girls. My aunt showed them what our society refuses to accept: a woman on her own can do a lot. Anything.

She brought us to live in El Paso. The city that was only good for day trips or Christmas shopping became our home. English, our language for everyday life. Even though we'd only be a few miles from our house and even though we were just little girls, leaving Juárez meant leaving behind a whole life. The one we had and the one we would have had.

“Bueno, pues, you can come and live with me,” said Norma. “There's plenty of space, and you'll be comfortable. I can make trips to the office if you need something.”

“Claro que no,” said la tía, shaking her head no emphatically.

“What are you thinking then?” I asked her, sure that la tía had already figured out her next steps. It was impossible to imagine her not having everything perfectly planned.

“I worked my whole life to pay for unexpected situations like this. So.”

Unexpected situations, that's what she's calling her illness, as if it were a collapsed ceiling or flooding caused by a broken pipe. No doubt Norma is thinking that what's happening in la tía's head is like a collapsed ceiling, just like a broken pipe. I know her, I know she's dying to pull her phone out of her bag and google all the symptoms and the different components of la tía's illness.

"I'm going to stay in my house, I'll pay someone to take care of me twenty-four seven. And when the time comes, I'll go to a."

"Claro que no," says Norma, cutting her off mid-sentence.

"A nursing home," she says.

I'm better at finishing la tía's sentences. And I'm better at understanding la tía's plans. It takes one to know one.

"It's the best decision, Norma. There are trained professionals who'll know how to attend to all of Tía Mayela's needs."

I can feel my sister's stare, accusing me of being cold-blooded. She does it all the time, same as when we had the mobile clinic.

"You're not helping those people in that colonia, you're studying them like lab rats."

"Mice," I corrected her.

La tía has always paid for someone else to take care of certain things: food, cleaning, looking after two orphan girls. And now, her health. I remind Norma of that, and it pisses her off. She insists it's not the same thing.

"It's our responsibility to take care of her, Gris. We owe everything to la tía."

I tell her she's right, but Norma understands that sometimes you have to allow other people to take on certain responsibilities.

“You and I don’t know how to take care of someone in her situation.”

“You’re a doctor.”

“But I don’t specialize in that.”

“I didn’t invite you over so you could make decisions for me. I just wanted you both to know what was happening, and for you to help me make the necessary arrangements.”

La tía decides that Norma will take care of the office and hire a litigator to take over her position. I’m in charge of remodeling and adding some things to her bathroom and her bedroom so she can be more comfortable, and also looking for someone who can stay with her at home.

“Someone from your hospital.”

“But I don’t work at the hospital, I work for the hospital and ...”

“I’m tired now, I’m going to lie down. Un beso.”

Norma stays quiet, I can see she’s holding back her tears. For one second, I want to give her a hug and tell her everything’s going to be alright. Just because, and because everything is going to be alright. Then she stands up, pulls her phone out of her purse, looks at it, and puts it away again. She walks past me and says: Un beso.

Every phone call or visit with la tía always ends the same. Un beso. Just one. Even when you’re standing right next to her and she says goodbye, she says “Un beso,” even though, before she even finishes with the kiss, she’s already on her way. Sometimes she skips the kiss altogether. I understand her, though: her love for the two of us was always focused on education and experiences. Books. Clothes. Travel. Education. La tía always made sure we had everything we needed; she worried about what we ate, our grades, nurturing our talents. She made sure we had solid friendships and excellent teachers. We went to the best schools. We enjoyed the best camps, exchange programs, sports. Everything and anything to assure we’d be successful.

We come to be defined by the space we inhabit and the education we receive. Like Henry said, setting-based behavior. He was talking about the kids living around or inside the trash dump in Juárez, but more broadly it applies to everything. And that's what I'm most interested in studying. Who is the person who makes a life out of our leftovers? And, more specifically, what makes us who we are?

Sometimes I ask myself who we would have become if our parents hadn't died. If we'd stayed in Juárez. No doubt, we wouldn't be who we are now. I imagine a normal life, the two of us growing up in the furniture store, working for our dad. Each of us trying to convince a customer to buy some mattress or take home a sofa where the night before one or the other of us had had sex with some boyfriend. One of us pregnant at seventeen, the other teaching literacy classes or catechism in some neighborhood on the edge of town.

Both of us with an uncertain future, like la tía now.

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This is gonna be your corner. Nobody else has the right to work it, but there's always gonna be some pendeja who tries to take it cause she don't know, cause she acts like she don't know, or cause she knows you don't know. Stay ready. You gotta mark your territory, your corner's your territory and if you don't defend it, it ain't gonna work out for you round here, period. What do you mean who? Like any of em, mija, any of em who front like they're one of us but definitely ain't one of us. Ay pues, you'll know: you'll see em and you'll just know. You'll know they don't have our class or our style. No, it doesn't happen all the time, the rules around here were laid down a long time ago. You may not think so, but pretty much everybody respects the rules, but does it happen, yeah it does happen. Don't think you're the only one who decided to get into this cause you were sick of being hungry, cause we both know that's why you're here, don't come at me with some story bout how you're on these streets cause you were bored. Ah, see? That's why you have to keep your eyes peeled, cause if they steal your corner, they steal bread off your table. So if someone fucks with you on this corner, you tell em they can go fuck themselves and end of story. And if they don't leave—cause there's always some snaggletooth bitch who acts like she don't know—you tell em: go talk to la Reyna and you're gonna see how quick they cut and run. Yep, la Reyna, that's me. Reyna Grande, even though you'll hear la Bibi calling me Treyna Glande or la Tijeras screaming at the top of her lungs, Where's Mi Reyna Trande? Fuckin bitches, they slap nicknames on every damn body. If only they were that creative with their hustle. You'll get to know em, they can seem like cabronas, but deep down they're so sweet they're sickening. They're also damn good with their fists, so if I'm not around and you get into some shit, you let em know, and you'll see how quick they beat down any motherfucker who messes with

you. Ay, come on, wipe that sad look off your face, mija, you look like you're gonna cry. Are you sure you're up for this? Mira, just in case, I'll put you on a test run. I've been at this game too long to take care of baby chicks.

Before you hit your corner, you gotta report to me every day by six at the latest. If I'm not in the house, you can find me at Javier's, let's just say that's my office. That little spot over there, see? With the roof caved in. I don't know why he doesn't fix it, it ruins the whole look of the place. Know what, let's go, we can chitchat over there. It's time for my clamatito. It's too damn hot. I don't know how Javier does it, a clamato with beer is no rocket science, but he makes em so tasty. He's a fuckin expert, he knows just how much lime to use, how much salsa Maggi and Tabasco. El Javier makes breakfast too, so if you don't feel like cooking one day, just go and see him. El Javier's one of us, if you get my drift. I mean he's an upside-down pineapple cake, I mean he was a pineapple before, but then he got turned upside down, you get it, right? I mean, transsexual, mija, trans-sex-u-al like you. How did I know? Mija, I knew right from the jump, as soon as you asked me if ... hey, wait, are you crying? You're gonna ruin your makeup. And you look so pretty. Mira, I clocked you cause pues it takes one to know one, but it's obvious how hard you worked on yourself, and don't worry, we'll show you a bunch of other little things you can do. In a little while, you'll be everything you wanna be, the full complete you, just like el Javier.

Yeah, el Javier used to be Javiera. I have no doubt you know what it's like to grow up pissed with your own body and then to head off to become who you really are. One day you decide to leave everything—hometown, family, life—behind to become the person you wanna be. And becoming who you wanna be is expensive, mija, for sure you know that. Pues bueno, that's el Javier. He left everything, changed everything, and forgot everything to be able to build a new life. Sometimes his hips give him away, depends on the pants he's wearing. But listen, mija, don't be staring at him like you're

trying to figure his shit out, he hates that. Fijate, that's what happened to la Bibi when she first got here. She was studying him like a mouse at some lab, the only thing she didn't do was straight up ask him, Hey, Javier, whose team are you playing on? Pinche Bibi.

No, el Javier doesn't work with us girls, and we don't work for him, let's just say it's like a client-client relationship. We're his clients and, sometimes, if he doesn't have someone special in his life, pues he's one of ours. Of course, he only likes the ladies, like ones blessed by mother nature with quality tits and no novelty dicks, not like you and me and la Bibi. Yep, Bibi too. Just like you, she had a big P for pendeja scrawled on her forehead when she got here but over time she figured her shit out. You're gonna like her. You're gonna end up adoring him too, he's a decent guy, I mean, he lets me set up my office there, you know? He always tells me how—for a small fee—he'd give me the little supply room. He says, get a desk, a few chairs, a fresh paint job and you could work here, Reynita. I haven't taken him up on it, but it's just cause I'm huevona, that's the damn truth, straight up huevona. Working this late-night schedule at this age is fuckin killing me ... um, this is when you interrupt me and say, But you look so young, Reynita, how can you say that. Oh I'd looove to look like you when I'm your age ... Ay, mija, I'm starting to think you don't just look dumb.

Bueno, let's move on.

When you go to work, cause this is work and not play ... when you go to work, you take a bath, do your hair, and fix your makeup. The bath has to be fuckin quick, cause there's hardly any water here and there are days when all you have is a bucket and a cup, chula. But the second part, your look, the transformation, the magic that turns you into a real princess, take it nice and slow. Take your time so you can make your face into a fuckin tribute to beauty. Okay, let me get a good look at you, your skin's a little rough, you're gonna need a moisturizer or something. How do you get rid of your body hair? Don't tell me you shave it. Ah, you were starting to freak

me out, it's just these little hairs here, they're pretty thick and they only grow that thick when you sha— ... no, mija, what do you mean you use tweezers? Eyebrow tweezers do the same as a razor: you pull it out and pull it out and pull it out and after a while the little hairs turn into little fuckin tree stumps. Oye, your eyebrows are actually pretty, you know, not too thin but not too overgrown. Cute, cute, cute. Might even copy your eyebrows. Aww, so sweet, yeah, if you want to fix mine up, that's perfect, you can do whatever you want with me, honey, yo flojita y cooperando. But okay, that beard, you can wax it off, even though it dries your skin out a little, it's still better. I have the best recipe, I got it from my nana, my mom's mom, she took care of me and my sister when amá was working in the maquiladora. So yeah, literally all the time. My nana fixed her own wax with her own secret recipe: sugar, honey, water, Vaseline, and a bunch of other ingredients, but nobody'll get that list outta me. Something she learned back in her town. My nana was from Ecatepec, la tierra de los cerros, she called it, and they come up with the best remedios there and they keep the best secrets. Bueno pues, that wax my nana would make, she'd plaster it on thick on all my sisters, cause the three of them were as hairy as monkeys ever since they were little girls. I never had any hair, how ironic, right?! The little boy with no hair on his body and those little escuinclas with fuckin beards for days. I mean I woulda actually preferred ... bueno, obviously, I woulda rather been a girl ... But I was gonna say I wanted to be hairy as a monkey like them ... yeah, I woulda loved to be hairy or pimply or something that woulda forced my nana to give me one of her treatments. Her hands were scratchy as sandpaper, cause she worked her ass off in town, but I loved it, I loved to feel that roughness. Besides, she would take all the time in the world to work on their faces, for each sister, it was like the only time she'd give that level of attention, like individually. My nana took care of us and all, but she saw us like a unit, four escuincles she had to bathe, feed, and get to school every day. Pobre, that's why amá brought her all this way, to take care of us, just work work work, she had no time for special

treatments, no spoiling us, or at least not me. She'd say being too gentle with boys ruins them. Ruins, she said. And even though she was so tough and screaming all the time, I still ended up switching to the other team. If she saw me now, she wouldn't believe it, I mean honestly she'd prolly die all over again just from the shock. Ay mi nanita, god rest her soul. No, no, she wouldn't die of shame or surprise, but from the shock of seeing me, that little pigeon-toed skinny-ass kid had turned into this queen of a woman. La Reyna Grande.

You're gonna need another name, by the way, we need to figure that out. I don't know, just Anita and nothing else, it's not gonna fly around here. You need something else, I don't know, más catchy.

Anyway, I'll take care of all your little hairs. Now, lemme see your legs, hold on a sec, if you move I can't see a thi— ... Oh, wow, look how long your legs are. But they're a little pale, right? I put coconut oil on my skin instead of lotion, and so my legs aren't just smooth, they smell great too, they're shiny and they tan perfectly. Coconut oil, here's a secret, it's also great lube. You knew that already? Caray, you'll prolly be good at this, I see you already know a thing or two. Almond oil? I haven't tried that one yet. Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one around here who learned the wrong way? You know just a little spit on that ass and here I come. Mira, I finally got a laugh outta you.

Oye, is that your hair or are they extensions? It's yours? Oye pues then give me some, just look at this tangled mess on my head, I mean the hair's so thin, I'd love to have a lovely mane of hair as thick as yours.

Pos we have arrived. Uy, it's packed. A ver, a ver, lemme look for Javier to ... ah, look, there's an empty spot. It's always crowded. The whole neighborhood comes to hang out, eat some food, get wasted. The place is perfect: opens early, closes late, home-cooked food, buen ambiente, and cold beer. No, mija, this is paradise. Mira, I haven't even ordered and look at him, el Javier just went to make me a clamatito.

What's your poison?

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4

Her gaze lingered on a cup of coffee that she wasn't even drinking, just staring at. The coffee arrived to the table still boiling, but then went from warm to cold. The coffee she loved so much in the mornings, in the middle of the afternoon, at night, was now forgotten on the table. She wasn't the same anymore. She was here and also elsewhere. It didn't happen all of a sudden, it was little by little. First, she stopped going to one of the houses on the other side of the border, because her employers wanted someone who'd sleep there every night. Then, they fired her from another one. Old-ass bitch, how dare she accuse me of stealing, she said one day after she got home. But I don't give a fuck, just let a few days go by, then she'll realize nobody's gonna do things for her like she wants em done, once she sees no one's gonna take care of those kids like I did, those little brats and their temper tantrums all damn day, she'll see and then she'll beg me to come back. That ungrateful bitch. After everything I did for her. Thanks to me she has the life she has, all thanks to me, she'd say.

Later they fired her from another house, the one here in Juárez. She was pissed. There's no money, they say, no money. Just look how everything is in Juaritos, they say, but they're always going out and buying more crap instead of saving for the hard times. Fuckin people. Fuckin new rich. They should be scared, scared I'll go to the cops and tell em what I saw in that house. Narcos! All of em are narcos. Yeah, fuckin right, they got rich overnight. I asked her how she knew. How many times did she come at me with that same old tired story. All of em were narcos, according to her, except the ones who actually were. That's how it was, she opened the door wide to people who she honestly shouldn't even say a word to.

So, since she couldn't find another house to clean and almost nobody was giving her clothes to mend and nobody

was calling her to let her know there was a job cleaning some random house, some office or warehouse, she just started sleeping all damn day till the sun went down. The pantry was bare. No bread or tortillas, just one or two dusty old cans. Forget about stumbling across a little hunk of cheese or ham in the fridge. Not even a chicken leg. Not a damn thing.

And she couldn't care less. She just lay in bed, staring at the ceiling.

And so did I.

Till I got bored.

So then I'd head over to the window or sit on the sidewalk and read or I'd just watch people walking by. The woman who left early to work. The woman who came home at nighttime after a long day. The one who put her chairs outside and got to chatting as soon as the sun went down and a little breeze rustled up. The woman who'd laugh and laugh. The one who pulled out her guitar and started singing.

Sometimes, when I have no desire to do anything at all, I still like to sit somewhere and just watch people. People and their lives.

After I don't know how much time spent lying down day after day, she came back to her old self for a little bit. She saw my face and my eyes full of hunger. She said she was sorry, but she scolded me at the same time: Why didn't you tell me you hadn't eaten anything? Go put on a sweater and we can go to the store and see if they'll run a tab for us till I get some money. Some Bimbo white bread, baloney, and a little jar of mayonnaise can make a world of difference. A couple cans of tuna can save your life. I'm not exaggerating, they can save your life!

We were able to eat for a few days.

When that food ran out, when now there seriously was nothing left, I mean absolutely nothing in the house to eat and we couldn't get them to put anything else on our tab at the store, well then, yeah, we went out to hunt. We came back

with a few cans, a random bag of fruits and veggies that weren't exactly old, but weren't fresh either. A bag of rice or beans infested with weevils that took hours to remove one by one. As we picked through it, she'd say the same thing over and over again: Of course by now she's realized I never stole anything from her, she just misplaced her earrings somewhere, I'm sure she wants to call me, but she can't bring herself to pick up the phone, I'm sure she's exhausted from all her *work* work, plus everything she has to do around the house, old-ass bitch, accusing me of stealing, me, me. Godawful bitch. Lonely-ass bitch. Bitch-ass motherfucker. After everything I did for her, everything I did to take care of her, I'm the one who took the load off her shoulders. Hey, niña, go check and make sure I don't have any missed calls.

After a few days, that ran out too. Along with the little bit of energy she still had. The worst was she stopped talking. At first, she'd just say short little words: yes, no, me either, I dunno. Then everything became hand signals, gestures, opening and closing her eyes, and that's it. Then nothing. Nothing at all. Hunger was common in any of the houses in the neighborhood, but silence not so much. She forgot about everything, including me. She lay down on her little bed again.

I started walking to and from school on my own.

Then I stopped going. What for?

I stopped going after Children's Day. I remember it well because of the party. Because of what we ate. The songs we sang. That day, International Children's Day, was my going-away party from elementary school. Probably it was my going-away party from childhood in general. I didn't have a lot of friends. I wasn't the teacher's pet. Nobody paid much attention to me there, but even so for a long time I missed it, being at school. My going away party from childhood, yeah, that's what it was.

One day, when I woke up, she wasn't there anymore. At first, I didn't think anything of it, or I did think, I thought she'd gone back to her routine and she'd gone to look for a job

or to bring home some food. I perked up. I started cleaning the house, because by that time it had fallen apart too. Night came and I thought she wouldn't come home again. Days passed. Two, four, five, I don't know how many. I prayed she'd come back. I think I cried. Now she really had gone and forgotten about everything. My stomach growled. I didn't dare go talk to the neighbors. I didn't dare go to the dump. I stayed there, staring out the window as people walked back and forth. The ones headed to work and the ones coming home after working all day, the ones taking chairs outside and sitting around telling jokes. The ones snacking as they downed their beers.

Then, when my hunger and my fear were at their worst, she came home.

But she wasn't alone.

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5

It's not a volunteer gig, it's my research. It's a job that has nothing to do with little missions to go clean up an abandoned lot or vaccinate a few people. No, this is a lot more important. It's for science, for the community, for me, for my community. I don't expect to be understood, but I wish what I do and the people I'm studying were seen as valuable. We're talking about people who started living there more than twenty years ago, men and women who make their lives on land set aside for waste materials. And not just any waste, but the materials created by these two cities. In the end, these mountains of trash come from Ciudad Juárez and El Paso. Sorting the trash, recycling the trash, living from and *for* the trash.

“To survive. So it has nothing at all do with those volunteer trips your girlfriends organize, thinking they're saving the world by giving a few plants to some tired old ladies.”

“Don't get all worked up, Gris. I thought.”

“That I just go there to keep my conscience clean?”

“In the name of 'health.'”

Norma always manages to get me out of sorts. Sometimes I can ignore her, this time I couldn't. Changing the topic only gave her more avenues for attack.

“Let's talk about la tía, pues.”

“You want to wipe your conscience clean, huh, hermana?”

“I'm being serious.”

“¡Yo también! When I said you were too busy with your volunte— research, I was being serious.”

“I'm saying I can take care of it. I can do both things perfectly well.”

“I don’t get it. When I suggested la tía come to live with me, you both said that it was better to hire someone for a while and then off to a nursing home, and now it turns out.”

“It’s different. Me moving back in with her isn’t the same as her moving in with you. She’d be in her space the whole time, with her things, in her home, so when she starts having episodes, it’ll help her to be on familiar terrain.”

“I don’t know, Gris, you’re always so busy.”

“And you’re pregnant.”

“You don’t sound very happy about it.”

“Don’t be silly. Look, I’m just saying that you’ll be going through your own process and you deserve to enjoy it. Besides, la tía already told you she doesn’t want to leave her house.”

“Apparently, you don’t want to leave there either. You just moved out and now you’re going right back. What are you going to do with your apartment?”

•

I get it that Norma thinks it’s weird. Even though she did her college years here, as soon as she could she went to live with girlfriends. Me, on the other hand, I went to Galveston and when I got back, I didn’t even look for a place to live. But if I went straight back into la tía’s house, instead of looking for my own place, it was because it seemed like the most practical thing. Close to the hospital, close to the international bridge, and with so much work to get done, what time did I have to look for a place where honestly I was never even going to be?

“Tell me at least you and Henry fucked, fuck, are going to fuck a lot over there, before you let him go.”

“Norma.”

“The whole Kama Sutra.”

“Nor-ma.”

“Grr-is, you better watch out or you’re going to end up like la tía in every damn way.”

Norma thinks my personal life will be decimated, that I’m nixing it right when I was finally starting to have one. But what personal life? I wanted to say to her, but that would mean telling her that Henry and I broke up, and I have no desire to hear any more opinions on that matter.

“Make sure you don’t lose Henry, because you can always curl up in his arms or wrap your legs around his when everything else has gone to hell.”

“And you should make sure you find someone who can stay at the house when I’m not around. I haven’t found anybody.”

“And you’ve been looking?”

“The truth is I haven’t even had the time. I’m always so busy.”

“You are your own version of Tía Mayela: always putting professional things ahead of your personal life. Like they say, the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Stop it.”

“Just sayin. Oye, pero if you’re so busy, when are you going to find time to look after her? How is that even possible?”

I’ve got it figured out and I tell her that. I’ll only be going to the trash dump twice a week, and I’ll split the rest of the time between working at the office and at home. Since my job in the first phase of the project is qualitative analysis, I only have to go do interviews, record them, and evaluate the results. I just need my computer and my notes. I’ll be like Tía Mayela, turning the dining room into my office.

“By the way, I ordered a hospital bed already. I also got some quotes on the changes that need to be made to the toilet and the shower. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to take a training on ergonomics.”

“On what?”

“A training where they teach you how to move, carry, and care for someone with a disability or illness.”

“It’s really tough for me to imagine la tía like that.”

I let Norma’s words sink into the silent parts of my soul: *like that*. There’s no use talking about the inevitable. La tía is sick and that’s it. One part of me wants to ask Norma what she’s been feeling as she watches la tía lose her strength and come to terms with her increasing fragility. But there’s no use, there really isn’t. It was obvious this would happen. We’ve spent so much time watching family members pass on: our parents, la abuela and then el abuelo, two tíos. At each one of those funerals, la tía would say: It’s the cycle of life.

She’d say it in such a matter-of-fact way that anyone listening would have thought she felt nothing when these deaths happened, even though it was her sister, her parents, her brothers. But we know she did. She just had other ways of living with her grief.

When we were little, we learned to understand that certain gestures meant la tía was being sweet. We learned to gauge her affection for us by the number of books she gave to us. Now, sometimes before she hangs up the phone, she says: Te quiero, nena. Nena. When we were little, she never used these little affectionate words with us. Not that I remember. La tía was measured with her words, with food, with the amount of time she’d devote to each thing. Now when she shows up late to a meeting or eats an extra slice of cake, she says: Pues, it doesn’t matter anymore.

“Do you remember that little notebook she had where she’d scribble down how many coffees were consumed by the ladies in the office and then how she’d tally it up every month?”

Before I answered, Norma listed all the other inventories la tía would keep track of, with her employees at the office and her workers at home. With the two of us. Norma got me

laughing. And for a few minutes, just a few minutes, the two of us forgot the matter at hand.

Norma and I are very different. She's the type of person who always has an opinion or a joke about everything and it's always well received. When we go out—something that doesn't happen very often—someone always comes up to her to say hi. She was always very popular. Starting in high school, she had a new boyfriend every semester. How she ended up married to the biggest idiot of them all, I have no idea. But he loves her and takes care of her, and I guess that's the most important thing. I still think that my sister could have done more with her life, but really this is what she always wanted: to have a family. To be okay.

“Don't you think, Gris?”

“Perdón, what did you ask me?”

“If you're scared to go to the trash dump. This project just seems too dangerous.”

“It's not.”

“You're going to work in a trash dump, Gris, a trash dump. It's full of infections, diseases, animal skeletons. Maybe even skeletons of people.”

“Norma, there is a whole team of us. I know what we're doing.”

“We know.”

“What?”

“You meant to say ‘We know what we're doing.’ You're becoming more like la tía every day. In the office, she'd erase all the work done by other people on a case. I won, she'd always say, instead of ‘We won.’”

“No, of course not. I'm not like la tía.”

I'm not.

6

You made a good impression on Javier, that's good, he's pretty much family. And you've gotta respect family. Yeah, that's right, you heard me. Family. Living together forces us to act like family, and, like any good family, we've got a ton of love and drama for each other even though, I won't even lie, we have the occasional catfight or hair-pulling incident. You gotta show respect for your elders, learn from the experts, and always be willing to lend an ear and listen to the other girls when they're going through shit. Cause—and you gotta get this deep into your head—there's no trouble more intense and nothing lonelier than what we face on the daily. I can't even begin to tell you everything we deal with, mija. Some of us had to leave literally everything behind to be who we are, others have had to bear unimaginable burdens because of the life we chose. And other girls, try as they might, they can't get outta here. Every! One! Of! Us! We all survived something and we gotta be ready to throw down for each other. I know it's not always gonna be possible, te digo, there's always gonna be some misunderstandings, but when we stick together: everything's better. It's gonna be tough for you at first. Sure, you're looking up at me right now, and I'm all confident, but when I got here I was just as quiet as you and such a dumb, dumb bitch. More of a jackass really, I wasn't the real-ass bitch I am today, cause when I got here I was still Raymundo. A jackass but not a pendejo, I got into a fight with this one vato who was messing with a girl here at Javier's, and Linda saw me, she owns all this. When things finally calmed down, she came up to me, and she got me to open up to her. I told her my story, I was running away, I didn't have a place to stay, not even some back alley to drop dead in and she told me, Mira muchacho, you're big and strong, stick around and beat the shit out of any motherfucker who so much as messes with my girls, and I'll give you a roof over your head and food to

eat. Little by little I started to find my place here. We all find our place here, no matter what your biology is or your beliefs. It's not like the other—let's call em—unions, here we all come from diverse walks of life. It's not like this in other places, the other prosti unions are for biological women, travestis, faggots, or vatos exclusively. Not us, and that's something Linda made clear from the get: everyone fits in here. That's what sets us apart in the market. Even the most hardcore, fetish-loving kinkster finds whatever he's looking for: whether it's young girls, more mature girls, girls with dicks and tits, girls with no dick and fake titties, not to mention all the twinkies with their angelic little faces. What's a kinkster? Ay, mija, let's leave that for another day. For now, I just wanna clarify, we're all very different here, but—best believe—we're all very united. That's real important now, just look how bad things have gotten in Juárez.

Walking beyond our blocks can be dangerous, never know what you'll run into out there. That's why you gotta get it in your head that we might be fightin over some bullshit, some lipstick or a fuckin loser client, but when the time comes, we gotta stick together. Stick together like superglue, you got that? When it comes time to throw down, we're more family than the Holy Fuckin Family. And if you don't believe me, just ask el Javier. Isn't that right, Javier, our family is like no other? Ay, Javier, always the joker. Don't pay any attention to him, mija, after all in terms of dysfunction, we have just enough. But as long as the dysfunction isn't in your dick, we're good. Have you gotten rid of yours already or you just hiding it? How do you hide it? I know it sounds like a stupid question since it all ends up the same really, but what I mean is ... yeah, that. And, well, sorry for the indiscretion. Is yours big, medium, or average? Hahaha, you turned purple, mija, literally purple.

Anyways, what was I talkin about before? Oh yeah, about our diversity. Mira, we've got enemies left and right, our competitors don't understand our philosophy. They don't take kindly to all these different types of people together. Our

theory is: if we're all putas, why the hell should we be segregated? Between the bunch of us, there's a little of everything. Right now, the active-active girls, it's five of us: la Bibi, la Tijeras, la Serna, la Rusa, and me. Them three aren't like you, like la Bibi, or like me, they're biological and ecological women, haha. Dick or no dick, they all hustle just as hard. Some of em came from other unions, other neighborhoods, other cities, we've got all genders and all ages. They come and go. Some came just as young as you. All of em got their training with me, cause, let's say they've already been hustling, they might have picked up some bad habits, and we have to show em the wisdom of our ways. Some girls can't hack it here and leave. Other girls want to stick around even though I wanna get rid of their bitchy, shit-starting asses. Some girls really hold down the fort, come what may. Ahorita, I'll tell you, there aren't a lot of us, but that's better for you cause it means there's space, I just have to be sure you deserve an opportunity with us and our harmonious little group. The harmonious thing is just a figure of speech, there's times when it's like a chicken coop at high noon, like everybody got on the same page: I don't know if they're on the rag or if it's the hormone injections or just cause they're fuckin out to kill, but some days, they're rrrreal ballbusters, mija. But don't scrunch up your face like that, it's not that deep, for sure you saw some fights and screaming and shit-talking in your house too, all families do it.

Right now, our biggest worry is that la Bibi's itchin to get her a pussy. Yup, she wants her operation. That's why she started hookin, let's just say that dick of hers is gonna provide the funds to get rid of the dick altogether. Uy pues, of course she's scared, imagine. But she's hell bent on getting rid of it. Some of the girls in the building support her and others not so much, they lecture her on and on about how she needs to think it through cause later there's no going back, the surgery is serious, not to mention the recovery time. Once, all hysterical, she even got it in her head to grab the scalpel and do it herself, but we got there in time to stop her. Ay, I can't even tell you how bad it was—screaming, blood, a total fuckin mess. She

really gave us a good scare. No, mija, we don't stop working just cause there's some drama, we're even more intense than any of those Silvia Pinal episodes, you remember that show? Who am I kidding? You look like you just popped out of the womb three days ago. Oh really, you watched it with your mom? Uy no, no way I ever watched telenovelas or Silvia Pinal with amá or my nana. I had to watch it in secret. But ugh, now I'm all distracted, we better move on with your training.

I don't know if you noticed already, but everything around here is a long walk away: our corner, Javier's place, the hotel, our apartments, the pharmacy. The barrio is generous with us, the barrio is good, the barrio gives us everything. Friends, everything. That's why we're here. There's no need to leave the Panamericana or to go downtown, everything you need is here. That's right, everything. The clients are the ones who come here, no need to do much more than just post up on your corner, maybe give a little twirl, and bam, you've got enough for the week. What kind? Let's say we have ... a wide variety of clients, we get fancy cars, narcos in their pickup trucks, even ancient Volkswagen Bugs, so sad. Every now and then you'll get a client who just walks up, some guy who just got off work or stumbled over from Javier's. But all of em, and I need to stress this point: all of em are lookin for some novelty, some affection, a little passion. That's where we enter in or where we let them enter in, whatever the case may be.

We're here to give em that affection, novelty, passion.

In the good ol days, there were a lot more Texas plates, gringos who'd cross the bridge and come here ... to cum here, hahaha. We had soldiers come too, but then the war started and now not a one crosses. Iraq fucked up our shit, mija. Our soldiers stopped getting permission to cross over and, well, our whole business model collapsed. And not just ours, also bars, shops, restaurants, all of it, mija, every damn thing. Uuuuuy sí, mija, before, yeah, before all this you'd see them everywhere. No, not in uniform, damn. Of course not, but you can spot em straightaway, heads shaved, a kinda march in their step and

always in packs. The soldiers were our favorites, no lie, a bunch of the girls dreamed of the day one of em would fall in love and take em across the border. What do you mean what for? Pues, a vivir el american dream, mija. No, not really, fijate, everybody thinks they're violent cause of their time in the army, but not all of em are like that. Generally speaking, they're the sweetest, that's why they come, really, to get a dose of some genuine tenderness. Ahh damn, now I'm getting all nostalgic, it's just, those really were good times, with the gringos and those soldiers. Goddamn it, we had em paying and paying good. A big chunk of my savings came from that time, and now the most I can save is maybe 20 or 30 percent of what I earn, the rest disappears paying for pura pinche pendejada. You gotta save, mija, save your money, it's the best advice I can give. I'm saving for my retirement, I'm going to ... No pues, nowadays all we get for clients are some wannabe rancheros, some lost teenage souls tryin to lose their virginity, or some sexed-up randos with a little extra cash to blow. Don't get me wrong, we've got a lotta clients, but now there's a lot less of the clients of a certain pedigree, pues. All we have left are the politicians or the jerks who lick the politicians' boots. Not my favorites, I have to say, always some shady shit going on and I don't know, I'd hate to wind up entangled in any of their mess, like that shit about the congressman who ... Me? With a soldier? Ay, all the time, mija, all the time. Put one of them soldier boys in front of me and I fall in love. Thing is, for me all they have to do is say good morning with their velvety voice and I just melt, as soon as I smell a little zesty bar-soap freshness or see some well-pressed clothes, there's no turning back. But even with that, I never really lost my shit for any soldier or random gringo. El american dream and me, we don't get along too good. I'll explain some other time cause ... ay, it's okay, it's still early, I'll tell you a little. Mira, mija, I guess you could say I already lived that famous sueño americano, but it ended up not being my thing and it turned into a nightmare. And you gotta get the hell away from your nightmares and so for me, before I ended up a dad and the man of some house, I got the hell outta there and I lost fuckin

everything. Or almost everything. Thing is even when you lose everything, you always end up gaining something, just you can't see it, not at first. Ugh, there I go again, telling my secrets and spilling all the tea on the first date.

And speaking of spilling the tea, best not to talk with just anyone who comes around. I'll explain: You can tell straight off if you're dealing with a client by their flirty little smile, a little look that undresses you in a quick second. It's easy to tell. But then there's others who just ask a million questions and won't even give you enough to buy a Coca-Cola. Doesn't happen a lot, but it does happen. My theory is they're reporters or writers who want to write about "The Dark and Turbulent Lives of the Border" or about "The Grand Ladies of the Night" or some bullshit like that. Stalkers, that's what they are, stalkers who wanna find out about our clients, about the ones who got famous for killing some jerk or about the ones moving drugs through the neighborhood or about the politicians famous for killing someone, moving drugs or both. There's a little of everything in the garden of Our Lord. Uy, mija, you'll meet em soon enough. Show up all shiny faced, offering you a cigarette or a drink and acting like they don't want anything from you, they just start in with question after question. Best to keep a tight lip with em.

But if you do give answers, that shit's on you. Just don't bring any of us into it. No names, no nicknames. I mean, this is your family and you gotta protect family. And I might as well tell you now, if you open your mouth too damn much one day and you get us in trouble, say goodbye to your corner and my protection. One time, one of em came around asking specifically about la Cafre, may god rest her soul, poor girl. This dude wanted all the nasty details about the shape she was in when we found her. Obviously, we told him to fuck off. To la Cafre? Hijole, mija, now that's a touchy subject. They killed our Cafre, mija, they took la Cafre away from us. Not one day goes by I don't think about her. We got into this business at almost the same time, we were sisters—her, la Bonita, and me—walking up and down and back on these damn streets,

always together. La Cafre was a fuckin gorgeous woman, the most beautiful of all of us, and that asshole even took that away from her. He slashed up her face too, can you believe that shit? There's bad people out there, mija, twisted motherfuckers, I mean, people with a one-way ticket to hell. We're living in a time when being a woman is dangerous, but you should know this by now, right? Everyone in this city's heard the talk about women turning up dead. Maybe you don't read about it in the papers or hear about it on the radio, but you sure do hear about it on the street. Dead women showing up in neighborhoods or downtown, dead bodies of women on the outskirts of the city or at the trash dump. More and more dead women, carajo. But listen to me good, I'm positive there's something else going on behind all this, cause what a coincidence that almost all the women—if not all of em—were working in the maquilas. And we all know at the maquilas they're basically held captive, abused, harassed, forced to do god-knows-what ...

Damn, this conversation got dark real quick. Javier, shot please.

No, what went down with la Cafre was a whole other story, but after they took her out, the cops were doin raids all the time, even came in to el Javier's here. It was all a big show just so we'd think the authorities were actually doing something. We were the first ones to walk their fuckin lineups, as if we weren't the victims. You wouldn't believe all the hootin and hollerin we did, all us pinned up in there, nothing like being with your family, even if it is locked up in a cell. The next day, a nice bath, a coffee, some huevitos con chilorio that Javier made, and we were good as new, even though on the inside we'd still be feeling like shit. We'd laugh about it then, but now ain't no damn way we'd be laughing about going to jail, cause nowadays the pigs don't play, now they're scary as fuck. No way, a pig don't get so much as a buenos días outta me, I wouldn't press my luck.

And speaking of pressing your luck, don't ask these girls for a damn thing, but you best be sure to lend them whatever

they need if they ask you for something, that's the rule. And best to get used to the fact that anything you lend out, it ain't comin back. If you do that, the other girls'll think you're cool, and over time you'll earn their confidence. Round here, respect is more than a word, it's the law. Each one of us respects each other's clientele, you know, the "preferred customers" like they say at the grocery store. Just as an example, la Bonita crossed the line one time and I won't go into it. She don't work with us no more. God no, shut your mouth. Her contract was canceled. No, she didn't get killed or anything, she's just don't work here no more, I had to get rid of her. You're actually gonna be taking over her corner. Uy, I said nothing happened! What I heard was la Bonita hooked up with el Inge, who was la Toña's preferred-customer-almost-even-boyfriend, she's another girl who doesn't work with us no more. You can't even imagine the shit that started, first just words, then shouting, pushing, shoving. La Toña ended up with her lips in full fuckin bloom and la Bonita's nose was crooked like some boxer from el rancho. Fuckin disaster. And yeah, when it comes to brawls, all us putas are the worst, or the best, depends on how you look at it. Why? I don't know, we just are. Maybe cause all the beatdowns end up shaping us. Mija, if you don't know how to take care of yourself, you won't survive here, period. Behind the scenes, you're always gonna hear stories of like, my dad used to hit me and if not my dad then my mom was doing the beating and if not my mom then my stepdad and if not my stepdad, there's always somebody. No, no, not everybody. No one ever hit me and behold: loud and proud, about to celebrate my quinceañera in the game.

Where'd la Bonita end up? Well, it's a long story, first she stopped making the rounds cause she was healing from the injuries from that fight with la Toña. But as soon she got better, within one damn week, she was already knee-deep in some other bullshit, then some other shit and again and again a million times over. She could be a real problem child. I'm gonna tell you the whole damn truth, it hurt me plenty to throw her out on the street cause she was a good person, all things

considered. La Bonita would give the shirt off her back for someone else, which was why I ignored the BS and put up with her so long. And she wasn't really open with her feelings, she was kinda stand-offish, but also like real empathetic and brave. With all la Bonita's bullshit, it was too risky for us to be mixed up with her, so bye girl bye. I do miss her, her and la Cafre are like a whole era for me. And that's how I told her too, I'm gonna miss you, but this ain't working. She took it well, almost gracefully. I told her if she ever ran into trouble—like real trouble—to come find me.

Bueno, what else can I say?

Ah yes, your image, of course, yeah, let's talk about your image. Out there, whatever you're projecting is what'll pull the clients in or push em away. As you might imagine, in this business your image is the most important. I'm proof of that. I'ma stand up and give a little twirl. Javier! ¡Música! I'm gonna show this new girl what's what. Ay, no, a Paquita song? That's not what I need right now. Ándale, yeah, that's it, that's more like it. You just take in all this eye candy, honey. Some people might say I'm too old for this dress or to strut like this, but as you can tell, I've still got it. You right, I do look like a Barbie! And that's cause I always pay attention to my image. Even if I'm just stepping outside to sweep the porch, I'ma curl my lashes. Image is every damn thing, specially for women like you and me who didn't have the luxury of being accepted as women from birth. You gotta accentuate those features, find a balance, your face and your clothes shouldn't be over the top, but not frumpy either. I want you cute and feminine all the damn time. It's not about confusing the client or for the poor guy to think he's picking up a little girl and then the girl comes with a surprise, no. Of course it happens, there's always some nearsighted fool who lifts up your skirt and then splits as soon as they catch a glimpse of that cannon between your legs. If I had a dime for every time the whole shebangabang went to shit just cause some drunk pendejo wasn't clear about who he'd picked up at the corner.

I mean, hookin is hard, but hookin while transsexual is harder, so get ready. ¿El inglés? Yeah I speak some English. Fijate, I picked it up in high school and then later on I perfected it when I was working en el otro lado. Sí, en El Paso. I worked as what they call a paralegal over there. Oh, what's that? Ay, just some overrated office gofer. A shit ton of work honestly. No more than what I've got here, but still a shit ton of work. That was my last involvement in the world of work under the name of Raymundo. Oye, why don't you have another drink? Well goddamn, aren't you just a model of good behavior, look, if it's about money, order whatever you want, I'll pay.

Javier, Javieeer.

Oh, Javier's got his head in the clouds. It must be his time of the month, I mean, his time to fall in love again. He gets like this at least once every two or three months, he gives his whole damn self to someone and then later he gets bored or the girl decides she likes him, but she's also freaked out by him, like that Ana Bárbara song: le gusta, pero le asusta. Remember, mija, if you think we've got it hard, it's even harder for guys like el Javier. It's an acquired taste, let's say, sleeping with el Javier or falling in love with him. Thing is there's women who think a man has to have a dick between his legs, but honestly a man is anybody who wants to be a man. And same for women too, obviously.

Nooooooo way, you kiddin me? El Javier and me never, nothing, no, actually sometimes we're even eyeing the same pretty little thing. Yes, mija, sometimes I do let myself have a little fun, I'm actually pretty fluid when it comes to these things. And it's cause I'm so fluid that things have gone the way they have, I've had my heart broken by men and women alike. Thing is as soon as I get off, I fall in love, and I fall hard.

You wanna know how many times I've fallen in love? Ay mija, over time, a lady loses track of these things. In my lifetime, I've had my share of boss ladies, coworkers, pigs, clients, uuuuhhh. And speaking of clients, let me tell you bout

this one dude who uses our services sometimes who's like six and a half feet tall. He's sturdy with a mustache, hairy arms, buns of steel, smells like oatmeal soap. Papitooo. That man has never even heard of moderation, he loves his extremes: either girls much smaller than him or much taller, but never his own height. Name is Goyo, he's a regular, and he's into pinching, spanking, biting, slapping: both giving and receiving. He's never hurt anybody, but if you don't know about his kinks, he might catch you off guard. Don't make that face, I wouldn't send you off with Goyo, no no, I only send Goyo to see the pros. I'm just telling you so you get an idea of the type of clientele we've got, mija.

Back in the day, I had a client who came just for me to spank him. He also liked it when I told him no to everything. I liked him so much, that handsome fucker. Anyway, one day I woke up with him and was all lovey-dovey, instead of biting him, I kissed him, and instead of stomping him with my stilettos, I was cuddling with him. I was puro amor, and get a load of this, that was what set him off, he lost all control. I ended up with this scar. This one, see? Look, right here. Mira, it goes from here to here, cuts right across my eyebrow. Yeah, well, that's cause good makeup covers anything.

Ah, good thing I remembered about this one, there's something else you have to learn. Not that I'm trying to scare you or anything, but sometimes guys show up who'll try to knock you upside the head and even though that's not authorized by management, we can't totally prevent it. It's no joke, mija, I'm being serious, there's plenty of crazies out here. But don't freak out. Well, maybe just a little. Freak out a little bit, so you keep your wits about you. If shit gets weird with a client, just say: You'll have to excuse me, sir, the session has ended. And you come find me.

7

As she showed him the house, she was smiling, happiness welling in her eyes. She took him by the elbow and pointed into the kitchen, saying: It's small but clean and honest, and there's always food. Brushing her hand over the wall behind the kitchen sink: Look, it has four walls, all of them solid. Windows, a door and a lock. A good lock. She opened and closed the door to show him it really was a good lock, an important thing to have in this neighborhood, she told him. Though now with you here, we're going to feel a lot safer.

She kept on talking: We sleep here, we eat at this table, be careful when you turn on this faucet because the water spits out everywhere, the stove only lights with matches or a lighter. No, the cold doesn't slip through this little crack, the cold is everywhere. The heat, you also feel it, since here, you know, in this city you're either freezing or sweating all over, even under your nails. I remember very clearly that he kept his back to me the whole time, I couldn't see him and he couldn't see me.

A seed of a house, that's what it's called, that's how the government makes them, so later people can expand into the backyard, add bedrooms, another bathroom. But how was I going to build all that? That's why I left everything in the same place: the kitchen, living room, dining room, bedroom. A house is a house and ours has a lock.

After that, she sat him down at our table. You hungry? Let me see what I can cook, I'm really good in the kitchen. In the houses where I work, they usually just want me to cook, no cleaning, sweeping, or taking care of kids. I'm that good. My dream is to open a restaurant serving lunches or dinners or something like that. "Cenaduría La Chatita." That's what *apá* called me when I was little. Chatita. Because of my nose, see how it's really flat? But listen, first I'm gonna make you a

little arnica tea, it'll do you good. For pain, it's the best thing, I mean look at what those bastards did to you. Oh I'm so silly, I went and forgot I was going to clean it up for you. Get me that bag, niña, I brought some groceries.

Right then, he realized I was there. Between the stove and the table, watching him, trying to piece it all together. He looked me up and down, then glanced back and forth from me to her. Asked her if I was her daughter. She just said: niña, the bag, get it for me already. First thing is to clean that cut on your eyebrow, that's what worries me the most. A little hydrogen peroxide, just a splash. Oh come on, this doesn't burn, just wait for the alcohol. Haha, so big and still such a crybaby. If those guys from the bar saw you, they'd give it to you good. Except now not for defending some bitch, but for acting like one! Okay, now for your tea. One of my clients showed me how to make this, she said. It'll relax you, your muscles, everything. And you? Why are you just standing there? Give me a hand, there's groceries in those bags. Did you eat something? She asked me matter-of-factly, like she'd just left a few hours before.

I didn't respond. I focused on removing the groceries from the bags and avoiding eye contact. What's your name? He asked me. I stayed quiet. How old are you? And nothing came out of me. Cat got your tongue, he said after a while, giving me a little pinch on my cheek, but gently, so it didn't hurt, like one of those pinches you realize you like as soon as it's over.

She saw us, and she said that, yeah, I really was so quiet it did seem like a cat had bit my tongue. But she reads out loud real nice, one day tell her to read to you, you'll see how well she reads. Isn't that right, niña?

After that, she got back to what she was making, a caldito de pollo, that's what I'm going to make you, she said. I thought she was saying it to me. Oops, I forgot the onion, but it's no problem, the little cube has onion in it. That's my secret, I cook the chicken in the water plus I put half a cube of bouillon in too. Chicken with chicken flavor. She laughed and laughed.

Steam from the mug rose around the man's face. I sat down in front of him and got a better look. His tousled hair, a purple eye so swollen I wondered to myself how much he could even see. His eyebrow with a little bandage barely covering half his cut. His knuckles all busted, bloody at the edges. He took a sip, it's really hot, he said. I know, but drink it before it cools, it'll do you good. But it's too hot. Drink it, I know what I'm talking about. At that moment, I didn't realize it, but now that I recall, I think he had the face of a dog I once had that always looked like it was really angry but at the same time still knew there was no point in growling.

We're not going to be alone anymore, she told me as she massaged the man's shoulders. El Roge is going to live with us, she added. I didn't even know how to respond, and anyway what could I say? This man saved me, she whispered as she helped him lie down on her little bed. This man saved my life, this man, this man, she repeated over and over. We were at this bar, niña, and he, he saved me.

She wrapped him up in one of our two blankets. Positioned a pillow under his head and told him: Now you're all mine. I saw her kiss his hands and tell him, You'll be staying here now, with us, we're going to take care of you and you'll take care of us. At first, I didn't understand how he was going to take care of us if he was all beaten up. I understood it even less as more and more days passed and he stayed in bed. We couldn't even turn on the radio. Shhhhh, can't you see he's sick and needs to rest? She'd tell me, holding a finger over her mouth, reminding me to keep my mouth shut.

One day out of nowhere, he got up and, after drinking a cup of coffee and looking around, said: There's a lot to do here. He got dressed. Jumped into his pickup. Left without saying where he was headed or when he'd come back. She was an ocean of tears. She cried and cried and cried and cried. Her I-have-no-idea-what-to-do face. She was the same as me when I thought she'd never come back and she'd left me on my own. Only I didn't cry as much, and the guy, well, he was back in under two hours.

He brought boxes of nails, a hammer, pieces of wood. He fixed the back of a chair and sealed a little hole in the wall to keep out the flies, cockroaches, and even a cold draft. Maybe it's not so important right now, he said, but as soon as winter comes, you'll see. He fixed the roof and a couple of leaky pipes. A few days later, they went hunting together and came back with a mattress, a sofa big enough for two people, another table. We'll get the materials to build that other room, he said.

Thanks to him, our place started to feel more like home, and our little group like family.

We'd take chairs outside to talk, laugh, sing songs together. Tell jokes. I'd never heard her laugh so much. I'd laugh just because of her laughing, even though sometimes I didn't get the jokes. The three of us were feeling so good that the overheated nights of August cooled off a little just for us. There was always food in the kitchen. Milk, cheese, sometimes even eggs, a little bread. Hot dogs. Sugary cereal. See? This is why it's good to have a man, she'd say over and over again. Men take care of you. Bring you food. Look out for you. She'd kiss him all day long. At night, she'd tell me to read outside while they did their things together.

I remember one day in particular. I was outside reading my copy of Alice in Wonderland. I was on the part where Alicia chats with a caterpillar, and one of the neighbors told me: Niña, niña, tell your parents they promised to come play dominoes with us. Tell them we're ready when they are.

Your parents.

That's what the neighbor said: your parents. I closed the book and said: My parents are sleeping.

My parents.

My heart was beating fast. I felt like it was about to explode. Like I was about to explode. Having a family is like having a good lock, a shiny lock, a lock that's so strong no one can take advantage of you.

Pos, wake them up, they promised to come over and play dominoes with us. The neighbor said it like it was nothing, but to me it felt like everything.

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The journey begins as soon as we leave the hospital, getting this and that authorization, signing this and that paper so they can assign us a van with a driver. We had told them that one of us could drive, but they wouldn't allow it. Safety, all bureaucratic delays have to do with safety and with the fact that, since nothing belongs to us, not even our own ideas, we have to do endless paperwork.

To get to the international bridge, the driver takes Paisano. I like that he's taking this route. We drive by different elements of the city: offices, clinics, schools, barrios that have been here forever. Then crossing over to Juárez, the same pattern repeats: offices, clinics, schools, currency exchanges, bars, strip malls. We pass through a city that—because it grows so fast—has grown however it could. At first, we talk a little, we review our strategies, someone jokes about eating at this place or that one and leaving all the work for another day. Someone mentions that we're going to the edge of a place that itself has always been an edge.

“They say people here are very kind, is that true?” one of the youngest research assistants asks. It's his first time in Mexico.

I tell him yes and I'm left wanting to add that that's not necessarily what we'll find in the settlement around the dump. He must imagine that's the case, and, if not, he'll find out soon anyway.

We've been driving for almost an hour, and we still have a way to go. It's like the long avenues never ended, like life had no desire to disappear, but then it just does. Eventually it does. The houses grow smaller and smaller, more run-down, more isolated. Fewer houses. The landscape is made up of mismatched structures, built out of whatever is around. Their

parts aren't repaired, they're replaced. The windows disappear, the roofs with their varied textures are erected upon walls about to collapse. Like a promise that will never be fulfilled.

“Is that a house or a storage unit?” says the same assistant.

“Both,” Henry answers.

And it's true, because everything here has two or more uses. Abandoned cars can be a house or a storage unit. An old tire can become a pot for a plant. Everything has multiple lives.

I try to imagine my parents here or nearby here. Talking to the people, teaching them. I still remember them telling us we had to eat everything on our plates, that there were people with fewer resources, opportunities.

“Pobrecitos, mamá?” asked Norma, adding the -ito to not have to just call them poor.

“Sí, chiquita, sí, pobrecitos.”

The first time I talked about the barrios growing around and inside the municipal trash dumps, about the people who live off what others throw away, I was already in my master's program, and my professors and my classmates looked at me like I was describing an apocalyptic novel or something. It was simpler for them to understand the barrios that squatters built than these settlements that no one planned to build and that arose, simply arose, out of the earth. Or out of the trash.

Our mission is to understand the world of garbology in all its different levels. Of course, we know about household and industrial trash, but what interests us is to see what they make it into, what they do to get it ready to use. It's also our job to listen to the voices of everyone doing this work, to get to know the people working on and living in the trash. Probably, this will be the hardest part because we have to earn their trust. And if the clinic was useful at all, it helped with that part. Some of the neighbors already know who we are and say hi to us. They share their experiences with us. Others don't seem to care about us, or, even worse, we make them uncomfortable.

I think about la tía. About everything she did to earn our trust. Norma would cry all the time the first weeks in the new school and she didn't want to say what was happening to her. I wouldn't speak. La tía wasn't a patient woman at that time, or she didn't seem that way to us, and besides she was constantly busy. And despite that, she'd ask us questions, talk to us, bring over a cup of milk and some cookies for us, show us pictures of when she and mamá were kids. The two of us—though I can only speak for myself—started to feel closer to her. Ever since then, any little thing that happens to Norma reaches la tía's ears first.

So, just like la tía, it's up to us to be patient, to keep showing up until we're able to earn their trust.

In the mobile clinic, the work was simple: just setting up the truck and receiving patients. This, on the other hand, I don't know how it's going to go. We've spent two hours walking over things that would normally be disgusting to us. Stepping on dead earth.

Dead, it's strange to say it like that, especially because in this dead earth, there's so much life. This place is full of noise, laughter, a song that never ends. I don't know how I imagined it, I guess I was expecting silence and shouting, because that's how anger and sadness are communicated. And I thought that this was a place of either anger or sadness. Surprisingly, people joke, laugh, they're having a good time. All we had to do was tell them we wanted to interview them, and two ladies immediately told me their life stories. As if they had no intention of getting out of here.

I was the one who suggested to everyone to try to dissemble their shock at what we'd see, and I'm actually the one who had to fake it even more *and* the one who first climbed aboard the van to go back. Everything was more overwhelming than I'd imagined.

The biggest show of the day was the arrival of the garbage truck. The people—entirely covered with rags and hats, handkerchiefs covering their noses and mouths—positioned

themselves just below the truck. Then, a deluge of bags, boxes, clothing, shoes, objects that in the torrent became impossible to distinguish. Every type of trash. Expert hands picking through the waste of the city.

“Are you okay?” Harry asks me.

“Yes.” I don’t dare tell him I’m not, that I wasn’t ready for all of this.

“Look at this,” he says, showing me a photo on his camera.

It’s a little girl who—unlike everyone else—isn’t baked by the sun or covered with dust. She isn’t under the deluge. She also looks like she’s also there to do a study. She surveys the scene from a long way off, perched on a mound of trash, like a wolf taking care of her pack.

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The key to your image is to exaggerate a little more. With what? Like with everything: hair, eyelashes, face, wardrobe. I'll give you a mini-class on curling your lashes, blush, and winged liner, like a chola. That one's real popular right now, the chola eyeliner. This one you see right here was made with a surgeon's precision. And speaking of surgeons, we're gonna ask la Bibi to help you in that other department you're hiding. She designed a panty that holds your dick in a spot where it won't be a bother and you can just be 100 percent you. All the details count around here: outfit, voice, everything. What you want is for it to be clear who you really are and at the same time, not quite clear. The client comes looking for something specific and us girls are here to give it to him. I like to think we're escorts who provide services to those who need them. Me? Pues every now and then. Retired? Ay, mija, what I would give but no, it's not my time yet. I'm saving, for sure, because in a few years, you best believe I'll retire and get outta here. I love my Juaritos, but it's been a good run for me already. Where to? Pues mira, my dream is to move to Ecatepec, all my family is from there, I was born here, but I spent summers down there, the best moments of my life as a kid were there and I'm gonna go back to that land of hills, I want to see the Cerro de Córdoba from up close again, el Chiquihuite, el Acetiado, el Cerro Gordo. Ecatepec is right next to the actual Lago de Texcoco, you know? Ecatepec is my Shangri-la. Ecatepec is the toilet of Mexico City? Ay, no, you don't know a damn thing. I bet now you're gonna be like la Tijeras going on and on about how it's about to get dangerous down there too, like Juaritos. I mean, have you even been there? See? Ecatepec is in the Valle de México and that's where I'm headed, you'll see. Bueno, that's still a long way off and, for now, my job, what I do is business administration. I do it all: accounting, human resources, communications, assets

and liabilities, or actually, asses and lay abilities. Ay niña, why don't you laugh a little, it was a joke. You better get used to my jokes if you're gonna live here with us girls. You're like really serious. Or maybe it's that you're not paying attention to me, don't think I haven't figured out how your eyes never leave your phone.

Bueno ya, we better ask for the check so we can head home and I can show you what might end up your new place of residence.

No, walking around here isn't dangerous. I mean, no more dangerous than in any other part of the city. Things here are gettin ugly, yeah, but not here in this neighborhood. Mira, that one over there is the pharmacy. The owner lady sometimes gives us mean looks, but her kid sure does flirt with us.

There on that sidewalk at nighttime, a man sells elotes, uy you have no idea how long the line gets. And on the other side of the street, some young guys sell hot dogs on the weekend.

Over here, follow me, it's just a block away.

Right here. Isn't our building cute? The pistachio color makes it pop, am I right? Even makes you forget that the fuckin city trash dump is over here. Right over there. Ay, mija, don't be dumb, you can't see it from here, and blessed be, you can't smell it from here either. But you walk just five or maybe seven blocks further and the stench blows in your face. Well, no, more like ten blocks. Maybe fifteen. I don't know, I never walk over there. There are some summers when, you know, twenty blocks away you catch a whiff of it, a funk that blows and blows and blows all the way over here.

But really, it's nice here, everything's super close by. This building was bought by one of Linda's boyfriends. Who's that? Ah well, some congressman who ... Ahh Linda, you're asking about Linda, ay, mija, sometimes I get lost in my story's twists and turns and thing is I talk so damn much during these trainings that ... Anyway, la Linda's the one who started this business, what, I hadn't told you that already? Yeah, I already told you that, but you're so damn busy with

that phone. Listen, just put it away. La Linda would've already broken it, a la chingada. She was everything for us girls. The mother of all putas, or of all vices, el Javier would say. Vices, that's all of us, claro. She's the founder of our whole business. She got here just like you and me, a complete loser looking for a job and then all of sudden one day she was the one running the place. She brought me and la Cafre and la Bonita here, she made us part of her family. But what I was saying about that damn congressman: So he told Linda, I got this building for you and for your girls. And at first she didn't think he was being serious and she was all no and no and no, I won't move there without the title papers. La Linda was plenty sharp, she knew good and well this building for sure came from one of the congressman's shady businesses. Sí, fijate, congressmen, government ministers, people with money or at least a lot of influence in politricks, they were our best clients in la Linda's days. But then, when she put me in charge, little by little I pushed that trade away, it's just that I don't know, I mean I don't want shady shit mixed in with my business.

In any case, one random day she shows up with papers in her hand and says: muchachas, we're moving. And we've been here ever since. Now I handle the business myself, because when la Linda started getting sick, she passed all her knowledge and all the work to me. I just deliver her cut every month, she entrusts the rest to me. Don't worry, come on in, mija. Mira, down here we have like a little common area, so we've got the TV, the DVD player, the stereo system. One of the girls says we should buy one of those karaoke machines for when we get bored. Here on the second floor, we have two bathrooms and rooms for two of the girls. You're gonna be in the third, right next to me, so I can look after you and keep up with your training. Let's go, I'll show you.

Here you've got the basics: bed, dresser, closet. You can decorate it however you want. Once we finish fixing up the rooms on the second floor, I'll put you there, cause what I wanna do is tear down that wall between what's going to be your room and mine and then make myself a ... what do the

gringos call it? Un, un, un loft. Yeah, a big big space just for me with exposed brick and windows that open wide.

La Linda? Uy, la Linda moved to El Paso to live with her daughter and to enjoy her golden years in peace. I want that for myself too, to enjoy my golden years in peace. But in Ecatepec, definitely, in Ecatepec. Have you been there? No, ugly? It is not ugly, it's a beautiful valley. More like a dirty back alley? Ay, chamaca, don't start talking shit, I know what I'm talking about. Bueno, I'm sure it's grown like everything else, but that's just progress. Mira, if I'm gonna be honest, it's been forever since I went. Since the funeral for amá. Because that stubborn lady wanted to be buried down there. Those last few years, I didn't see her at all. First, she stopped talking to me and kicked me out when I told her I was a joto. And later, there was no chance she'd talk to me after I buried Raymundo and became la Reyna. I'd send money to her through one of my sisters, I swore she'd never want for anything and I followed through on my promise. You should've seen what a beautiful funeral she had, the whole town was there because, come what may, amá was the prodigal daughter of Ecatepec. She was the first one to move to the border and the first to support her family on her own. That's why I want to go to Ecatepec—for her—so they can bury me next to amá and my nanita, under the cerros, under that cloudy sky, eso eso. Yeah, pretty soon it'll be time to say goodbye to the desert, the desert grinds your life away, makes you dusty and dull, it tries to swallow you up every damn day. Ay, I'm being so dramatic.

Bueno, but what was I telling you? Oh yeah, the loft. Right, I want one so I can sit on my perch high above and see y'all moving around like ants while I clickety click the remote control to watch my favorite shows.

A pimp? Ay mija, you don't get it or you're just stupid. I'm telling you it's me around here and nobody else, I'm your pimp daddy, yeah, or your pimp momma actually, haha, your everything, honey, your everything. The only one calling the shots around here is me, I already told you, if someone wants to start shit with you, just call me and I'll beat their face in. I'll

protect you just like I protect all my girls. Nobody, you'll see, nobody's gonna mess with you once they know you're one of my girls, everyone around here either respects me or is afraid of me, doesn't matter which, but here the one who makes the chicharrones pop is me and only me. Ay, you get me all fired up, niña, I mean on my own I get fired up about any little thing. It's the damn hormones, even after taking them for centuries, they still fuck with you, like they play tricks on you, they bring out your worst. Oye, what hormones are you taking, cause you're taking hormones, right? Uy, those are so damn expensive, no wonder you wanna join our union. Mira, tranquila, there are generic versions of those, and I know someone who sells them and gives you a payment plan. The ones la Bibi takes are pretty expensive, but she says the others don't work for her. Right now, I get my hormones for free cause I had a doctora who understood my body's needs to a T. Yeah, a lady who was my doctor, and even better, she'd come to see me, private house call and everything. But turns out she was cold-blooded, she left me high and dry. Just came for a while with some other gringos, the type that show up trying to save the world until something more colorful comes along. In any case, ever since she left, my period's been irregular. Of course, mija, I have my period and all, what do you think? Just that mine is different: I don't bleed, but I'm a perra the whole month long.

10

Promises. That man was all promises. Promised he'd get her out of this place. Promised her a house with multiple bedrooms, lots of windows and closets. A washing machine. Darling, I promise, you're going to live your dreams. I won't let you spend your life scavenging in the trash. Or cleaning other people's houses. Or taking care of other people's problems. As soon as I get a call from that other job I was telling you about, you'll see.

That man also started to promise me things, but only when she wasn't around. Told me he'd build me a bedroom and paint it pink with a bookshelf and books, lots of books so I wouldn't have to reread my same ones over and over again. And you'll go back to school, just wait til summer's over, you'll go back. Education is essential so you don't end up being ...

At first I just listened. In one ear and out the other. But later, there were so many promises, so many plans, that I ended up getting excited too and I followed suit. I thought: I'm going back to school and this time I won't have to walk all those blocks, because he'll take me in his pickup truck and all the kids in my class will see me. I'll wave goodbye to him, see you later, I'll say, goodbye, goodbye, as all the kids pass in the glaring sun.

Idiot, three times over a fucking idiot.

If there's one moment I might confuse with happiness, it's that one: when all three of us lived in that house together. Because there was always music, laughter, sometimes we'd even put carne and cebollitas on the barbecue. This is for my darlings, he'd say as he'd lay a thick cut of meat on the grill.

The summer was ending, and the day to go back to school was getting closer. The pink bedroom he'd told me so many

times he'd build for me slowly transformed into a house, a house that'd be better than this one. A house with bars on the windows and flowers in the garden. Just imagine, he'd say. A house with a fridge full of food and, on the table, the bread you love so much, the cheese that melts in your mouth.

But how are we going to buy another house? Where are we going to get that money from? I asked him. If you give me a kiss on the cheek, I'll tell you. But seriously, you don't even have a job like she does. You just work every now and then. How are you going to? I'll tell you if you sit in my lap. And after the kisses and after sitting me on his lap and after I let him rub my back, he'd always say: I have a secret and I can't tell you. And you can't either, you can't tell her. And this, he'd say as he kissed me, you can't tell her about this either.

Later on, he started to touch me. He'd rub my thighs, hold me tight by the arms, sniff my neck. I told him not to. He said, niña, you're practically my daughter. I told him that dads don't touch like that. How do you know if you never had one? Men are predatory animals. I read somewhere there's no animal more intelligent than a predator. They put a spell on their victims, who practically offer themselves up for sacrifice.

I don't want you to touch me there, I told him, as his hand ventured beyond my thigh. You'll like it, look at those goosebumps, you do like it. No, no I don't. I don't want to do this. I don't. You're going to do what I tell you or if you don't, I'll tell her you started it. Come here. This time it won't hurt, he'd swear.

I don't know if it was the pain, the fear, or why, but I didn't say anything. Weeks passed and I didn't tell anyone. His fingers touching me, me saying no, him saying it was okay. Keep quiet, little girl, he'd say.

Me, the quiet little girl.

11

The first thing I do when I get home is take a shower. I scrub my skin until it turns a reddish hue. Afterwards, I clean the shower tiles with bleach to get rid of any mark of the trash dump. It's like the dump is stuck on you and on everything you touch.

I fill the bathtub, sink into the water, and stay there until my skin puckers. I've thought of adding a few drops of bleach to the water, because my bath salts and my oils don't seem up to the job of beating back that stench. Not even a clinical mask works. It's a stench that gets into your pores, it itches and it sticks around for days. It doesn't matter what I put on my body, it never goes away.

One of the assistants put plugs in his nose one day while working in the field, and then afterwards he couldn't get the taste out of his throat. The thing is it doesn't go away, the stench sticks around. But anyway, it is what it is; it's impossible to think we'd be able to go in and out of the actual stomach of the city as if we hadn't done anything at all.

“Well, I don't smell anything.”

“I do, and I'm going to get you another bottle of perfume, hermana.”

Norma lets us know that she has already found the ideal person to stay at the house when I'm in Juárez.

“Ah, you're still thinking you're going to come live here?”

“Sí, tía. We already discussed this.”

“I know, I don't forget everything, but we'd decided it wasn't necessary. It'll be enough to hire this girl Norma's talking about.”

“But she’s only going to be around in the daytime. It’s important you’re never completely by yourself.”

“I hate to say this, Tía Mayela, but Gris is right.”

“Stop.”

“Come on, tía. Honestly, you’d be doing a favor for your favorite sobrina.”

Norma has always insisted I’m la tía’s favorite. An absurd idea. La tía has always loved us and treated us the same. If she ever saw one of her employees at home treating me or my sister differently, la tía would reprimand them. Like that one woman, what was her name? A lady who would actually favor me over my sister. She liked it when I’d read to her out loud or help her write letters. Norma was always getting on her nerves.

“Besides, I didn’t renew my lease in my building. You’ll have to adopt me again.”

I feel stupid. If la tía doesn’t accept me moving in, it’s no big deal, I’ll find another place. But I really can’t be anywhere else but here. Anyone else in my position would do the same. Besides, I have to admit it, this is also a chance to learn more about how the mind—shaped in a certain way—begins to betray itself.

La tía looks at my boxes and my suitcases, watches as Norma and I bring them into the house and carry them up to my room.

“Will you be able to live here?”

Good question, I think to myself.

“Of course, I can. I did it for a long time and look, I don’t have a lot of stuff.”

She doesn’t try to help us, and she also doesn’t question why we didn’t pay movers, like she would have before. Now she just observes.

“¿Estás bien?” I ask her.

“Yo sí, pero I don’t know if you’re going to be comfortable.”

Only two weeks have passed and, between getting my fieldwork done and taking care of la tía, I have no time at all. It hasn’t been easy. My days are frittered away so fast. It was a bit tough for me to get used to living with her. I was so used to having a medium-sized space with very few things, and now I’m in a huge space with far too many things. What I thought was the same old house is not the same old house. La tía—who used to be so organized and have three people working for her—spent the last year alone, so the house is a bit of a puzzle. The kitchen drawers seem to follow just one rule: if it fits, it goes here. I try to make time when I’m free to organize things a bit. The girl who is going to help us can’t start coming until next week. So it’s a good time to get rid of la tía’s tiliches, the word she always uses for her knickknacks. Norma helps me; she puts labels on all the doors and drawers.

“I read on the internet that this will make it easier for her once her mind starts to get foggier.”

“That’s still a long way off.”

“You may be a scientist, but you sure aren’t being very objective. Her mind is about to be erased, you know that, right? Her mind is going to erase everything. Her mind will be.”

“Empty and silent.”

Living in la tía’s house means returning to the room of the little girl I once was. I stored away some things in the attic that la tía hadn’t touched. I brought some of the furniture from my apartment, and I put the rest into the attic as well. A bed, a lamp, a carpet. That’s all I need.

“You’re going to need a desk.”

“I’m fine without one, tía.”

“And where are you going to do your homework?”

Most of the time, she's okay. She forgets small things or gets minorly confused. We don't say anything to her, we don't correct her. Sometimes she catches herself. Sometimes she doesn't.

"Your work, I meant to say your work."

"At the dining room table or at your desk."

La tía does alright in the morning, but I begin to notice that in the afternoons she spends more time staring off into space. Quiet and alone with her thoughts. She sits in front of the picture window in the living room and just watches the world outside. I wonder what she's thinking about.

"Doesn't it seem weird to you that your room is just like you left it?"

"I don't know, I hadn't thought about it."

Ever since I moved in with la tía, I see my sister more often. She comes by almost every day, she always brings food, or some dessert. She says it's for la tía, but I know she's doing it for me too.

"I'm telling you, you're her favorite. My room became the TV room a long time ago."

"I mean she left my room like that for guests."

"Like she has so many."

Maybe it is true what Norma says: I'm la tía's favorite. She sees herself in me. The eldest daughter, the one forced by circumstances to become more responsible. When my parents died, la tía and I both lost the chance to do whatever we wanted. We were assigned the job of taking care of someone else. No. In all honesty, both of us assigned ourselves that role. She had to take care of two little girls, and me, my little sister.

"You're not scared we'll do the same thing?"

"What do you mean?"

"Forget everything."

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12

Being punctual in this business is crucial. We break the rules a bit on weekends, because everything starts earlier, ends later, or doesn't end. Customers come and go as they please. And we stay till the customer comes, haha, get it? Bueno, my point is we work the whole weekend through, no days off. And if it's a week people get paid or get their Christmas bonuses, the weekend lasts like sixty hours. The grind is even more intense. One thing: no matter what the day is, the client gets the exact amount of time they paid for, you charge them for any extra minutes, and you charge them well.

We get Mondays off, but that's not exactly true. Monday is the day to wash your clothes, do your brows, paint your nails, exfoliate, wax. Yeah, I'll show you how to do it without any goddamn razor or tweezers. Show me those little hairs again. Ay, I wanna pull em out already. For me, thick little hairs are like pimples, a good excuse to pinch and ahh sweet release. Mondays are days for general cleaning, we have to sweep, mop, dust, all of us together like a little army of worker ants. Tuesday's shopping day. You can do it on your own, but normally we all do it together. There was a while when we'd go to the movies on Tuesdays, we'd do the shopping, eat something somewhere downtown and then go see a movie. It's been so long since we did that, things have been so strange, mija, but maybe it's time to get back to our little tradition already. I don't know, after everything with la Bonita, like everything went in another direction, like all of us scattered even though we're under the same roof. It'll take a while for the girls to start to trust you, in this business there's a lot of perras so we're all slow to warm up. Take it slow at first, just say hi, be sweet, try to listen to them, and—most important—keep your ears peeled cause all of em can teach you something.

No, no, you can't wear whatever you want, you have to follow our code. Sí, claro, there's a code, a secret code, but it's easy to memorize. Ready? If I were you, I'd write it down. This is it: a girl who doesn't show it off, doesn't sell. Ay, mija, you really don't know how to laugh, do you? Anyways, don't worry if you don't have anything sexy, I already told you I've got you covered, but later on, you're gonna have to buy your own clothes. You're size ten, right? I figured. How do I know? Cause sizes are my thing. The girls are always shocked, I'm a genius with sizes. It's the same for me with shoes, you're a nine, easy. You're a seven and a half? De veras? Me too, I'm a seven and a half or eight, my feet are like universal size. Everything fits me. So you and me, we can lend each other shoes and things, like sisters, mija, sisters.

Sometimes las chicas lend each other shoes, but first they have to learn to trust you. All the ladies have their own personalities, you'll get to know them soon enough. They're scary at first, but they grow on you, they become part of your life, your best friends, your sisters, your daughters, your everything, then when they leave, you miss em, puta madre, you miss em so damn much. Because every last one of em leaves, and that's fine, they have to move on. That's the rule in this business, you can't spend more than four years here. In four years, you make enough money to figure out how to live, whether that means getting alignment and balancing done for your body—I mean chichis and hips—to head out into the world and be the woman you wanna be. Or just to become part of society like it should have been from the beginning. Remember this: this job is just in the mean and between time. This business has to be a phase in your life, something temporary, something to help you get ahead and that's it.

I don't expect you to come back years down the line to say thank you or bring me Christmas presents, no señorita. First of all, I already told you, the time'll come when I won't be here, but the thing is I want the same thing for you that I want for all the girls: to get your hands on enough money, strength, and integrity to be able to face down the reality of this world

without that reality messing you the fuck up. I want that world that closed its doors to you to open them wide, cause, don't lie, of course somebody closed the doors on you at some point, made you think you'd get stuck outside forever, and that's why you decided to come here, cause they left you outside on your own and with nothing.

Why am I still here? That's a good question, but for another day.

So your feet are size seven and half? Who woulda thought, you look like a big girl, but apparently you're tricky. By the way, that's another good lesson: tricking. Tricking is an important word around here. Look, it's not about faking something for the client, because faking something always ends up seeming phony and then that shit catches up to you and you get caught. Tricking is different, tricking is providing an illusion. Tricking is lying, teasing, confusing, trapping, arousing, sweet-talking, fascinating, seducing. A ton of synonyms for that.

That's what I said, synonyms. Check this one out, totally quiet at first and now you're like a walking talking Larousse dictionary. Larousse? What if we make Larousse your stage name? Maybe you'll even end up being our little dictionary and you can take that responsibility off my hands. Look at me, I'm the only one here with any school learning. Uy mija, I'm a proud graduate of community college. I was an active member of society, like I said, I had a good job, I paid my taxes, I was a model citizen. Until the day I ended up with my own little domingo siete. What do you mean what's a domingo siete? Ay Larousse, you don't have any street smarts at all, huh? A Sunday seven, haha. That's what you say when a girl gets knocked up outside of the bounds of marriage, civil or religious ... No, I didn't get pregnant. Ay mija, you're such an intellidummy, it's so sweet and cute. Mira, just stay on your toes, if you mess around with women, do yourself a favor and wear a condom and don't leave some lady out there knocked up with her own domingo siete. I know you don't mess with

women but never say never, honey. You never know where this business is gonna take you.

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13

The first time she found us, we weren't in bed, no. He had me on his lap. And now what are you two doing there? She said. I got nervous, so nervous I couldn't say a word. He made like nothing was happening, just said I was telling him a story. But there's no book in her hand. A story she made up. Didn't you make up a story? My head nodding.

But he was the one making up stories.

Before she found us again, many days had passed and many other things had happened. This time I wasn't sitting in his lap. Nothing could make her believe I was telling him a story. You son of a bitch, she yelled, son of a motherfuckin bitch. Then she dragged me off the bed onto the floor. Pulled my hair. Slapped me three four five times. I told her it wasn't my fault. I told her I didn't want to do it. But she didn't believe me. Her rage grew. Slapped me again and again: six seven eight times.

He acted like nothing had happened. It was her idea, he told her. You know men, how weak we are, I'm sorry, Chatita, it was her, I swear it was her. It's her age, she's curious, don't be hard on her, she got the picture now for sure. I'm not defending her, Chatita, but she's just a kid. What does she know about right and wrong?

None of this stopped her: nine ten eleven twelve twenty slaps across my face. Each one harder than the last. This is what I get for being so good to you, she said over and over. I'm not even your mother, I'm not related to you, I'm the one who saved you, I'm the one who took care of you when they wanted to throw you in the trash. Who wanted to throw me in the trash? I got the nerve to ask. What do you care who? But you know what? They wanted to throw you away, because you're a piece of trash. Complete trash. I gave you a roof over

your head and a life and everything else and this is how you repay me, trash, this is what you do to me.

She hit me once, hard, then again and again. She replaced her slaps with punches. Fucking bitch. Her fist clenched tight. He stopped her. He said, leave her alone already, she doesn't know any better, how's she going to know. I've been telling you she needs to go back to school, they'll teach her there, leave her alone, vieja.

But she just kept whaling away on me, just whaling away.

I knew she wasn't my mom. Even though I had her last name, I knew I wasn't actually hers. I don't know when I found out or how. It didn't matter to me. She was there, and she looked after me. I saw her like a kid sees a mom, because she gave me food to eat, took care of me, kept me in line. Isn't that what moms do? Honestly, it never mattered. It never occurred to me to say: You're not my mom! Who do you think you are? No. It never occurred to me to say: Tell me who my mom is. Tell me where I come from. No. Never. Because something joined us together.

But that day, that day I did tell her, after all the times she hit me, I told her.

Why are you hitting me if you aren't my mom? Or even related to me? Why are you hitting me? In an instant, I switched from fear to rage. I could've hit her back. I think he saw I was about to charge her, and he pulled us apart. He took her by the arm and led her out of the house.

I lay down in the same corner I always did. Drifted asleep, insulting her under my breath. But I didn't cry. I didn't give her the pleasure of my tears. I held them in. Held myself in, like I hold everything in now.

The next day she said, get up already, it's late, there's work to do. She made breakfast for me. Turned on the radio. Sang two, then three songs, one after another, like she used to before the man moved in. You're not mad anymore? I asked her. Honestly I wasn't the one who started it. Forget about it

already. We've got things to do, she said again. He wasn't around, but I didn't dare ask where he was or if he'd left already.

Come on, you're going to come scavenging with me. You're going to help me.

We walked to the trash dump, slipped through the fence and walked to the same place as always. I already know where the best stuff is, I told her. She looked at me like she didn't believe me. Really, I said, I really do know. I wanted to make her happy. I wanted to make myself happy. I wanted for everything to go back to the way it was before.

Okay, let's see. Show me, she said.

I did what I'd seen her do a thousand times before. I looked all around. Looked up and down. Kicked a little mound or two of stuff. Then I ran and ran until I found a little mound that stood out. I opened a bag. Shook it out in front of me. Then another. Then another. I went deeper into the dump. Kicked another mound. I pulled at things, opened other bags, shook them out.

When I went back, she was gone. I thought, she's off somewhere else, doing the same as me, and I kept on. Digging, looking, taking one thing out, taking out another thing. I remember clearly I found a pair of tennis shoes with no laces, two metal cups, and a ton of cans. I walked all around, carrying the tennis shoes, the cups, and the cans in a bag. Over and over again, I called out to her. I'm done. Let's go. When I realized she was nowhere to be found, I thought probably she went home, and I headed over there too.

The house was shrouded in silence. The house without her things. The house without her clothes. The house and her lock. The only thing left was her lock.

The house like they'd cleaned it out permanently.

14

The factories and the supermarkets also have their space here. They bring what's left over, products that are broken, spoiled, unsellable. Cans that expired long ago. People receive them here happily. Everything works until it doesn't work, one of the ladies told me. If no one else wants it, we do, another one said. I record them, take notes, and do everything possible to keep a poker face. I didn't come here to share my opinions or to save them from what they choose to eat or use. I came to learn how waste materials become consumable goods and the effects of living in these conditions.

“Gris, look at this photo, she's something, isn't she?”

“Yes, a total leader.”

“Her name is Alicia.”

Forget everything. There are mornings I don't know where I am or what I'm supposed to do. When I start to understand that I'm taking care of la tía and doing the project at the trash dump, I suddenly wish I could erase my memory and forget everything. I'd also like to forget the previous day, or the one before that, whether that's because I spent the day cleaning up after la tía or because we had some rough encounter during our fieldwork. I'd like to forget I have responsibilities and forget that I chose them myself. Forget who and what I am. Forget what I promised to be and to do.

“It's already seven, you're going to be late to school.”

“Gracias tía, sí, I'm headed out.”

Work today in the trash dump was especially exhausting. We wanted to do an inventory of the types of products that the people from the supermarket dumped today. All it took was one woman thinking we were taking stuff, and then several

other ladies started to revolt. It was frustrating, but I handled it with Henry and the others.

“We have to earn their trust. We can’t assume they understand why we’re here.”

“The inventory was your idea.”

The problem wasn’t the inventory, but how we were doing it. It should have been done quietly, like someone asking randomly out of the blue. Sometimes Henry is exasperating. Everyone is exasperating. They don’t understand how important this is. And if they do understand, then what happens is they don’t take the necessary precautions. It’s natural for younger people, but Henry?

We don’t talk about it between us on the team, but we all know it: the environment, the sun, the stench, all of it is irritating, and it puts people on the defensive. We’re becoming part of our own theory: the effect of a space on the individual.

“Last night I spent almost twenty minutes just looking at the trash dumpster.”

“I scraped every little drop of tomato puree from the can before throwing it away.”

Everyone shares what they’ve learned since we started to come. The younger ones talk about how difficult it is to choose fruits and vegetables at the grocery store. Others feel like separating out their trash has become a mission. Folding boxes, washing cans, being careful with the glass. What before we all did mechanically now demands our attention. As if what we do has an effect on these people. It doesn’t matter what we do or the condition of the trash they find, everything becomes useful in their hands. Yes, the conversation has become group therapy.

The truth is we also want to take something out of the dump. If digging around in the trash allows them to live, it allows us to sleep. I mention to Henry the idea of trying one more time, working our networks at the hospital to get them to

let us bring back the mobile clinic so we could have a more equitable relationship.

“Says the person who broke up something that hadn’t even started.”

“Ay, Henry, don’t start.”

Henry laughs and then he says I’m right: we have to bring the clinic back. And the fact is that that approach really did lead to good results in other neighborhoods. In fact, our assistants didn’t have to go knocking on anyone’s door, the community came on their own to the clinic: men, moms with their kids, elderly people, even the sex workers came for appointments; I guess they understood we were there to help. The same could happen here. It would be a way to pay them back for the time they gift us.

“Well, let’s do it.”

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We’ve heard they’re about to get electricity, and of their own initiative, not the city’s. Anyone who starves to death here is lazy, a lady told us, someone who apparently is third generation in this dump: People throw it all away and we collect it, sell it, or exchange it, but we don’t starve to death.

The leader of the pack brought us these two ladies. Henry convinced her to talk with us. And this girl, super sharp, asked us if we were going to pay her to bring more people to interview. I told her not with money, but with pantry items. She stared me down, straight in the eyes, like she was trying to intimidate me and said: But for your sake it better be good stuff. And walked away.

“It’s really strange, tía. She’s like a kid and an adult at the same time. Her hair is in a ponytail or down but she always wears a cap. She wears all black with a man’s shirt on top.”

“But what if mamá gets mad? I don’t want her to get mad at me.”

For a split second I thought la tía had said: But what if her mamá gets mad? But no, la tía was off somewhere else, she wasn't listening to me, she'd gone some other place in her head. The episodes are starting to take another tack. I didn't know what to do or what to say.

“She won't get mad, Mayela. Now, finish your food and then it's time to watch TV.”

La tía obeyed her. Magda picked up the plates, cleaned the table. It took me a minute to react and understand what she'd done.

“Okay, so we have to build a sense of normalcy around her lapses in memory?”

“We don't have to build anything. Just go with the flow, follow her lead. It isn't so hard.”

Magda is the perfect person to take care of la tía. She's patient, she takes initiative. She won la tía's trust very quickly. When we interviewed her, she told me that patients like la tía are like time travelers. They have what any person would want: to escape from reality and to recover memories that give her pleasure.

“I don't know about you, but I'd love to go back to my childhood and play soccer with my brothers. They told me I couldn't play because I was a girl.”

Magda repeated what the doctor and what I myself had told Norma from the very beginning: This illness is a one-way trip. But unlike what the doctor said, she emphasized the importance of it being a comfortable trip: As nice as it could possibly be.

Magda provided really good references, but I think what convinced us to hire her was her ability to analyze the situation and the empathy she showed from the start.

“They're time travelers and sometimes you have to travel with them.”

And it's true. La tía isn't the only time traveler. I'm traveling through time constantly. On the one hand, going to the garbage dump is like being in some remote past. The conditions they live in, their way of taking care of day-to-day problems, like the whole idea of civilization didn't even exist. It's horrible how condescending I am.

I also time travel inside la tía's house. She assigns us to different moments in her past. And since, in all actuality, we don't know her past, we wind up lost. La tía never talks about her childhood or her adolescence. And it's not like we didn't try, but she was always really tight-lipped about her private life.

"I feel like there's no more present in my life," I found myself confessing to Magda.

"We'll always have the future," she responded with a smile.

I like Magda. She's intelligent, sweet. Her presence is hardly noticeable and, despite that, she has a huge impact in the house. It's like she's here to take care of me too. Like Norma. She tells me she'll stick around a little while longer, and she encourages me to take a long soak in the tub.

"Do I smell bad?"

"Claro que no, but I've noticed that it relaxes you and your tía when you take a bath with those salts your sister brings. And afterward it's easier to deal with both of you."

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Tell whoever's calling or texting you that you'll get back to them later cause either you put your phone down or you get the fuck outta here, mija. I'm dead serious. Mira, just turn it off, cause if it makes noise again while I'm talking, I'll dock you points or hours, I'll pinch you so hard, I'll ... yeah, it's better if you just put it on silent and put it away. On silent, I said. Just let me find out you picked up your little phone when you're with a client, I'll run your ass outta here so fast, like, so fuckin fast. You have to give your client all your time and attention cause if he's into you, he comes back. If you turn him on, he'll even tip. Forget it, you don't need to apologize anymore, just don't let it happen again.

As far as I'm concerned, I say you can stay. I mean, if you're interested in the position, claro. You'd be on probation, okay? If it doesn't work out ... you pack your bags. Qué bien, perfect, that's how I like it, I'm glad you get it, and you understand where you stand with me. I need trustworthy employees, because—like I explained before—I do everything here: I'm administrator, event coordinator, bouncer for drunks. All of it falls on my shoulders. Needless to say, it's stressful.

You see me as some kind of matron saint of the trade on this godforsaken corner, but I already told you I had a marvelous life. I was an upstanding guy, and by upstanding guy I mean a son of a bitch who lied to his family, his girlfriend, and even himself ... what happened? What happened was the whole show came crashing down. Bueno, if I'm being honest, I'm the one who ditched it. One day I was forced to leave it all behind and to build another life. This one is my life, though, it's not another life, it's mine, actually mine. Understand?

Yeah, of course you are, I mean, I bet you're like me, another woman forced to leave it all behind, right? Yeah,

you're running away from something, anyone can see that from miles away, but it's better that way, cause if you combine that with you being so young, it'll give you a feel of like they say in English, "a damsel in distress," and the clients eat that up. What? What does it mean? Something like a mistress in a jam, the innocent bitch who everybody wants to save. You'll see, all of em are gonna wanna be your prince charming. But those prince charmings don't exist and if they do exist, they're not sending text messages, okay? But eventually you'll find one who makes your dreams come true. That's what happened to la Chavelita and now she's a lady with her own family. I'm not telling you this so you get your hopes up, but her life is an example for all of us. She met her now husband in ... ay, the chisme got good, why don't we go back to el Javier's place.

Put your phone away. Yeah, it's disrespectful, but besides that, someone might come by and steal it from you or just give us a good scare.

You've gotta be careful, that's why we try to stick together in a group.

Over here, come on. Yeah, right there.

Javier, I'm back!

Okay, I'ma order something a little stronger, in any case it's getting to be time for a little R&R. Drinks on me. No, I won't accept a no. And anyway today's Tuesday and I don't work. Javier, forget those clamatos, give us two tequilitas. No no no, no more no's. A lady can drink at any hour of the damn day. And this is the goddamn hour. I mean, it's not about downing the whole damn bottle, but it's important to hold your liquor, that's what makes you the boss of your corner.

Salucita.

Look at this girl, Javier, she downed it in one gulp.

A ver, stand up, let me get another look at you. Damn, you really are grandota. Who's the tall one in your family, your mom or your dad? Ay, I'm not asking you to explain your whole family tree, just tell me how you ended up so damn tall.

You'll do just fine, with that baby face and grandota, the big girls have a lot of pull with all kinds of guys, tiny ones or skinny ones or chubby or beefy or lanky.

Oye, don't let me forget, I'm gonna give you some pantyhose, I've got a box full of em brought over from el otro lado. A couple size L, obvi, I think you're gonna be the biggest of all the girls, it's teeming with petite models around here. You're proudly Made in Chihuahua, verdad? I figured. Women from here on the border are big, but they don't get into this business very often. The ones we get are the tiny girls, the ones who come from far away, from all those messy states and little countries with too many syllables in their names. Those tiny girls have their own charm too, but—I'll tell you—it's different. I was destined to be tiny because in Morelos everyone is like two feet tall, but since my mother married an incredibly tall chihuahuense, pues, look at me.

The johns always want the little ones to dress up as schoolgirls or nurses and guess who's the pendeja who has to go to Milano to get the damn uniforms, alter and hem them so they fit the girls like a glove. Ah, and do their ponytails or braids or whatever goes with their outfit. No, the big girls don't get asked to do that, the men always want the big girls for sado stuff.

You don't know what sado means? Ay mija, you don't know about fetishes or S&M? Are you sure you're ready for this? Cause look, if you're not, we could convince el Javier to give you a shot as a waitress here in the cantina and so then you won't have to ... No, I mean, I'm saying this as your friend, you've got no street smarts, no edge, no bite ... Sado stuff, hmm, how could I explain it? It's something you'll always end up liking. You've gotta spank em, slap em, squeeze em, pinch em with all the passion you can muster up. Why? Cause some people like a little abuse, mi nena.

Bueno, salucita.

Do I like it? Of course I do, sado stuff helps you work your shit out. De veras, seems like every spank or smack exorcises

a damn demon. No, don't try to tell me you don't have any demons, cause all of us here have at least one and sometimes more, and when the johns start begging and screaming for you to knock em upside the head, it all comes the fuck out. La Tijeras almost got locked up cause she pushed it a little too far with a john, almost split his jaw in two. La Tijeras crossed the line. It happened cause of that, cause she was working her own personal shit out at the "expense" of the client. She gets that way too when she fights with her girl, la Modosita, she used to work a corner here too. But she isn't modosita at all, she terrorized that john, told him she'd cut off one of his balls or both of em if he didn't withdraw the charges against la Tijeras. Can't talk to either one of those girls, both are the aggressive type, ya sabes. Sado shit comes natural to both of them. Yep, they were made for each other. Why doesn't she hook anymore? Ay pues, it's cause la Tijeras started to get jealous, and she didn't wanna share her vieja with nobody no more.

If I was you, I'd keep my distance from both of em, at least till they start a conversation. They can be cool, I mean sometimes they even fix up a huge meal for all of us. They're good in the kitchen. The frijoles rancheros la Tijeras makes are the shit, haha, get it? They become shit. La Modosita, though, she's the queen of las micheladas. So tasty. One day she'll make you one, you'll see, you just have to win her over. La Tijeras says one day they're gonna start a cantina or a restaurant, they're gonna compete with el Javier. You know, competition's always healthy, it forces you to step up your game. Both of em—la Tijeras and la Modosita—focus on saving money, they don't waste cash on pendejadas. Everything they make on the corner goes straight into their piggy bank.

And the thing is, fijate, one of la Modosita's clients works in the alcohol business, which—if you didn't know—is one of the most difficult to get into. As soon as they open their bar, they're gonna leave the corner behind. I'm happy for them, claro, but it also stresses me out cause we pull in more than 30

percent of our monthly earnings just from la Tijeras. A lot of old men are gonna be plenty sad when that one calls it quits.

The two of em arrived after I did, first la Tijeras and then la Modosita. La Bonita and me were the first to notice they liked each other, but they acted like they didn't. Until they did. You don't know how much I owe the girls who've come up with me, I feel like being here has helped me to take a huge step, to be who I am. Like I said, when I got here I was some random desk jockey, a pendejete with bad taste, I was totally petrified. I was a jackass, I was running away from life instead of dealing with it. But being here helped me become someone else or, actually, become who I really was all along. Mírame, here I am talking about me again. I can't get around it, I'm my own favorite topic.

Any last questions? Cause this introduction to la puta vida has gone on too long. ¿No?

Pues bienvenida y salucita.

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At first, I stayed right there. Her mattress was gone, her things too, but none of my stuff was moved. My old school notebooks, papers, vaccine record, my birth certificate with its “illegitimate daughter born in.” A couple of photos of the two of us together. I didn’t think about it then. Actually, I didn’t think about it until a little while ago. Did she think I’d come back? Is that why she left everything? “Illegitimate daughter.”

Even the pantry had a few things. I fed myself with that and with the canned food I’d scrounged myself. I didn’t think about anything. I’d whittle away at the day, fixing myself something to eat or sitting on my mattress and rereading the books I’d already read a hundred times before.

Later, when the food ran out, when I got really really hungry, I decided there was only one place to go to fill the empty pit in my stomach. I came here. Filled a big bag of food. Sniffed and scratched my way around.

The same thing every few days. The food would run out, and I’d come back for more. Going there and coming back, going there and coming back. At night not even reading could entertain me. Later, the electricity was shut off. Autumn was arriving, and the daylight didn’t last long.

I got bored. I started to come to the dump every day. Now not just because I was hungry, but because I got bored.

One day, night fell, and I didn’t feel like walking all the way home. I just went to sleep like I’d seen so many other people do: on top of some cardboard, curled up in a ball with a few bags covering me. I don’t know if I was scared. I just know I slept soundly, like the heat of the trash underground was keeping me warm.

I didn't go back home. Not the next day or the day after that.

A few days later, I'd already found a tent. One day, when the sun came up, I remember there was a dog nearby. It adopted me. I nicknamed it el Gorilón. It was a fat, hairy dog that didn't last very long. Next el Flaco arrived, but he lasted even shorter. Then el Pinto and el Negro followed me around for a while. El Doctor showed up after that, better late than never. I gave him that name because whenever I got sick, he'd lie down next to me and the problem would be fixed. Seriously, whatever I had, a cough, flu, stomachache, el Doc would snuggle up next to me, lick my hand or my face, and the next day I was good to go. But later, they all disappeared or died one by one: el Gorilón, el Pinto, el Negro, and el Doctor.

Over time, more dogs arrived, but I stopped giving them names. Dogs now are just dogs. It's easier if they don't get a name. If I've learned anything, it's that sometimes it's better that way, so one day you call them and they don't come and it's no big deal. One day I'll find them with their stomach split open, run over by the wheel of a truck, swollen up after eating some crap people threw away. And nothing to do about that, it's just the deal with dogs. Dogs come and go. Another one always shows up and it's like having the same dog. You can just call it dog. It doesn't matter if it's a different one or the same one that followed me around for months.

These no-name dogs are the only family I've got.

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The leader girl finally let us interview her. After she'd inspected each one of the products that came in the box: Okay then, what do you want to know? She told us we could call her Alicia. I wonder if this is her real name or if, in fact, it's just the name we can call her. When she talked, she didn't look us in the eyes. She was staring at the pantry items, at the camera, off into the mounds of trash all around us.

It's clear that life in the dump has aged her quickly. She looked like a little girl and like an adult at the same time. Every now and then either someone would come over to ask her something or she'd pause the story about how she ended up here to give orders to a group of kids. She'd tell them where to look, what to grab. She'd joke with them, pet their heads or pat them on their behinds as they headed out. I felt like she was comfortable, or I felt comfortable myself, because I got up the nerve to tell her that we'd taken to calling her the leader of the pack.

"We're not quite a pack. In a pack, everyone stays together, and well, here, everybody takes care of themselves."

"But everybody asks for your advice."

"Cause they're scared of el mero mero, Don Chepe."

Don Chepe. His name has come up several times in interviews. It's clear he's a man of a certain level in this community, someone to be feared or respected. Like mi tía in her good ol days. We haven't come across Don Chepe, but people have told us that he won't let us interview him and that we shouldn't mess with him.

"It's a miracle he hasn't run you out of here."

As she answered our questions, the smallest kids, the ones who follow her around everywhere, played a game of

clambering up the mountain of black bags.

“As long as you keep bringing us stuff, there’s no problem. The day you stop doing that, you won’t be welcome anymore.”

Alicia watched the kids play, joking among themselves. She’d throw a coin or a little plastic chip their way and tell them to find it. Once they’d scurried to the top of a mountain of trash, the kids would roll down with their arms crossed in front of them. Rolling and rolling until they hit the bottom, happy and erupting in laughter.

Henry asked Alicia if he could take her picture with the kids. She thought it over first and then said yes. She whistled to get them to come over. Then, one of them fell onto one of the bags and found something. He showed it to Alicia, and she celebrated like he’d struck gold: Run and show it to your mom, she told him. The kid snaked his way through the mountains of trash yelling: Mira, mamá, mira, I found treasure! What he found was a little chunk of plastic, something that could have been a kitchen utensil, the foot or the arm of something, a piece of something bigger, some meaningless trash. No, that’s not quite right. For us, it’s meaningless, but for the kid it’s not. It’s everything for that kid.

“Are you going to cry, doctora?”

“No, why?”

“Looks like you’re going to cry.”

Alicia stood up, told the kids to gather around for the photo, and then she left. She didn’t even take the pantry items. I don’t know where she got that idea from: I wasn’t going to cry.

That same day, we talked with the kids’ mom, and she repeated the same story we’ve heard from the other moms: husband left her, she got kicked out of her house, she doesn’t think she’ll live in the trash forever. Few things change in this story. What interests us is learning more about how, why, and

what it means that they live there, something that I'm sure only Alicia can give us.

That girl stops me in my tracks. Not just me, everyone. We're all intrigued. She has a way of talking, a voice, a tone somewhere between rage and sarcasm, she has a spark and a sadness. She doesn't complain, she just is.

I ended the day chatting with another woman, Chela. She's not much older than me, with two kids. The interview with her flowed easily. She told me she isn't leaving that place, that that's where she's had the chance to give her kids a better life: My life was in the trash, and the trash gave me a way to provide for my family; I even feel safe here.

Chela lived in another neighborhood, not very far from here. She was a housewife. Her husband supported the family, until one day he didn't come home from the maquila. At first, she reported his disappearance, she asked the people from the maquiladora about him, and when she realized not only was she not going to find him but also she could get herself and her kids in trouble, she let the issue rest. She started to work in a meat market, then at a grocery store, until the day she met Alicia, who brought her to the dump: For me, trash is money, it's not even nasty to me anymore, look, I even bring my kids with me when there's no school because when we work together, we get more. All of this stuff around us, it's not trash, it's food, shelter, clothes, furniture, life. Even though in other places misery is growing by leaps and bounds, here it helps us get ahead.

“Leaps and bounds. Leaps and bounds.”

“Sí, tía, leaps and bounds. You know what that means?”

I keep up with the routine of telling my tía about my day. Sometimes she pays attention and asks me questions. Sometimes she halfway listens, shakes her head, and asks me not to tell her sad things anymore. Sometimes she just looks at me, like she's there but not at the same time. Suddenly, she stands up and walks off to her room.

“Un beso.”

I’ve started to look for a new use for the things I see in the streets and alleyways of the neighborhood, appliances or furniture left outside houses. I can’t throw anything into the trash without fully examining it and then doing a deep study of whatever’s already in the trash. The other day, I yelled at la tía for throwing away a yogurt container that was practically full. Magda came to her rescue and told me: It was me, it went bad.

“Well, you should have washed it before you threw it away, that container is still good and.”

“I should have, but your tía got hysterical when she smelled it.”

Knowing that whatever la tía and I don’t finish goes into the trash enrages me. It could be for someone else. I get pissed that things go bad because no one eats them.

“I’ve told your sister already that she shouldn’t buy so much and she doesn’t listen to me.”

“Well, take some of this stuff to your house, Magda. We can’t keep on wasting food like this.”

“I don’t need you to give me food.”

“I wasn’t trying to offend you. It’s just that when we were little, we had a señora who’d help us clean, and la tía—besides paying her—would also give her all our leftovers and.”

“You had a señora? Sounds weird to say it like that, don’t you think?”

“Of course, we didn’t have her, she worked with us.”

“For, she worked for you.”

I tell Magda about how much affection we had for that lady who’d do everything for us. I try not to sound like some privileged idiot as I talk to her.

“There were days we’d see her more than la tía. She’d make us breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She’d get our backpacks ready, our lunch bags. She’d do our hair. I think sometimes

she'd even spend nights taking care of us when la tía was on a trip or I don't know. I'd read to her and."

"What was her name?"

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember.

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La Serena says you wanna work with us, that you've already got experience and everything, is that true? Lemme get a good look at you. Ay, chula, I don't know, you look like you're a total newbie in the business. Ah, you worked corners in your town. But just a little, right? How could I tell? Pues from your face. I can see the fear on you. As long as that fear is visible, you're still one of the new girls. But it's natural, even though you've worked in this before, or actually even if you've worked in this your whole life, you never quite shake the fear. Anyways, starting out in a new place, working with a new union, pos it's scary. I say it never goes away completely, like you just figure out how to live with it. Like la Serena, she's scared shitless every time she has a new client, she'd rather just stick with her regulars. I don't blame her, all kinds of shit goes down around here. What's the business like in your town? Where is it? Uy, chula, no wonder you came here. I don't know what's going on, but it seems like there's a lotta dirt coming out these days. Down there y'all didn't hear about what happened in Chihuahua with ...? Ajá. Eso mero. But look, the point isn't to walk around freaked out all the time, you just need to take your precautions. Cause the fear fucks with you, it holds you back. I used to be afraid of so many things. Of my family, of what people might say, just life in general or love. Afraid to admit who I am. Uy no, if I told you the whole story, my life's a telenovela, chula. To get where I am now I had to make it through so much pinche miseria. This is who I am, you know? I'm very open. Ay, I forgot to introduce myself, I'm Reyna, Reyna Grande, and if you stick with us, I'll be your boss. I talk a lot, as you'll hear, and my stories never have a happy ending but there's lotsa lessons in them, so take notes. Everything I say is part of your introduction to la putería in this establishment. Mira, I made you laugh, I can tell you're a sharp one, the last girl I trained, I

couldn't even get a buenos días outta her. She was real cute, a big girl like you and full of beauty tips. See my eyebrows how they're drawn on? She taught me how to do em. No, she's not with us anymore, as a matter of fact, your room was hers before. Good question. Why'd she leave. I'll tell you in a sec, but first come with me, lemme show you your corner.

How old are you?

Okay, but now, just between us, this time the truth, how old are you?

Good answer, not even I woulda come up with something like that. However old you want, that's what I'll say from now on, I'ma copy you. You're startin to grow on me, you look all freaked out but actually you're pretty confident. That's the basic thing in life and in this business, it took me a while to understand that. Cause now you see, I'm very sure of myself, but the truth is it took time for me to bloom. Like, as a kid, sometimes I'd try on my sisters' clothes, just every now and then and in secret. And when I got caught, úfale, I wiped it from my mind forever. I was in junior high then and the thrashing amá gave me must've been a really good one cause honestly, I swear, I never even thought about doing it again. Mainly, out of fear. A lotta years passed till I started to try on clothes that belonged to a girlfriend I had at the time. Bueno, I don't know if she was a girlfriend, I call her that just cause sometimes we'd fuck. I was her first. I say she started to go out with me just to see what she might feel. The only thing she had room in life for was work, work, work. I hope you're like that too, okay? Cause laziness has no place here. That's what my girlfriend would say, you know. I was her legal assistant and she was the star attorney at the firm where we worked. She never cut me any slack, Raymundo this, Raymundo that. Raymundo, laziness has no place here. We'd only fuck when she had absolutely nothing else to do. She'd take me to her apartment, I'd spend the night with her, sometimes messing around, sometimes talking. She had so many dreams and aspirations. Me, pues, I'd listen to her and I had no doubt she'd achieve every last thing she desired: her own firm, a

huge house. I think that's why I liked being there with her, that's why and cause it also meant I didn't have to cross back and forth from Juárez to El Paso every damn day. Ah, cause I worked over there, but I lived here. One day, I remember it like yesterday, just for fun, I opened her closet. The closet of this woman who was determined and disciplined, with goals for her life. Forget colors or texture, no cleavage or being flirty. No problem, though, I was so happy buttoning up a silk blouse with pearly buttons, a tailored skirt. Ay, I was finally myself. My transition took some time, but it happened cause of her or despite her.

And look at me now. Pues sí, I guess I should thank her, it's true, every cloud has a silver lining. Wow, you're really deep, aren't you? You're starting to grow on me. Oye, but I told you to look at me. Yeah, at me, not at my tetas, what? You wanna touch em? No, don't say sorry. I'm being serious. How could it bother me if I'm already used to it? Honestly, you wanna touch em? Don't worry about it, for real. These two have gotten me into some problems, no lie. Confusion is the mother of all vices. There's some people who like em and others who just don't. Years ago, when I was hooking and I wasn't the manager, I had a regular. A total bombshell who loved these sugar titties and my strong jawline, she was so into it. We'd fuck in missionary just so she could keep an eye on these girls. What do you mean which girls, chula? Pues these, my girls. Ay mamacita, my tetas, my girls are the TETAS that you just fondled. Mira, let's get back to what I was saying. I'm telling you with that regular, we had a wonderful time. She'd whisper under her breath, tell me the sweetest things. We'd see each other a couple times a month. But one day, she just stopped coming. And it was better that way anyway, cause I almost fell in love with her. I fall fast and hard.

Yeah, I like women.

Men too.

Whatever team you want me on. My theory is the world would be better if we were all like that, I mean if we all tried a little of everything. At the end of the day, love is love, chula. I

like love, I like to love and be loved. Suck and be sucked, hahaha. For real, you really do know how to laugh, I mean, ay, la Larousse had no sense of humor at all.

Bueno, this corner will be yours and you'll need to take care of it, so nobody swipes it. Sometimes abusive bitches poke their heads up around here. They come in waves, depending if the economy tanks, you'll either just see us or sometimes girls from other neighborhoods come through, cause they know there's more money to be made here. It's been a long time since I saw em. You'll live with us in that building over there, that one where they're doing construction work. I'm building myself a loft. Know what that is, a loft? Ah, mira, I'm glad you understand cause lotsa girls end up here who seem like they never even opened their eyes in school. Women? Well, not a lot, no, and now, with how things are in the city, less and less. I think they're scared to go out and get caught out after nighttime. If they come, they come with someone else, you know like couples looking for something. But women on their own, it's rare to see nowadays. I will say they're the best clients, you know? Besides paying well, they give good tips. Like they get how hard this profession is or they understand they're only able to occupy positions in society cause of women like us. What I mean is that if women are active and moving forward with their careers, it's cause they have women toiling away for them at home, taking care of the kids, washing their clothes, fucking their husbands so they don't get distracted, know what I mean? Ay, I'm so cynical, I know.

What I'm tryin to say is there are a lot more men as clients than women. And speaking of the guys, there's a little of everything: generous, cheap, really cheap, assholes, but everybody gets first-class service, so remember the client gets whatever they request. Look at it this way, chula, the client's the one who provides for you so you can eat, drink, live, and for some of us he's the one who ends up paying for our tits. Let's just say that your tits, you get em from the johns. Took me two years of work to get my girls. They're pretty, right?

It's obvious you liked em from the get. You turned red, jaja. And you wanna ask me something else don't you, I can tell. I can tell from a mile away, you're dying to ask if I have a little water gun between my legs. Flash news, chula, I do have one, but I keep it safely tucked away, I save it for special occasions.

One time I did think about getting rid of it, taking it the fuck off so I wouldn't end up sowing kids left and right like any fucking asshole. I was a fucking asshole too, I messed up, I got my girlfriend pregnant. That one, the one I was telling you about. I got her pregnant and I ghosted. That chapter of my life, it was just easier to lock it up and throw away the key. And no, I'm not proud of it. So now you see how I had to run away, how I got here and ended up staying. Like all the girls, yeah, you're right. We're all running from something. Ay, I think you and me we're gonna make good friends. Ay, but look at me, I haven't even explained your responsibilities in the business, and I'm more hocicona than ever, just blabbering on and on and on. Mira, we'd better head over to el Javier's, a clamatito helps me focus and I can explain how we get our work done in more detail. El Javier is ... ah, yeah, he was the one who recommended you, where do you know him from? Uuuy sí, that Javier is sooo popular, everybody knows him, and obviously he's left a trail of exes all over town. Oye, so do you have a boyfriend or a girlfriend? I'm just asking to find out if your pareja knows and if they're okay with what you're doing. Cause that's what happened to the girl before you, mi Larusita, I miss her. She was half super smart and half dumb as a brick. She left cause she had this little boyfriend who was too damn jealous and wasted her time calling her over and over and over again. But I mean, if he loved her so damn much, why didn't he get her outta this business? The johns started to complain and for good fuckin reason, you know, they're not paying to watch you talk to some other man.

Javieeer, un clamatito. Chula, what're you having? I got the first round.

No, I didn't just start off by myself, I was initiated into the work like they initiate a lotta girls. I mean, they have to school

all the girls who leave behind their messed-up former lives. This new life is a mess too, but damn it, it's the mess we choose. I got initiated and I won't say it's been easy cause you know this ain't easy. The goddamn truth is that being a puta is plenty tough, but a girl can get used to anything. By the way, how long have you been in the business? Some people would say I've sunk really low. But sometimes you have to fall down to get up again, and I lifted myself the fuck up. And I got a lift for these two round friends of yours and my chin and this ass. Yep, my ass too, you don't think this ass just grew like that outta nowhere, do you? Ass is everything. Stand up so I can see yours. Chuuuula, you're gonna do just fine.

Gracias, Javier. Come on, chula, salud.

El Javier's the real deal, he's an extension of our business. Before, we were just compas, then he was all, Set up an office over here, and now pues we've joined up together. It made all the sense in the world, cause his clients use our services and when the deed is done, the girls take their clients to grab a taco to recharge. It's the perfect set up, a real win-win. And now you tell me, what brings you here? Fijate, I started working on the corner with the idea of making some money to buy the body I wanted and just look how good I turned out. Linda, my boss, would say ... what was it she said? Ay, I think I gulped down that clamatito so fast now I'm all tie-tongued, haha. She'd tell us transsexuals—at that time there were two of us, la Cafre and me—that to be women we could augment, remodel, add, but never subtract. La Linda would always say, Removing, that's a sin. I don't agree with her it's a sin, I just think it's taking a risk. We had one girl, la Bibi, who worked with us till she got her pussy. After the surgery was the recovery period, and it lasted a long time and I don't know, I think she got scared about staying in the business, she was afraid she might get hurt, I don't know. In the end, she split. If someone decides to get into this to save up their money to remove it once and for all, it's none of my business. Everybody has their own ways to feel complete.

And how in the hell would I know what anyone needs to feel complete? Maybe life is about never really feeling complete, and you just keep walking that road to completeness over a lifetime. And on that road to completeness, you find out things about yourself. Me, as you can tell, I'm still on that road. And speaking of complete, we need to wrap this training up. Mira, if you take a second to look around, you'll see everything's in walking distance: the corner, el Javier, the hotel, the apartments, the pharmacy. The barrio is friendly, it's a good barrio, the barrio provides everything for us. The barrio gives, but it also takes away, so be ready and stay ready. Anything happens, you just shout out my name. Besides being the administrator here, I'm also bodyguard and official rompehuesos. I'm fine breaking some bones, I'll beat the shit outta anyone who fucks with my girls.

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Leave here? I've thought about it more than once.

Look for my family? I don't have family.

Go back to school? What for.

Your questions are honestly pretty stupid today. I can tell you didn't sleep well, or you skipped breakfast or something. I like it better when you ask me questions about my life here, about what we do to survive. I think a book could even be written about it. That's why you're taking pictures of us and interviewing us, right? For a book? I'm asking if that's why you come here once a week, to make a book with the material. Listen, lady, you're all over the place today and you're wasting my time. Let's just stop here.

A bad day? Well, damn, aren't you lucky. Around here, nobody has just one bad day. Every day is crappy. But there's no use complaining. I get what I need from here to live, sometimes even more than the bare minimum. The things here take a beating and keep on ticking, and if they don't, there's always more stuff on the way. I find things I didn't even know I needed, but then later they become just the thing I actually do need. I think the same thing happens to rich people. They buy things they don't need, things they don't use. Then when they need them, they're so dusty and ancient it's better just to buy them new. That's the way it is with everything. Am I wrong?

One of the first things I scavenged when I moved here was a bat, a baseball bat. I remember I said to myself, you don't need it, but then I thought, well, what happens if I do? It was all smooth, beat up and old and sad. A bat some rich kid played with so much, he got bored. For sure, that bat saw a lot of balls whizz by and got in some good hits. For that kid, that bat was a toy, but for me it's much more. It saved my life more than once. It must still be somewhere. I don't use it anymore. I

use this knife, which is more effective for when someone tries to intimidate me. Isn't it pretty?

What do you mean what for? To protect myself. There's always someone around trying to intimidate you, because you beat them to something they wanted or just because they can. Maybe he gets a kick out of fucking with you. This knife has also saved my life more than once. She's by my side day and night. Yeah, because at night, I slip her under my pillow, because nobody's going to catch me off guard, not anymore.

And I'm not saying people here can be dangerous. Actually, it's people from outside, the ones from outside or people who just moved here. People who don't know their place. People who don't know who's who. People who don't know who I am. Messing with me can get you into a lot of shit, Don Chepe says. And he's right. You all haven't interviewed him yet?

You look distracted. I think you already asked me that before, but I'll still answer. Look, people build their houses with whatever they find. Plastic, wood, cardboard, tarps, blankets, pieces of whatever. That's what I built mine with. The walls are crooked and the roof is part metal and part wood and part sky, but it keeps the rain out and that's the only thing that matters. Besides, if something stops working or breaks or collapses, you take a few steps and find another piece to put in its place, and you're all set.

In the dump, there's always something to replace something else.

All of us live here on the same ground. The ground smells like trash. It's filled in with trash. It is trash. Look at the ground. Come over here. The ground ferments in the summer, and that smell, well, it's annoying at first. Later it becomes like air. The same old air. You don't even smell it.

The air is a mix of everything: fruits, vegetables, chemicals. I say it's a smell that's only gross to someone here for the first time. Someone who comes once and doesn't come back. Because anyone who comes and stays, anyone who lives

here, anyone who doesn't know anything else, the smell doesn't get to them. It's just the smell. My smell. Yours. Until one day you don't smell it at all. I don't smell it anymore. Do you? I mean, the smell becomes a cloud over everything and everyone, but still some days it's stronger than others. It makes your eyes and nose itch. It gets stuck on your hands and your cheeks. It follows you around like the flies. There are times when the only thing you see are flies. Clouds of flies. Flies and more flies. Mosquitoes are only in the summer. Because it rains and the water collects and gets dirty, and then hundreds fly out.

The mosquitoes don't bite me. I think they know none of me is good, not even my blood. Or they're scared of me, like everybody else around here. It's better for them to be scared of me. That way, nobody messes with you, not even the cockroaches.

Yeah, of course there's cockroaches. There's cockroaches, larva, all kinds of insects we can't see or feel. Or probably other people can see and feel them, but I don't anymore. I don't know, I mean, probably all the bugs are here just seeing what they can get, like us, like me. The same with people. They're like larvae. Like cockroaches. I'm not trying to be mean. That's just it, they do their own thing, provide for themselves, and, I mean, to each their own. Nobody comes here to make friends. People come here to get what they need to live and that's that.

The truth is, despite it all, despite the smell, the discomfort, the people, the daily struggle to get ahold of the best stuff dumped by the trucks, being here is actually pretty easy. Honestly. Well, because life here is always the same. The sun comes up, and the stench and the people and the flies are already here. The sun goes down and they're still here. Stench, people, flies, and trash. That's all there is.

Listen, you don't have a smoke do you?

I'm also really young to live by myself and live off trash, don't you think? But look around, here I am. No, I mean, if

your conscience won't let you give me a smoke, I think we better just end this now. No, I'm not mad. That's how I talk.

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I feel like I'm doing everything wrong or leaving it all half done. I'm exhausted, between work and taking care of la tía—which has become work now too—I don't even have a second to take a breath. Though if I had time to breathe, I'd also do it wrong. Norma says I have no idea how to relax and she's right. I feel overwhelmed and stuck.

La tía, on the other hand, seems to be on a voyage with no end in sight. Last week, for example, she settled into some far-off portion of her childhood. It took me a while to understand what was happening. She was saying: Are we going to the store? Let's go, let's goo, let's gooooo. She said it over and over again in a sing-song voice. Let's-goo-let's-gooo-let's-gooo. Since I didn't pay attention to her that very second, she launched into a temper tantrum. And I didn't know what to do. I felt like an idiot. La tía crying and shouting and me standing there, with no idea how to deal with her tears. Suddenly, I came up with a solution:

“Okay, but after we eat.”

“Ándale, let's go already.”

“After we eat, or else mamá will be mad.”

“Griseeeelda, ándale.”

La tía called me Griselda. She was talking to my mother, not to me. She calls me Gris; Griselda is my mother. La tía was talking, that is, she thought she was talking, with my mother. La tía was a little girl inviting her sister to go to the store. La tía: let's go, let's go, let's go, and I didn't have a damn clue about what to do. So much studying about health and behavior to have no idea how to treat an unwell person when the time arrived. It didn't help at all to be the first in my class or to have spent hour upon hour in the library. I'm not

capable of taking care of anyone. When the temper tantrum started up again, I called Magda.

“Go with her flow.”

“I tried, but she won’t stop crying, she’s not calming down.”

“Give her what she’s asking for or something similar. I’ll head over. But don’t hang up, I want to hear what she says.”

I suggested to la tía that we go look for a snack in the kitchen: For sure, mamá has something around here, I said. ¿Y una Coca-Cola? She started crying all over again, because there were no Cokes. So Magda, listening in on the phone, promised her she’d bring her a Coke and some other treats. La tía started to make her a list of everything she wanted and little by little she started to calm down. Then she took me by the hand and led me into the kitchen—that she’d already torn apart—to find something: A little snack, Griselda, a little snack before mamá shows up.

As Magda cleaned up the mess left in the kitchen, la tía and I watched TV. She was laughing along at an episode of *The Golden Girls*, and I faked like I was laughing, but in all actuality I felt awful. One of the actresses, Estelle Getty, spent the last years of her life with senile dementia.

The same thing will happen to my tía. At some point, she’ll completely lose contact with reality and we’ll lose her to the disease.

A few days later, she wanted to play with dolls, and since there’s nothing of the sort in the house, I took out a few of the little ceramic figurines from her glass-front cabinet: two girls with watering cans in their hands showering water on the plants in an imaginary garden. She took one, and I took the other. We play-watered the entire carpet: *Riega y riega y riega, vamos riega y riega y riega*, la tía sang. She laughed at me, because I was singing off beat. She roared with laughter, because I had lost the rhythm completely. I think I’d never seen her happy before.

And as if the years were passing us by from one night to the next, yesterday she arrived to her teenage years. At nighttime, she came to my room and asked me to borrow my red dress: The long one, the one with the white flowers on it, that one, the one we bought at Penney's. I told her I didn't know where it was. She was disappointed: And what am I going to wear to the dance? There's going to be a lot of good-looking guys, she said. It's strange to see her like that, one second a little girl, the next a teenager looking for cute guys at a dance.

I go over my notes from the last few days, and it seems to me that her mind gets stuck at a particular age and then she imagines everything out of that moment, making things up. But it's also possible that these are specific memories. I should know what's happening. So much time studying and still no idea how to deal with all this.

"One day, ask her how old she was when she lost her virginity," Norma asks me.

"Stop it."

I know my sister is only trying to make me laugh. Or make herself laugh, because it affects both of us to see Tía Mayela in this condition. I interrupt the silence and say to her:

"And what if I ask her if she had any lovers while she was raising us?"

Norma is surprised, almost as much as I am, at what the most boring person in the world just said.

"La tía didn't have any time for sex."

"¿Ves, Gris? Por eso te digo que you've got to fuck as much as you can, while you can."

I don't remember the last time my sister and I talked like that, one second serious and the next second joking. We got caught up on our work situations, on our experiences with la tía, and we told each other how we were feeling. Or rather, she told me what she was feeling, and I just explained a little more about my day-to-day.

“Sometimes she wakes up from a daydream, she comes out of some memory or whatever it is, and she catches herself dancing in front of a mirror or playing with two little dolls or with a ton of makeup slathered on her face, and she’s ashamed.”

“Oye, pero, are you sure she’s taking all her medications? Is she eating well? Are you sure Magda is taking good care of her? What does the doctor say?”

I try to calm my sister’s nerves. I explain that Magda is phenomenal and that la tía trusts her completely and has allowed herself to lean on her for everything. I don’t confess to my sister that I’m also allowing myself the luxury of leaning on her too, and that without her we’d be lost.

“Ay Gris, what if la tía had come to stay with me and I had no idea what to do. I don’t have your fortitude.”

Me? Fortitude? Alicia is the one with fortitude, the women in the dump have fortitude. La tía has a fortitude that I never inherited and that I’ll never be able to learn.

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Don't be silly, have another, it's on me. I know I told you I'd only get the first round but damn you're so sweet, I already feel like you're one of us. Don't worry about it, if you stick around, once you make a little money, you can pick up the tab one day. Javier, otro clamatito, and what are you gonna dr— ? Perfect, that's what I'm talking about. Javier, two clamatitos. Make em stronger, porfi.

How much do we make ... lemme see, daily, weekly, monthly, what do you mean? Mmm, it's tough to say, depends on the season, I guess. I don't know, in a bad week you pull in like two thousand. In a really good week even six thousand pesos, bueno, but I'm not including my percentage there and what we charge for room and board, hardly anything really, honestly, compared to what you pay for rent or utilities anywhere else. Besides, maybe it's wrong for me to say, but this is the best place to live, nobody messes with us here, nobody would ever come around here, yelling putas, maricones, cochinos de mierda like in other parts of the city. Nobody judges us here. Nobody criticizes us. Aquí nadie nos critica. Aquí nadie nos ... ay, chula, this sermon I'm giving sounds like a Juanga song, aquí nadie, aquí nadie, no no nooooo, porque somos dueñas y señoras. Sweetie, just play that Juanga song "Ya no me interesas" in the background all the time and you're set for life. My song would be called: we're bosses and we're ladies. Ay, chula, ya ... don't sing it anymore, I'm going to pee myself I'm laughing so hard, why? I don't know, I don't know, cause aquí naaaadie nos critica, aquí nadie nos juzga, aquí nadie noooooos ... ay, I'm peeing, I'm peeeeing. Javier, tell this girl to calm down already, I think three new wrinkles just cropped up on my face from laughing so damn hard.

Bueno, ya. Pull it together, girls.

What I was trying to explain was just how much work it took for us to get this kind of respect in the barrio. When I was just starting out, there was always some fool who'd key Linda's car or graffiti some nasty-ass words on the outside of the building. I mean, all family values and perfect Christians, but then the kind of language they used against us, oh my god. I don't get it. They go to Juanga's shows and clap clap for him, the biggest jota out of all the jotas and then they act like we disgust them. Bueno, I don't blame them. Juanga is the Patron Saint of our city, may god protect his soul. But we're the ones who brought prosperity to the barrio, not him. But they give him credit for getting that street paved, supposedly because his mom drove through here every day to go to work. But we've done everything else, we got together with the neighbors' union and we got them to install new streetlamps, for one. As you can proly tell, our barrio is like a town in and of itself, no, not even a town, it's like its own city, we should hold our own elections cause did you see the candidates this year? De Guatemala a Guatepeor, chula, things only get worse and worse.

Our neighborhood is far enough outside the city, far enough from the dump and the churches, the biggest sources of infection around here, haha. And take a good look at it, it's cause of us. Besides the streetlamps, we got a water truck to come through once a week last summer, we got trash cans installed on every corner, uy, we even got cable and internet in the barrio! And it's cause of us, our connections, our clients, our charm. Instead of calling it Barrio Azteca, they should call it Barrio de las Aztecas, doesn't it sound better? I've been telling Javier to go ahead and set up a club with that name. But el Javier just tunes me out, right Javier? As long as you don't tune out my clamatito order, we're good. Life is okay around here, chula. Things happen, just like things happen everywhere else, claro, a mugging now and then, or some random gunshots, but that happens when outside people show up, cause people from here, we take care of each other and we make sure we're living well, in harmony, with respect, te digo. You're gonna be happy in this neighborhood, happy like all

the other ladies here, all of us. Oye, but don't think we don't see how things are going to shit these days. Did you hear about that explosion downtown? A car bomb, in Juárez, who could imagine that? I mean, those things happen in Iraq, in Colombia, or I don't even know where, but definitely not in Juárez. Ciudad Juárez is number one, like our San Juanga says. But in this number one city some shit do go down, some ugly shit, all over the damn place. No, sweetie, if I only told you the stories about some of the girls we've rescued from other brothels where they end up cause some motherfucker told them some fake-ass story or sold them to the highest bidder. La Tijeras says their own families sell them and then those same assholes are the ones you see on TV crying about them being disappeared. I don't know how true that is, but sometimes your worst enemies are in your own damn family, you know? Who knows what story's behind these girls who wind up dead here in Juárez. I do what I can to help, and sometimes you can help just by listening, lending a hand. La Serena—who hardly ever says a word but when she does get going, she gets going—she says I'm looking for daughters in all the girls I rescue from the grip of some predator, the girls I contract with and the ones I decide should go work for el Javier instead of for me. Maybe she's right, I prolly did leave my maternity behind, but the instinct is still there, I've still got some maternal urge in me somewhere. Oh my god, all of a sudden we got so damn intense.

You're not gonna drink that last little bit? Ay niña, not finishing your food or your drink is a sin, you know? But laugh, laugh about it, I'm just joking, you don't really believe in sins, do you? Adventist, oh good lord. No pos it's a good thing you left your family behind, they say those motherfuckers don't even eat chicharrones. But listen, at this point, you should know all that is puro cuento, I mean, it should be a sin to believe in sins. Yeah, I've sinned. These wrinkles and these gray hairs—which you better tell me you can't see—are the direct result of my sins. I've sinned in thought, word, deed, in what I have done. But what I've failed to do? Look, I always thought it said ... oye, pero it doesn't

make sense, what does it mean “sin by what I’ve failed to do”? I say it’s better to sin by what you do, not what you fail to do, hahaha. My sins? You’re really curious, aren’t you? You want me to tell you every damn thing. I already realized you’re real easy to talk to. Fíjate, some of your clients will love that, there are some who just want to talk and talk and talk. Honestly, there are clients who come here just to be listened to, to have a little taste of the attention nobody in the world gives them. And your job is to listen to them, prick up your ear. Make em feel like you never heard a more interesting story, more moving, more more more, whatever it needs to be. I had a client once who just wanted to talk and talk about his mom, his grandmother, his life. He’d lost both of em, one by one, because la pinche vida is like that: the more it gives, the more it takes away. Rico was his name and he wasn’t rico but he could give himself the luxury of coming more than once a week. He’d come, ask for his little blow job—cause that was the only thing on the menu that he asked for, his chupadita. Then he’d start telling me about when he was little. About when he lived in Yécora and he’d spend all his time climbing trees or chasing squirrels, or about the time his dad died and his mom refused to bury him and she wanted to pray at his bedside day and night, about how after that his abuela took them to live with her in Juárez and how he didn’t even see his mom cause she worked in the maquila, ay chula, a real telenovela of his whole life, poor guy. I think that’s why I ended up feeling so much affection for Rico, cause I’d listen to him and I felt like he was pretty much telling my own story. Cause I also grew up without a father and pretty much without a mother, cause she was always working at the maquila, and cause I always felt like the odd one out too. God doesn’t want you to hide who you really are, and remember I just told you I don’t even believe in god. So el Rico kept hiding, but not just that, el Rico set up a whole undercover life: he had a girlfriend, they got married, he had kids, and you know he was fucking guys whenever he got a chance. Until one day he found his way to us and he became a regular.

My life. I swear, it was my life el Rico was telling me about, except I had to leave behind the fruit of my sins. I wouldn't allow myself to become a mother. Somewhere out there in the world is a little boy or a little girl who's prolly suffering as a consequence of my decision to get the fuck outta there. So okay, okay, if abandoning a pregnant woman is a sin too, mea culpa. Ay, I always say I don't wanna talk about all this and then I always end up blabbering forever about it. Huh? Ah, pos no, no, I hadn't seen it like that before, you're prolly right, that's prolly true, anything left unresolved in our past has a way of hanging on, like you say, sticking around in our present. No, you don't need to say sorry, I appreciate the empathy. La Tijeras always tells me someone should be paying me to talk instead of giving blow jobs.

Pues sí, you're right, talking's healthy, but I don't think it heals the wounds, much less gets rid of the guilt. Ay, just imagine if talking about your mistakes got rid of the pain in your guts, uf, this'd be a different world, cause of course I carry that guilt around with me, not a day goes by I don't ask myself what happened to her, my girlfriend from before, and what happened to our kid. What's become of their lives.

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People come here as individuals or as families and then claim whatever stretch of land they want. They start scavenging in the trash and piecing together a life. Because people come here to piece together a life. The mountains of trash provide everything you need. It's not as easy as it sounds. It's not like grabbing things off the mountains, and that's it. For certain things, you have to ask for permission, pay a fee. There are certain times you're not allowed to take things and places you're not allowed to take from. That's the best stuff: trash you have to run after, while a guard chases behind you shouting or flashing a pistol. It's the kind of trash that—if they manage to grab you—they kick you and kick you till you drop it.

I don't know how many years I've been here. I stopped counting a long time ago. The only thing I count are the shoes I find, sometimes a matching pair, sometimes just one with no match. Like these sneakers. You like them? One's pink and one's white, see? One's a little more worn than the other, but the two are the same, see. The same. Same brand and everything. That's some luck, huh? I still have a little hope I'll track down the other shoe for each pair, and then I'll have four good sneakers. They've got a hard sole, like the kind that doesn't break no matter how much you walk or go up and down the mountains of stuff, clothes, furniture, trash. The sole lasts.

No, I don't even know what size I wear, but I don't need you to bring me anything, I mean if you want to bring me something, go ahead, but it's whatever. I don't break either. I'm a hard sole too. Around here you're either a hard sole or you get fucked over real fast. That guy over there under the tarp, he got fucked over for real, for being a pendejo and a weakling, because he doesn't know how to take care of

himself. Because he doesn't show respect. He thought it was no big deal just to start scavenging in the mountain of trash without asking Don Chepe for permission.

Don Chepe decides who scavenges and who can't. You have to show respect to Don Chepe and pay him his fee. Don Chepe looks after you. The metal I sell means I can eat and they can too. Don Chepe is everybody's leader, he's the only one I talk with, I don't care about the other people and they don't care about me either. Don Chepe and me, we see eye to eye. One time, in private, he told me the old folks need us more than we need them. They don't do anything anymore. They just sit around smoking, guarding the places where the good trash is. Look at them, he said, over there reminiscing about the times when they didn't live here, when they worked over there, on the other side of the border, the times when they had a house and a life and stuff.

I don't think Don Chepe likes you all coming around here, no matter how many vaccines or bottles of Pedialyte or other stuff you bring. If anyone has stories about this place, it's Don Chepe. He's always been here. He doesn't know any other life or time. This is his everything. What he loves is talking about the times back in the day when people threw away better stuff. Better than this? I'd say and show him like a whole box of cans of pozole. Don Chepe says yeah cause at that time people didn't come here and throw away bodies or chunks of bodies, trash so dirty it makes you sick.

Yeah, for sure I've found chunks of bodies.

No, what for? Like the police are going to do anything. I learned that from Don Chepe too. Not the police or the government. I mean, come on, you aren't ever going to do anything for us either.

There are things I don't like about Don Chepe, it's true. I know he makes deals with the guards and the owners of companies that throw stuff away here even though they shouldn't. I know he gets into other stuff too. He says he doesn't want people to come and throw bodies away here or

pieces of bodies, but I know for sure he gets money for that sometimes. I don't get into that. I just focus on my own work and that's it. Anyway, I'm done talking about that now.

What else do I do for Don Chepe? I collect metals, and I coordinate the women who pick plastic. I take care of his stuff. For the metals, I have a detector. No, it isn't a machine or anything, it's just my eye and my gut. It's like I could see the metal shining from down below. There are days I find a ton of shit in a few minutes, and then there are days when I forage the whole day and nothing.

I don't have to do much anymore with the women, since they already organize themselves. Because plastic's a shitload of work. Really a shitload. I'm hoping one day we can have our own plastic shredder here, and we can just do it ourselves without the gringo middleman. We'd make so much money. But also, we'd need so much money to be able to buy a machine like that.

What I do, what I handle is metals, really. If I collect a lot one day, I don't have to work so hard the rest of the week. I take it slow. And I have time to read. The old books I have or the other ones I found around here. Working and reading. That's all I do. For a while, Don Chepe was on my case about how I should go back to school: You, little lady, are very smart for your age. I told him I was already too hairy to be in elementary school. All that hair gave him the idea of calling me Peluda sometimes. Peluda, come over here, Peluda, what you got? The dump is enough school for everybody around here, Peluda, but not you, you need to go to a real school, you're really smart, you're actually going to get out of here one day.

Sometimes I think he sees me as a daughter. Well, a daughter who has to work her ass off to win his affection.

If I'd stayed in school, I don't know, maybe I'd be in high school by now. Sometimes I'm walking around the neighborhoods selling stuff and I see middle school and high school girls walking with their backpacks and their uniforms

and their long socks pulled up to their knees and their giggles and their gossiping about boyfriends and their hair pulled back slick and their lipstick, and I want every last bit of it. I want to be one of those girls and have a backpack and a uniform and walk around giggling and giggling. But then, the desire passes. I forget about it.

I had a friend once. El René. He was older than me, but such a pendejo, like unbelievably stupid. He liked me. He told me we should leave together, look for somewhere else to live, a more dignified job, but I was all, I'm not leaving here, I'm from here, I'm staying here. This is my home. Who needs boyfriends? Who needs backpacks, long socks, uniforms, or homework when you can have a life for free?

When el René left, I did get sad. Honestly, I was already getting used to having him around. We'd scavenge together. The two of us, we'd watch the TV at the burrito stand outside there and laugh and laugh. We'd each buy a burrito. Split a Coke. Watch El Chavo. La Chilindrina is in love with El Chavo just like Doña Florinda with Profesor Jirafales, he'd say to me. What's your point? I'd ask him.

One time, I couldn't get out of bed. I was in pain. Like a pain in my belly I'd never felt before. I didn't even want to move. I wanted to stay right there forever. El René was outside yelling and yelling Alicia, Alicia. At first, I didn't answer, like to see if he'd go away. Then I shouted I wasn't going to do any trash picking that day. There I was, curled up in a ball. Then el René came barging in, yelling that a pickup truck with gringo plates had driven by, full of things to toss. Come on, let's go. He lifted up the blanket and stared between my legs. What's going on with you? And then I saw it too. The blood stain on my clothes, my mattress.

The smell of blood.

Damn, I can't stand the smell of blood. Everything else: old meat, rotten fruit, dirty water, none of it compares to the smell of blood.

El René covered me up again. He kept staring at me. It was like I could see a rat in his head running around in circles. Hold on a minute, he said and left. Later he came back with a lady, one I'd only seen in the dump a few times before. He let her in. She uncovered me, and he showed her the blood between my legs. She looked at me. Asked me, who did this to you? No one, I said. Is it the first time blood comes out like this from here? I told her I didn't know. Told her I hadn't done anything. Told her my belly started hurting the day before and that I just woke up like this.

Then she looked at el René and asked, Did you do this to her? And el René said, No, no way, I found her like this. Is Alicia going to die? I looked at her, and I asked her too. Am I going to die? She just looked at us and told us we were both idiots and that hopefully we'd never reproduce. She gave money to el René and sent him to the store to buy pads. Then she picked me up, undressed me, and bathed me with water from a bucket. When el René got back, she grabbed the package of pads in his hand and sent him back outside.

What's your name? I asked her, as she put the pad into an old pair of underwear she found in my dresser. They call me la Bonita, she told me. Honestly, she was pretty. With like a sad face, but still really pretty. She told me I wasn't a girl anymore. Said I was already a woman and that every month I'd feel bad like this and blood would come out from between my legs and so I always had to have a pack of these pads and wear them.

The blood this morning is the difference between what you were yesterday and what you're going to be from now on, she said. Look, Alicia, that's your name, right? You have to watch out for yourself and watch out for men especially, because they only want to get between your legs. I don't know why, but I told her a man had already gotten between my legs once before, but I hadn't bled as much. La Bonita's face completely changed. She turned ugly from crying so much. She had me tell her everything in detail, but I don't know why she wanted to hear it all if she just kept crying and crying.

La Bonita also asked me over and over again what the deal was with el René. I told her the same thing I'm telling you, ma'am. Only little girls want boyfriends. Stupid-ass girls. And I'm no little girl and no stupid ass.

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One of the last times with my parents was at a restaurant. I don't know what I ordered, but I know I finished it all. Norma, on the other hand, was really picky about her food, and she started to say: I don't like it, I'm full, I don't want any more. She said it so many times that mamá got tired of it, smacked the table hard, and forced her to finish it all.

Today Alicia allowed me to pay for her lunch. The idea came up because I'd never tried *tortas de colita de pavo*: If you pay for em, I'll take you to get the best turkey tails around, she told me. When she saw I wasn't quite convinced, she added: And I'll answer whatever questions you have.

It's incredible all the things that pass through her brain. Maybe it's that she's younger and she has all the references closer at hand. As we were walking, she told me about all the dogs she's had, their names, habits, even some anecdotes about them. I thought about all the dogs that Norma and I never had. Then she told me about some of the characters who lived in the trash dump. Characters, that's the word she used. Everything was recorded.

When we got to the spot, she ordered two *tortas* and two Cokes, we sat down at a table, and I began with my questions, which she answered one by one between bites. She ate quickly, taking disorderly bites out of random sides of the bread.

My interviews with Alicia have led me to think about my parents, especially my mother. When we were little, we'd ask la tía about her. We asked her to tell us about their childhood.

“Which of us looks more like mamá?”

“Did she get into trouble?”

“And you, tía? Did you get into trouble like mamá?”

“How did she meet papá?”

Little by little, we discovered that our mother and la tía were very close, always together wherever they went. Always taking care of each other. Sharing dresses, shoes, and even their homework with each other.

“You didn’t like the torta?”

“I did, it’s just I’m not that hungry.”

Alicia grabbed my plate. She looked me in the eyes, but she wasn’t asking for permission from me, she was telling me she was going to eat it. Adelante, I told her.

“Do you have kids, doctora?”

On my way back to El Paso, Norma calls me and tells me a whole long list of things, but the only thing I can make out is that la tía got out of the house. She found her almost immediately but. I tell her we’re about to cross the bridge, that I have to hang up, that the border agent is walking up, that I can’t be on the phone.

“We have to take her to a nursing home, Gris.”

Norma has been saying that from the start. I didn’t think we had any reason to rush, we just needed to make sure she wasn’t alone. Now I’m not sure; even with Magda, the strain is getting more intense. There are days that are decent, but then there are others when it’s hard to negotiate with her, with la tía, I mean. Her moods throw me off, and Magda is the one who pulls me back together. When Tía Mayela has an episode, her personality shifts radically, one second she’s laughing, the next she’s mad or crying. Whenever she has moments of greater lucidity, she seems miserable, depressed, and I get worried.

“We always liked the same things, Griselda and me,” she blurts out, like she’s picking up a conversation she’d have with us when my sister and I were kids. Sometimes I don’t know if la tía sees me as an adult or a little girl, but I know she sees me, her eyes in mine, like she’s recognizing someone.

When we were little, la tía always took us to eat breakfast at that old diner on Montana. It's incredible it's even still there. My sister and I could never finish all the food. If there was enough food left over, la tía would ask for a to-go box. But if there was only a little bit left on our plates, la tía would grab the saltshaker and cover them with salt: So no one else can eat what we already paid for, she'd say. I'm sure more than once Norma left food on her plate just to see la tía pour salt all over it. I don't know why it seemed so funny to us. This morning, though, I didn't find it funny when la tía shook salt all over the remaining bits of hotcake that Magda had prepared for her. But I kept my mouth shut.

“Are you going to finish your food?”

I said yes, stood up to get some coffee, and when I got back, la tía stretched her arm out over my plate and started to sprinkle salt all over my food.

“Carajo, tía, cut that out.”

To get the saltshaker away from her, I smacked her on the hand. I don't know where the decision to do that came from. La tía looked at me with fear in her eyes, like she didn't understand. Then, Magda, with infinite care, took the salt and pepper off the table. She took her by the hand and led her to the sink to wash her hands.

“Do you want to watch TV for a while, Mayela?”

My face was flushed, I'm guessing from anger. Or maybe shame? We have to get her into a nursing home, I thought. I stood up from the table, threw out my breakfast, and stood there in front of the trash for an eternity.

“It's normal to lose patience and.”

Magda stood in front of me, lifted up my chin, looked at me, picked up a napkin and cleaned off my face. I had tears on my face, and I hadn't even noticed. She put her hand on my shoulder and, without thinking, I leaned right into her. She embraced me without hesitation, like she'd thought of it before too. My face between her shoulder and her neck. Magda

smelled clean, like vanilla, like peace. Her arms around my back, mine around her waist. My lips on her lips.

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Water, gas, and electric are included with your rent. This is the key to the building, and this other one is to your room. A ver, open it up to see if it works cause I just got the copy done this morning. Okay, there's a trick to opening it, look. Around here, damn near everything's got a trick to it, or lotsa tricks! The kitchen and the living room are common areas. I try to keep the basics in the refri, you know, eggs, ham, milk, fruit, veggies. There's rice, cereal, soups, coffee, and sugar in the pantry. The only thing I don't buy for us is meat and chicken, each girl handles those herself. Every week, we take turns buying for everybody. Like the chicken for tomorrow is courtesy of la Rusa. She's more serious than la Serena, I swear she hardly every laughs at anything, but she's trustworthy and caring, the best of the best. Don't tell her, but she's my fave, I feel like when she came here, she was an ugly duckling and now just look at her: a real swan. Or as she'd say: the swan princess.

Here's the first-aid kit, there's always sal de uvas, Pepto, Merthiolate, Band-Aids, alcohol, and aspirin, lotsa aspirin, cause in this house it's okay to run out of something, but never the aspirin. The idea of having a first-aid kit is a new one, for sure. The doctors from the mobile clinic suggested we get one after they started coming a few months back. Ya sabes, a charity project for hypocritical gringos. Ay, I'm such an ungrateful bitch, I mean, that's how I managed to find that doctora for myself, I'm so sophisticated, haha. I really miss her, thank god for her, cause not only did she switch up my hormones but also she took good care of me, chula, she always followed up personally. She wasn't one of those self-absorbed types, no no no, she took her time with all her patients, she asked how you were doing and paid attention to you. La doctora would laugh at all my bullshit, she tracked how I was doing mentally, physically, emotionally. I called her Doctora

Rainbow Brite, do you remember those toys? Ay no, of course, they're not from your time. Her name was Gris Méndez, everybody called her Doctora Méndez but I started calling her by her first name, Doctora Gris, I told her one day, you're so sweet and so pretty, you're so fabulous, Gris doesn't do you justice, you're not gray at all, I said, so Doctora Rainbow Brite it is. I hope she comes back some time, ojalá. She's so kind, it's like you trust her right off the bat, I felt like I'd known her my whole life. Chingado, I really do miss her. I liked her so much. Those fools from the gringo mobile clinic got what they were looking for and then they split. I heard they set up by the dump now like trash pickers, haha. No, no, of course they're not actually picking through the trash themselves, I bet they're studying people there like guinea pigs, researching them to prove what all of us know: this city is going to fuckin hell. Cause I'm saying, even though we're okay here in this neighborhood, the city is going to fuckin hell, and fast. All you gotta do is walk the streets and you'll see a ton of crosses everywhere or posters with faces of the girls who disappeared. Just go downtown and look at the buildings, pockmarks from bullets on the walls, cracked windows or full-on covered with bars, or empty on the inside. Or the people, have you seen how people walk, eyes peeled, grabbing on to their bags like their lives depended on it? Terrified, people are terrified.

One last drink?

Oye, what did you say your name was? Ah yeah, that's right. It's pretty, really pretty, but ... can I be honest with you? It's not gonna work around here, it's like too long. Gimme a few days and I'll think of another one, I hand out nicknames for everybody. Like a baptism. More than your pimp momma, I'm actually your fairy godmother. Javieeer, another round, plis.

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Smokes take away the bad taste in your mouth, put you in a good mood, relax you, I don't know. They taste so good. Starting to smoke was the best thing that happened to me when I moved here. I mean I know they mess up your lungs, but damn they're so delicious, especially when the weather's really hot or cold.

My house? Oh, we can go if you want, but I don't know what for, I don't even have anything. Well, I do have two fridges. Honestly. Two. Someone is always getting worked up about the conditions here at the dump, and then you see people coming out all the time. Case in point, people from the political parties come when they're campaigning and they need votes. They hand out clothes, mattresses, slippers. One time they brought a bunch of those furry slippers, and summer was already on its way, so like useless. Happens all the time, they bring stuff we can't even use. That's how they ended up bringing us fridges. We didn't even have electricity then. Yeah, fridges, like the little ones, I mean what were we going to do with them? They were such idiots. La Bonita, la Chela, and I laughed and laughed at them. Yeah, Chela's like, if you just say hello to her, she'll tell you the whole story of her day. Come on, doc, she's the one you're always avoiding like the plague. Thing is, Gustavito, the one with the curly hair, said: amá, amá, we should turn it into a safe. We just laughed even harder. But la Bonita said, Pos I don't see why we need a safe, but we could make them into closets, I mean they're ours anyway. So for a long time, I'd store my clothes or my cans in those fridges. Now one is hooked up and the other, since it never really worked, it's still my storage unit.

Yeah, I brought la Chela and her kids here to work, but at first I didn't really get along with her. La Bonita's the one who helped me get along better with everyone. La Bonita's super

outgoing, she knows everyone around here and in other neighborhoods: el Azteca, el Pirul, she even knows people in la Industrial. Thing is she's a puta. No, that's not an insult. That's her job.

Before, the only person I talked to was Don Chepe, and nobody else. I didn't get along with anybody except my dogs. But when I met la Bonita, all that changed, cause la Bonita's super friendly, la Bonita would talk to anybody, even a damn rock. Well, everybody but Don Chepe. She won't talk to him. Not to mention, she doesn't like it when I talk to him. I tell her it's a work relationship, but she says you have to watch out with a boss like Don Chepe. She doesn't see things like I do.

Case in point, the only reason we have electricity now is because Don Chepe organized everybody. He told us if we all chipped in a little of what we earned every week selling at flea markets or from money we had tucked away, we could buy the posts and the wires, and then have electricity. And that's what we did. Then a congressman, who somehow found out we were pulling together money for electricity, he gave us the portion of the money we still needed, obviously because he wanted attention. Came to take a picture and the whole nine yards. That was my first time in the newspaper. Me standing next to the congressman holding on to my shoulder. La Bonita kept the clipping somewhere. For the memories, Aliiii, she said to me, look at you, you're the big union boss in the dump. Nobody but la Bonita calls me Aliiii. Yeah, like that, with a long eeeee sound at the end, it's like she's singing it. Don Chepe calls me Peluda. La Chela and her kids call me Alicia, Alicita or Licha. I like it when la Bonita calls me Aliiii.

In the picture, I'm standing between Don Chepe and the congressman. Behind us are other people who live here and some random guys who follow Don Chepe around everywhere these days. He jokes and says the guys are a gift from the congressman. But I don't actually believe he's joking, because that congressman and all the politicians always give really strange gifts. La Bonita says she knows the congressman: From my other glamorous life, Aliiii. He can't be trusted, that

guy can't be trusted, she says. For real, Aliiii, I know what I'm talking about. Don Chepe rubs me the wrong way, but I'm not afraid of him. That congressman, though, we all need to be afraid of him, very afraid. If only I told you what I saw. Go on, tell me, I'd say to her, but la Bonita, no, not a word.

La Bonita always comes and says, swear to me, if one day the two of em pull you into their shit and the shit turns rotten, you leave. I tell la Bonita that nothing bad will happen. Thing is you don't know, she says. Besides, where would I go. This is home. Home is wherever you go, you are your home. Her favorite phrase.

Look, Aliiii, she says, if you ever get caught up in some shit, you march yourself straight over to that lonchería, the one right there at the entrance to el Azteca, it's called Trópico de Cáncer, the one with the jukebox in front. You march yourself over there and ask for Reyna or Javier and tell them I sent you. I've never gone there before and I hope I don't have to, because the actual truth is if they take me out of this dump, I won't know who I am. La Bonita worries too damn much. I ask her, what could happen to me? But la Bonita insists: Seriously, it's better for you not to work with Don Chepe. But I don't listen.

Maybe la Bonita's right. Because a few days after that photo I told you about, one of those vatos sidled up to me. Yeah, one of the like bodyguards the congressman sent to take care of Don Chepe. The dude started trying to talk to me, like, What's your name, like, Oh you're so cute, like, Oh you're so güerita. I didn't pay any attention. I focused on my work. But why're you ignoring me, güerita, why you gotta be like that, nobody taught you any manners? I stayed focused on my work. You think you're god's fuckin gift, don't you? Pinche escuincla, he said and then he left.

That same night, he came back, drunk, high, or just stupider than in the morning, and he broke in here. He was lucky I was fast asleep and I didn't hear him come in, because I only managed to scrape him with my knife, but if my head was on straight, I'd cut that bastard wide open, cut his stomach

open, and cut his dick off, because no one fuckin touches me, nobody lays a damn hand on me. Just a little kiss, he said as he licked his wounds, fuckin jerk. I didn't even tell la Bonita about that, I mean what for? She'd just worry more. If that bastard tries to mess with me again, he'll get it a lot worse.

No, afraid of what? I never avoid a fight, because if you do, then nobody'll look at you the same way. They lose respect for you immediately. You have to beat the shit out of any motherfucker who gets in your face. I pick fights here and there just to make sure people stay scared.

What am I afraid of? Nothing. I'm not afraid of a damn thing.

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The interviews with Alicia constantly stray off topic. Henry's worried: This is not journalism, he says, ask what needs to be asked. He doesn't understand that it's about building trust, it's about accepting that sometimes what's needed is more of an organic process for information to come to light. If I have to talk with her about books, songs, or dogs, I do it. Those are her interests and, in many ways, they have shaped her. If I interrupt her or force her to follow a structure, she loses interest and leaves:

“Qué hueva me das, doctora. This is so boring. Later.”

That's how it is with Alicia, one day we've got her attention and the next day we bore her. I bore her. I'd like to have all the time in the world to reread my notes and listen to all the interviews with her. But things with la tía are going from bad to worse. When she found out she couldn't open the doors with the new locks, she got mad at us: And how am I going to go to work? Magda suggested she work from home, so she turned the dining room into her office. This flashback is more familiar to me; when we were little, we'd often see her sitting there, working hour after hour.

During these more recent episodes, the mood swings have decreased in intensity. Tía Mayela is so focused on her work that her emotions are more stable. It's like she's in a permanent state of stress because of all the work she needs to get done. Sometimes she turns Magda and me into her secretaries, and there's nothing else to do but obey.

Magda is more efficient than I am, my aunt has promised her a raise and she asks her all the time if she isn't interested in being her paralegal: Though to do that job, you have to work really hard, niña. She tells me that I don't even know how to make copies, and she talks bad about me with Magda and

Norma. La tía is right, I'm a little useless, truth be told. I find it confusing when she asks me for bank statements or when I take dictation for her. Magda is good at locating clients by phone, serving her coffee, and reminding her of her schedule for the following day. Whenever possible, I act like I'm working on whatever she's requesting and I work on my own things, but it's difficult to concentrate. There's always some emergency in this office. When my phone rings, she gets mad.

"This isn't the place for personal calls."

"Licenciada, it's a call from the accountant. I asked him to call."

I don't know how Magda does it. She always manages to keep Tía Mayela more calm. Three jobs, now I have three jobs. The project, la tía, and this office.

When my sister comes home, she doesn't have to play a part in our little theater company. Norma is Norma: her right hand in the office. She sits with her to go over paperwork with the same exactitude as before. Sometimes she looks perplexed, and I wonder if it's because she doesn't recognize anything she's seeing. The letters are transformed into something else entirely; tiny insects wander across the paper, and she's incapable of extracting any meaning.

"Have you ever had a more demanding patient than my tía?" Norma asks Magda.

"All patients are demanding in their own way. It's an issue of understanding the rules of their particular game before sitting down to play with them."

"Well, I still think it's time to take her to a nursing home. You should help me convince Gris."

Magda looks at me. She's already told me that she prefers not to have any opinion on this topic. That the decision is ours, as her nieces.

"She's not ready, Norma."

"Maybe actually you're the one who isn't ready?"

I ignore my sister's question. I tell her next week I'll be on vacation, and I'll be here twenty-four seven with la tía.

"Magda, since I'll be here, you should take some time off. We'll still pay you, of course."

La tía interrupts us. She demands a list of invitees for the Christmas party from Magda, who responds:

"I can't take a vacation. I have to organize the Christmas party."

"And the New Year's one," I say.

My sister, more than a little exasperated, chastises us for our little theater production one more time. I tell her that it's not about understanding it, but my sister doesn't pay me any mind. She sits down with la tía again to review cases.

Magda serves la tía's lunch at one o'clock on the dot; one minute later and she'd definitely be fired. The menu is the same every day: a sandwich with queso fresco and a few slices of avocado. She's always delighted to eat it, as if it were the first time she'd tasted something like that.

"This cheese was always your mother's favorite."

It takes me a minute to understand what's happening. La tía has gone back to being la tía.

"I know we never talk a lot about her or about me. You should record me while I tell you the things I remember, like you do with the people at the trash dump. Time is running out."

I don't know if she's serious or if she's joking. I don't know if I should go and get my recorder. I look at Magda, who is just as disconcerted as I am. Disconcerted. Ever since all of this with la tía, I've started to experience emotions that I don't think I'd ever felt before: fear, uncertainty. Happiness. But it's a strange happiness. More like anxiety.

"The fax has been sent already? It needs to be at the court by now."

It takes me a few minutes to realize what's happening. She demands the fax again, and I tell her yes, that it was already sent. She asks me to show it to her: The fax, I want to see the fax, she demands. Magda walks up behind me with a paper.

“Yes, Licenciada, it was sent. Here's the confirmation.”

“Wow, you really are efficient.”

“Do you need anything else?”

“Yes, Raymundo still hasn't checked in?”

It's not the first time she's asked about him, but for me the name doesn't ring a bell. I should make a list of the names she mentions when she's in one of her episodes. Make a whole timeline of situations and events. Put together a meticulous record.

“Okay, if he calls or comes back, we need to tell him that we don't want him here anymore.”

Magda says that this Raymundo was definitely some kind of boyfriend. I tell her that he was more likely an employee who catastrophically screwed up.

“Like you, on a daily basis.”

Magda laughs. I give her a kiss without la tía noticing. That, in and of itself, provides a certain thrill. The timidity of the beginning phase has evaporated, and the level of desire is ramping up.

That evening, I tell Magda that when la tía and my mother were younger, they'd sworn they would study together here in El Paso. Then buy a house, travel a lot, make their money in dollars.

“My mother got married, dropped out of school, and had Norma and me. La tía, on the other hand, focused on her studies and working.

“And when she adopted you two?”

“Work, work, work, a tiny little break, and then back to work, work, work.”

“Just like you.”

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You should already know that in this business—client or no client—you've gotta stay alert at all times. You never know when some jealous wife might leap out or police show up to fuck with you. There's always someone tryin to get revenge on some client for some old vendetta. I'll never get tired of saying it: We do okay in this neighborhood, but we're living in dangerous times. Don't get it mixed up, sometimes I get this wild desire to just leave it all behind and move to Ecatepec with my little nest egg and, I don't know, feel out the place and set up a little business, cause obviously it's not like I retire from my position on the corner and this damn country is gonna start sending me any pension. A woman has to think of her future, and me, I think about mine all the time. But this is god's truth, chula, in order to even have a future, you better be 100 percent on your toes, so yeah keep your eyes open. Learn to defend yourself, hide when need be, take care of yourself when the time comes and you're alone. Me, of course I'll watch out for you, and so will Javier and all the girls: la Rusa, la Serena, la Tijeras, I mean even la Modosita, she doesn't work on the corner, but she's family. But still, there's gonna be real emergencies, when the only person you've got is you, even though I'm always looking out for everybody and making sure to monitor who picks up my girls, cause you never know. The guys seem like they took a bath, combed their hair, put on cologne, like the face says I wouldn't hurt a fly and, despite all that, it ends up they're hijos de su putísima madre y de su putísimo padre. Look, me, what I do is I put my hand like this and then with the hard part—here between my wrist and my palm—I slam it right on their nose. Like that, with every ounce of strength you've got, you won't kill em, but you'll leave em dazed and bloody. Men can't see blood without getting all dramatic, you know? They freak out and

get even madder, but by then make sure your feet have already hit the pavement.

Ahora, and forgive me for saying it so bluntly, but it's time to get rid of that innocent, sweet vibe, cause people are gonna think you're some kind of pendeja. Yeah, you're too sweet, I realized it when we got to el Javier's, when you ordered the same thing I did, when you didn't interrupt me even when I asked you something and I didn't even let you answer. I realized it from the advice you gave me, from the things you said to me, which obviously I really appreciate, chula, from the bottom of my heart, but you need to take care of yourself. This shit is like sweetness bordering on pendejada, pues. But don't worry, that pendeja side of you, you either ditch it or the world'll get rid of it for you. But it's better if you ditch it yourself. What do you mean what happens if you don't ditch it? Uy chula, didn't you say you already had experience in this business? Okay, sweetie, I see, you weren't in it very long. So, like I said, you need to ditch this pendeja bullshit or someone's gonna fuck you over and you can forget about your corner and, like I already told you, your corner's the most important thing, what do you mean I hadn't told you that? Oh, I didn't? Well I'll say it now: Your corner's the most important thing. Nobody else has a right to it, and there's always and I mean fuckin aaaalways some pendeja who acts like she don't know or she knows you don't know. Ponte fuckin trucha. You have to mark your territory, your corner's your damn territory and if you don't defend it, you won't make it in this business, chingada madre.

Ay, now you got me in a bad mood, and we were talking so nice all afternoon. Answer me this, and look me in the eyes: Are you sure you wanna work in this business?

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I have this strange habit of talking to myself out loud. After you've spent a certain amount of time here, I think this is just what happens. Sometimes it's easier to talk to yourself than to talk to someone else. I only talk with the doctor lady because she started to give me smokes again, but the truth is she gets on my nerves. I'm always talking to myself, unless la Bonita's around, and then I don't say a word because what la Bonita likes is to be listened to and that's fine, I like listening to her. She makes me laugh. But lately la Bonita disappears for days at a time. She comes and goes. And when she comes around, she's so hungover she sleeps for days. The only thing I do is talk to myself.

I talk to myself or I talk with the dogs. Two of them walk ahead of me and the other two behind. I say to one: Look, dog, don't lag too far behind. Or, Hey, dog, you stepped in your own shit. And the dog just looks up at me like, Who, me? I didn't step in nothing. I laugh at all the stupid shit the dogs do, almost as much as at the stupid shit Bonita tells me.

Today, as I walked with the dogs, I found a chain, with no lock. Wasn't even long enough to attach something, just a few links, but the chain was bent—used and abused—but wielded properly it could still be the difference between safety and danger. I'm going to keep it under my pillow or in my fanny pack. I'll carry it with me every day wherever I go, because like la Bonita warned: ever since the congressman made deals with Don Chepe, things here have gotten ugly.

Before, you heard a car go by at night like three or four times a year, at the most. Now you hear a car every other night, sometimes even two a night. I hear their trunks opening, then spitting, kicking, swearing, and they're gone. A heap of something left behind whining softly, quietly, until finally:

silence. Or you hear them moving in slow motion, dragging themselves away, disappearing.

Sometimes there's no kicking or swearing. A pistol whip or two and then the tires squeal. Sometimes I ask myself if what I see and hear is actually happening or if it's just my imagination, because by the next day everyone is just doing their own thing like nothing, like nothing happened.

One time, right at the beginning, I asked Don Chepe, Did you hear the shooting last night? And Don Chepe told me, Alicita, you better mind your own business. No need to keep an ear out. And no need—Don Chepe told me with his index finger practically touching my nose—no need to gossip. What happens in the dump stays in the dump.

So yeah, it's better to keep the chain with me. It's better to go out with the four dogs and to stay careful, because every day here's a new surprise. You never know if you'll find some treasure or fall in some shit. Because people throw away things here that nobody wants.

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A couple of my colleagues warned me about cognitive decline. The patient's motor function begins to decline, their vocabulary is reduced to just a few words, and there is a progressive loss of their capacity to comprehend, to take care of personal hygiene, and even to smile. I was aware that those symptoms would determine the period of time she'd spend at home, and today I realized that la tía—though she does need help for many things—is not there yet. She has language. Her memories—the ones that Norma and I can recognize—are disappearing little by little. As they have vanished, they've given way to memories that are foreign to us or which we can't process. Comparisons aren't fair, I know, but I can't help but think about how Alicia's memory functions: her memories are immediate, detailed, there's even a structure and a particular tone to narrate things that belong to her or to someone else.

The first clue something was happening was when she didn't recognize Norma and when I became her sister again. She spent a few days like that, but we didn't really pay it any mind. We thought la tía had jumped into another period of her life and that was that. Days later, she complained about pain in her abdomen; I checked her out and didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. Maybe the time is coming? she asked me, and since time is one of her recurring topics, I didn't pay it any mind. But this morning, as she was eating her oatmeal and we were discussing my sister's baby shower, suddenly, she started to complain.

“It hurts,” she said, “me duele mucho.”

I asked her if it was her stomach again. La tía grabbed my hand and put in on her abdomen.

“Do you feel it? It's time, Griselda, es hora.”

She's confusing me with my mother, I thought, I'm my mother again.

"Call la Chata right now."

La tía fell to the floor, like the pain had her doubled over. Both Magda and I looked at each other with confusion. We didn't know who she was talking about or what was going through her mind. Time for what?

La tía begged us to call la Chata. It didn't matter how many times Magda told her she wasn't around, she insisted over and over again. Her hands tight across her belly: call la Chata, call la Chata. We took her into the living room. We practically forced her to lie down on the sofa. I got down on my knees to be able to check her out carefully and with no hurry. I lifted up her blouse and assessed her stomach area.

"I need you to breathe."

"I'm telling you to call la Chata."

"Stay calm. If you don't, we won't be able to help you."

"Help me what? Give birth? You're going to help me give birth? No. La Chata, she already knows what to do."

La tía pushed me, and I fell on the floor. She stood up from the couch. She started to pace in circles around the living room. The distance between us was enormous. I couldn't understand her words.

"Don't look at me like that, Griselda. You know I can't keep this baby."

"Baby?"

"A contraction, a contraction is coming, don't just stand there Griselda, dame la mano."

"Siéntate aquí, Mayela, I'll give you my hand," Magda told her.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not going to give this baby to you, no matter how much you insist. We have to get rid of it."

La tía started to complain again. I didn't know if the pain was real or if it was also part of the memory. I checked her abdomen one more time, and I found the source of the pain.

“It's your appendix, it's inflamed.”

The next steps happened incredibly fast: phone, ambulance, hospital, operating room. They removed la tía's appendix from her body and a baby from her mind.

Magda and I go over all the information together. I tell her other details from la tía's austere life, and it was like listener and speaker were trying to process the information at the same time.

“Whose baby was it?”

“The right question to ask is who even was that baby.”

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This is your corner. Nobody's got a right to it but you. Be on the lookout, keep your eyes fuckin peeled cause there's always some abusive bitch tryin to steal corners from the new girls. There's not a lot of em, don't worry. The profession's been suffering over the last year, disappearing along with the women. Here one day, gone the next. One day you see em, hang out with em, you're buying em drinks, and then a day goes by, another passes and then another and you don't see em again. But despite that, there's always gonna be some fool who tries to take over your corner, some girl who rejected the idea that poverty is somehow dignified and comes here to work and make some cash to buy food. And get this through your head: a hungry woman's a tough nut to crack, so you be on the ready. Look at it like this: if you don't defend it, nobody else is gonna do it for you, Chiquitita. That what I'ma call you, Chiquitita. Like that ABBA song, remember? Ay, how could you remember it, you were prolly born like ten minutes ago, right? You look so teeny-tiny. Chiquitita, tell me the truth! That's how the song goes, you prolly heard it on the radio sometime. It's a pretty song, I hear it and it makes me wanna cry cause it reminds me of ... Hey, please tell me you've got some paperwork to prove you're not a minor. Cause if you don't, that's gon fuck shit up for all of us. Lately, the cops have been more aggressive, and it's best not to give em any excuse to fuck with you. I really don't get it, there's so many other things that need attention and stat, but instead of handling that shit, what do these sons a bitches go and do? Come around here fuckin up *our* lives? Just in case, always keep your ID on you so ... You don't have one? Well, something, whatever to show you're legally an adult cause you look so young that for sure ... lemme see that, no pues, I'll have to take you later to get your ID cause that little paper is falling apart.

Now that I got a good look at you, you look tiny and big at the same time. You have a mean stare, like intense. The eyes of an old bitch. Your skin's worn down, I mean, you don't have wrinkles, but it's like you do. That's not a bad thing, it'll definitely attract a certain clientele. Just look at those knuckles, did you get in a fight or what? Shh, shh, shh. No, no, don't even try to explain. At least I know you know how to defend yourself and if you know how to defend yourself, you know how to work, cause anybody who doesn't work around here, don't eat. Lord, but look how messed up they are, I'm gonna get some aloe for that. Aloe works magic, it's so healing, it helps it scar over and makes it shiny too. My nana would use it all the time. But first we're gonna clean you with —ay chamaca, don't get all worked up, it's just gonna help heal your wounds, so they don't get infected. Look at you, it's like you're gonna bite me! Damn, you really are a self-reliant old bitch. You take care of your own damn self. I think out of all the new girls to pass through here, you're the only one who's gonna know right off how to hold down your corner. Come here, sit down. Sit down, I said. Damn, you're cagey. You're not about to let yourself get played, that's obvious, but you better let the clients play at their own speed. Oye, I'm not gonna hit you, I just wanna see you close up. Calm down, niña, calm down. Let's see, come here. Damn, your skin is really fucked up, but you've got a face on you, it's like, I don't know, really intriguing, like a mix of a kid and a grown woman who's seen it all. And you're cute, y'know? Really cute, those big round eyes are super seductive, we just have to do something about your look. Pues, that mess of hair on your head, your skin, your look, chiquita. Forgive me for saying it, but you're gonna need another bath, yeah, I know you already took one. When I opened the door and caught sight of you, I thought you were gonna ask me for spare change, haha. It's a joke, kid, just a joke. I know I didn't let you get a word in edgewise, but, damn it, with that stench, Chiquitita, it was impossible.

That you what? No, hold on, I'm talking.

Let's see, show me that paper again, how old you say you were? Cause you look like a baby. Oh, pues sí, you're definitely legal, but damn your years don't show on you one bit, you look thirteen. Girls like you have come here before, like small, but not age-wise, more like size. Skinny girls like you. Chiquititas who come to make some cash before crossing over to the other side. Girls with dreams in their eyes, as if crossing that damn river was a piece of fuckin tres leches. Oye, I'm not as annoying as you must think I am, but honestly you have the look of someone who's lived a lot and seen it all. You must be the reincarnation of somebody, or something. Do you believe in reincarnation? I do. Don't even try to sell me that lie that we just die and that's that. No, no, no. There's a lot we gotta get done in this world, for sure people die and then come right back to keep on keepin on, just in a new form. Lately, I've been thinking about what I was before and what I'm gonna be later. I don't know why, but like the more the years go by, the more an existentialist I become. Prolly also it's cause in the last few years I've like opened myself up to all the potential in the world. Like the way we all might be reincarnated. Damn, don't look at me like that, you're gonna be my age one day and then you'll see it the same. Watch my words, Chiquitita, no way this is your first time on earth. Your eyes give you away, your eyes tell a million stories, your eyes are proof you've lived other lives, I swear. Es más, your eyes make me see myself in my other lives, oye, you don't think you're a bruja, do you? A witch? An oracle? I look at you and it's like I can see another time in my life, I look at you and I see ... Ay, don't pay attention to me, I'm obsessed with this stuff, maybe cause I got a tarot reading a while back and everything got flipped upside down. Damn, I've changed so much, used to be I thought tarot cards were total bullshit: talking about there's money on the way, about you gotta sell your car cause there's a curse on it, about you had the love of your life and you let him leave ... but this time the cards made me question e-ver-y-thing. Want me to tell you what they told me? They told me my family's closer than they've ever been before, and at first I thought they were talking about this

family, the one I've built brick by brick with these girls, cause we're all family, right? But then I thought for sure the cards weren't talking about this family, they were talking about my blood relatives. I asked myself, And what if my sisters are thinking about moving back to Juárez? Nooombre, with how things are here right now and them being women, that's just too dangerous. My sisters are the only ones I've got now that my nana and amá passed. One lives in El Paso and another one is in Ecatepec. But I asked them and neither one has plans to come back. I was thinking and thinking about it, for a minute I thought maybe I was the only one who needed to be closer to my family, maybe that's what the cards were trying to tell me. Maybe it's time for me to move on. Mira, I'll be honest with you, I love every single one of the girls here, but blood is blood, y'know? And the thought of having my sisters close by, pues, it would really change things for me. And thing is, in the end, when I exit this profession, when I retire pues, I wanna be part of a family, being alone can be a real bitch. And so, that's when the lightbulb went off, that the family that's getting closer to me is my other family, the one I decided not to have. Ay mija, it scared me shitless just thinking about it, I'm stuck on this, I think about it all the time, I swear ... And do you have family? Oh damn, of course not, if you had family, I mean there's no way you'd be here. Don Chepe? I don't know what you're talking about. Oye, and have you had your tarot cards read before? Ay, what a question, if you're Bonita's friend, for sure she dragged you to that doñita who she's always going to see, the one who stinks even more than you. What do you mean no? Ay, I can't believe that shit, la Bonita, oye and is she still turnin tricks? Where'd you meet her? Oye, but now that I think of it, you haven't told me a thing, not even a name, I'm just here blah blah blah and you ... are you always this quiet? Quiet girls don't do so good here, y'know? You gotta use your words if you wanna seduce these clients. Well, words and body. Stand up and let me see what you're workin with.

Girl, I said stand up. If you don't know how to follow orders, this shit ain't gon work for you, Chiquitita. You don't

have this job in the bag yet, just cause la Bonita recommended you and cause I got you a bath and clothes and you're all pretty, hell no. Nothing's guaranteed here even if you come recommended. Think of this as a job interview and you have to convince me to give you a position here as one of our putas.

What do you mean no? I don't understand, then why'd you come? A ver, a ver, slow down, I'm not following. First you don't say a goddamn word and now you're a mile a minute.

Okay, calm down, start from the beginning. What do you mean you come from the trash?

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My name is Alicia, and I didn't come here to be a puta.

I don't want to be a puta.

I came because la Bonita told me you could help me.

I come from the trash.

Yeah, that's why I stank.

Yeah, that's why I looked like that.

Yeah, in the *trash* trash.

The city trash dump, right.

No, what do you mean pobrecita? My life was really good over there.

I had my house.

I had my job.

I had my dogs.

I had my life well organized.

On top of that, I even organized other people's lives for them. Or actually, just for the women. I got a group of women together and I convinced them to collect PETs exclusively.

You know what PETs are?

Whatever the women collected, I'd sell it to someone from a company. And then I'd pass the money to them and take my commission. All of them worked. All the women knew if they slacked off, they'd get a beatdown. That's the way it is there. You either work or you get a beatdown. That's it. Just like how you say it is on the corner. You don't work, you don't eat.

Goddamn right, collecting trash is work.

Alicia, I told you my name is Alicia. Not Chiquitita.

Or well, no. My name—as you can see on that paper—is actually different. When I ended up on my own, I decided to change it. Yeah, Alicia is a pretty name, prettier than Chiquitita. So don't call me Chiquitita. I've got a name.

Alicia was my favorite character when I was little. I like to read a lot. I read whatever I find. Whatever people give me. Whatever they sell at the thrift stores. Alicia, like the one from Wonderland. You don't know about her? It's the story of a little girl who runs after a rabbit with a watch and ... uh-huh, she goes down into a hole and in the hole she finds a whole other world, a wonderful world.

No. Not like me, no. I wasn't chasing rabbits with watches or anything. Ah well, that part is true, I did fall in a hole. Just my hole was the trash.

I ended up here because I helped Don Chepe. Everything I know I learned from him. When he met me, I didn't collect PETs or anything. I collected metals. Don Chepe told me: Nobody can get more metal than you. Metal's precious. Metal's money. You're really sharp. But the metal isn't yours, it's mine. Everything's mine. So you have to give me a commission. It's in your best interest, he told me. I'll get you lots of buyers. And you're going to find me more pickers like you, who'll work for me. And that's how I gathered metals with the dudes, and the women would pick up the PETs. And everybody was paying their commissions.

Yeah, Don Chepe is a son of a bitch, or well, he was.

I ended up here because of Don Chepe.

Don Chepe fucked it all up. Fucking idiot. What? No, I don't know if all men are fucking idiots. I just know Don Chepe was really fucking stupid and he got into a lot of shit and then he pulled me into that shit along with him. Some really heavy shit. I'm good with my fists, but it wasn't just one, it was a slew of them and I barely got in a few punches, yeah, with my fists, and as soon as I could, I got out of there.

I ran and ran and ran.

At first, I didn't know where to go, but then I remembered about you.

La Bonita had mentioned you before. La Bonita had told me once, a long time ago, when she started to trust me, when we became friends, she said if I got into some stupid shit one day, I should find la Reyna Grande. Pissed? No, I don't think so. If she was pissed at you, she wouldn't have told me to look for you.

No, I don't know how you can help me. I just know if you let me live here, I'll find a way to pay you back. But not being a puta. I already saw all the ladies around here are putas. No, I'm not insulting you or them, but that's what y'all are, right? Okay, okay, I won't call you that anymore. Listen, are you sure you don't have any other job for me besides hooking? Of course you do. Whatever you tell me to do, I'll do it. I'm good for my word. I'm really strong, and I work my ass off. In the trash dump, everybody either respects me or is scared of me, I'm not sure which, but nobody messes with me.

Or nobody used to mess with me.

But that wasn't my fault, I already told you that.

I'm just asking you to let me hide here. Even for a few days. I can sleep on the floor. I can eat whatever food's left over.

But you know, if you don't want to ... no big deal.

Ah, since like you're just sitting there with a blank look, staring at me, I thought that ... Us, know each other? I don't think so. I'd remember. I don't forget faces. I've got a good memory. I remind you of someone? Who knows. I'm sure I never met you before.

And no, I don't have anybody else to ask.

No, for real. Not a dad or a mom, not anybody. I had dogs, but I don't even have them anymore. So, can I stay or what?

Am I hungry? Yeah, I am. Seriously hungry.

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My sister was right. I should've listened to her and not allowed our lives to be gradually converted into a theater production. We wouldn't be facing this strange ending. Twisted, even. If we'd sent la tía to a nursing home, someone else would have been given the role of my mother or la Chata. Someone else would be rocking that invisible baby that la tía wants far away from her.

After she opened her eyes postanesthesia, Tía Mayela didn't say a word for a long time. Suddenly, she looked at me and smiled. She recognized me. I know for at least a few seconds she recognized me. I got closer to her to take her by the hand, and we spent a while like that. Twenty years ago, we did the same, but the other way around. The doctors had taken out my appendix, and she was taking care of me. I reminded her, hoping she'd interrupt me and she'd reconstruct the scene, but she started to get agitated; she wanted to sit up, and obviously the pain stopped her in her tracks.

"Tranquila, you just came out of the operating room," I told her.

La tía made a little bundle with a sheet and ordered me to do what she'd been saying over and over again ever since this episode started.

"Give the baby to la Chata. Take it to her. I don't even want to see it."

The shouting got the nurses' attention, and they immediately thought I'd provoked the commotion somehow. I left, like an idiot, carrying that baby in my arms.

I don't know how long I've been here in this waiting room, gripping this sheet, unable to move. Next to me, there's a

woman with a small child. The kid wants to climb onto the seat, but he hits his head and starts to cry.

“Ya, chiquito, ya, don’t cry,” his mother says. “Everything’s okay, come here.”

She sits him on her legs and starts to rock him. Little by little, the kid calms down. No one tells me: Ya, chiquita, don’t cry. No one is going to convince me that everything’s going to be okay. Not possible.

Magda replaced me in the hospital. She sent me home to rest, but I don’t want to close my eyes. I want to understand this episode and get closure for it. I can’t bury it like la tía did. I want to know what happened to that baby. Did that woman come and take the baby away? Did she take it and give it to my mother?

Mi mamá.

Maybe the fruit didn’t fall far from the tree.

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Niña, I'm in shock. I don't even know what to say. I never would've imagined that, well yeah, maybe, now that I can see you better, I mean you do look like people who live over there: your sunburn, that piercing look in your eyes, and—sorry to say it—but the smell, god, that smell. No, I mean I saw for myself that you took a bath, but I guess after so many years living there, pues, it sticks to your skin. We'll have to get you a couple more baths. Oye, you want some more? Hand me your plate, I'll get it for you. Here are some more tortillas, grab some. But just take em one at a time, chamaca, one at a time, they're all for you. Caray, the survival instinct is real, Chiquitita, I mean, Alicia. So weird, at first you freaked me out, but now it's like you could just melt my heart. Of course, you can stay here, absolutely you're staying here, you better stay here. I'm gonna take care of you. I'll protect you. I won't let anything happen to you. I'm not going to let those jerks get you and hurt you and dice you up into pieces, cause that's what they do with muchachitas like you, they grab em, hurt em, and dice em up, they leave em in the garba— ... ay, perdón, perdón, perdón, what am I saying? My pressure shot through the roof just hearing everything you told me while you were eating. I don't know if I woulda been able to put up with everything you lived through. All that about your mom, all that about ... no, of course it was your mother even if she wasn't, your mother's the person who raises you no matter if she birthed you out of her body or not. Then all that about your stepdad and then all the other stuff. A nightmare, I'm telling you, a nightmare. What do you mean it's not a big deal? Yes, it is a big deal, thing is you're like one of those people who get kidnapped and then afterward they lose track of reality. What do you mean who kidnapped you? Pues the trash dump, Don Chepe, your whole damn life. They really got you good and that's why you can't see it, what you lived through is

disgraceful, unjust, unthinkable for a little girl like you. Yeah, I know you're not that little, but to me you are. You're proly the family that showed up in my tarot reading. Yeah, you. Thing is I already see you as my daughter. I don't give a damn if you don't want a mother. You're lucky cause I'm one badass motherfu— ... I'm such a pendeja, I made my own damn self laugh. But it's not the time for laughs, no. This damn world, I'm telling you, this damn world has taken even that away, my desire to laugh. This damn world full of all those damn people. Those people, listen to me good, Alicia, those damn people are the trash of this world. The trash isn't what all of us throw away, it's those people with no soul or heart or decency or any damn thing at all.

Ay, jus look at me, now I'm crying and what do I have to do with it. If anyone here has the right to cry, it's you, with everything you survived, all that shit you escaped. But come here and let me give you a hug. Come here, I'm tellin you, ay you're so skittish, muchacha, come here, te digo. Ándale, la Rusa says my hugs have healing power. Come here so I can give you some healing. Ay, silly girl, I already know you're not sick, I mean healing like a metaphor. What do you mean what's a metaphor? Didn't you say you read a lot? Oye, I got an idea. We're gonna let some time pass. You'll have to stay inside so no one sees you till things calm down and then, then I'll send you off to school, you'll see. Alicia, I'm gonna turn you into an upstanding individual, no, I'm not saying you're not one already, but those vultures, you're not going back there, and you're not gonna stay here either, or at least not forever, you're gonna build a life better than all of us, better than la Bonita, better than that fuckin mean old man in the dump, better than me, better than all of us. You're gonna have the life you deserve and I stand by my word.

Ay, no, I need a drink.

No, what do you mean go out? That's not an option, not for you anyway. Not for me either, since I'm gonna be like your bodyguard, at least for a few days. If la Bonita sent you my way, it's cause she knows nothing bad happens on my watch.

Lemme call Javier and I'll tell him to bring us some food. He's always offering to deliver anyway. Now we'll have to see if he does, since I'm sort of in a fight with him, but I need a couple clamatitos and you do too. Yeah, you ran into me at el Javier's place, exactly, that one. Let me call him, mija, and ... ay, I know, I know, you're name's Alicia, but I already told you I feel like you're my daughter. Mi hija.

Mine.

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Everything started when people got to calling Don Chepe a snitch. They didn't say it to his face, because Don Chepe—whether he was a snitch or not—was still Don Chepe and he was everybody's boss. But they thought it and said it under their breath. I did too. I also realized that pinche Don Chepe was a snitch. But the truth is I never stopped to think about what might happen, I just kept on working like always, but now I was working for a snitch and no matter what you might want, that ropes you into some bullshit. Don Chepe got roped into some bullshit. And that was despite the fact he'd always tell me: don't tell one hand what the other hand's doing. But I think he repeated that shit to me so many times he forgot to remember it for himself. What happened was that Don Chepe—such a fucking moron—told one of his hands about the business he was running with the other. The first hand found out and gave him a fucking beatdown. There's no way he wouldn't get beat down. If someone betrays you, you have to fuckin beat that person down. We all know that. It's a law that applies to life in the dump and in the whole damn world. Anybody who doesn't know that is a total idiot.

There was more mist in the air that day than usual. A mist that hangs around after the garbage trucks unload their cargo and drive over whatever's there. More than mist, it was like dust, a layer of dust that sometimes you can't even feel and other times stings your eyes. That day, the mist stung a fuck of a lot, like scratching. The trucks left, and I had no desire to wait for others to arrive. I was going to head back to my spot when I saw it. It was dumped, wrapped in a blanket like all the other bodies that showed up there from one day to the next. I wasn't going to get closer to it, I mean, if there's one thing we all know, it's better to just leave the dead people who show up in the dump exactly where they are. But then, I heard the sound of another truck rolling up. It was coming over slowly,

and the body started to move. It shook off the blanket. Uncovered itself. Struggled to stand up. I recognized him by his white hair peppered with black and gray on the little rattail at the back of his neck. I hurried over, ran to help him. It was a fuckin fluke that the truck didn't dump its load right there: in that case, adiós Don Chepe. He would've been really fuckin dead. That's how it happened with this one kid, also another lady one day, and a dude who was my age. The truth is it's happened to a fuckload of people, dumbasses who don't know how or where to stand when the truck lets loose its avalanche of trash.

Newbies, you know.

Don Chepe hung on to my shoulder. His face was covered with blood and snot. His eyes swollen. His body a rag. Damn what happened to you, Don? I asked him, and he just let out a whisper that even he didn't understand. I took him to his place. Every so often, I'd have to stop, because he weighed so much. I asked him again what happened to him but he didn't so much as open his mouth. The people around there saw us but made like they didn't. Nobody came up to say, Don Chepe, are you okay? Do you need help? Not a one. Being afraid of someone is one thing and liking that person is another thing, I guess. Probably, I was the only one who really liked Don Chepe, and even I'm not quite sure about that. I don't think a lot about who I like and who I don't. I mind my own business. But that day, I don't know why, it seemed cruel to leave him there dumped like dog shit. I picked him up. I sat him down on some rocks and ran off to look for the doctors, but they'd already left. Pinches gringos, they're never around when you really need them. Yeah, gringo doctors. Every week they go to the dump and ... yeah, them. What do you mean their guinea pigs ...? I don't know, I don't get what you're saying, but anyways, since they weren't around, I pulled myself together and—as well as I could manage—I got him back to his place to help him recover. I made him a Nescafé. I cleaned the blood off his face like la Bonita had cleaned me up that time: careful, quiet, no questions asked. I mind my own business.

I'm a dead man, he said over and over as I wiped him with a rag. I'm a dead man. A dead man. Until I got sick of hearing it and I told him: Ay Don Chepe, if they really wanted to kill you, we wouldn't be here right now. I wouldn't be cleaning all these cuts and bruises. We'd be planning your wake and we'd already have killed a few dogs for your barbacoa. I said it to make him laugh, but not even a chuckle.

Pinche Peluda, you really are a pendeja. You don't get it, he said, they wanted someone to find me alive so the other motherfuckers could finish me off. But before they do that, they're gonna torture me like hell. They're gonna take their fuckin time. They're gonna enjoy it, those assholes. Now you see why I always tell you not to tell one hand what you're doing with the other, Peluda? You don't have to tell me that, I said. I don't say a damn thing to one hand or to the other. Not to you either.

I didn't hold back. I wasn't scared of him. I told him everything had happened to him because he had a big fuckin mouth, because he hadn't followed his own damn advice. Don Chepe just nodded, let me wash him off a little more until, suddenly, he blurted out that I could help him, no, actually, that I had to help him. You're the only one I can trust, Peluda, you have to help me. You're the second in command and everybody knows it.

Second in command, su chingada madre.

I should've told him no, no way, don't pull me into your bullshit. I should have left him right then, let that roadkill treat his own damn wounds and claw his way out by his own damn self. Truth is I should've left him there where he was dumped so a truck could run over him, so a ton or two or three of trash could bury him. Instead, I stood there in the middle of all that trash, and I almost drowned in it.

Such a fuckin pendeja.

Then Don Chepe asked me to ... Huh? I don't get you. First you tell me you want the whole story and now you don't

want to hear it? Make up your mind, Reyna, make up your damn mind.

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“Tía Mayela is my mother.”

“La tía is what?”

“She’s my mother.”

Norma hasn’t even fully walked in the door of the house. She asks me if I’ve rested, if I’ve eaten, if I want her to fix me some food. She doesn’t understand or doesn’t believe me. I repeat the whole story again more slowly, and even after that my sister is still doubtful. How can I blame her? I don’t even understand it, but I believe it. I’m sure.

“I’m her daughter.”

My sister paces from one side to another as I explain the basis for these thoughts.

“Es una locura, Gris, there must be another explanation.”

“It was a different time. For sure, she thought it was the only way out.”

I try to force her to understand how I feel, to see things like I see them, but my sister doesn’t budge. I insist:

“You always said I’m her favorite. You always said I’m just like her. Don’t you see? I am like her, I am her.”

“Bueno, sí, but that doesn’t mean that.”

“La tía had a baby and gave it to our mother, who raised me as her daughter.”

“I don’t know, Gris. They couldn’t keep it all secret for that long.”

“My whole life you’ve told me I’m exactly like her, that I’m her favorite, and now I know why. The fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree. Isn’t that what you’re always saying?”

My sister shakes her head no and keeps pacing from one end of the room to another. She rubs her stomach, stops a few seconds and then sits down next to me. She pulls my hand to herself.

“Can you feel this?”

Her baby is kicking. Here we are trying to figure out all this about la tía and this baby is kicking. Making itself known. My sister holds my hand and says:

“If all of this is true, if la tía had a baby.”

“What?”

“I mean it could even be me.”

We look into each other’s eyes, like each one of us was trying to find some mark of la tía that might explain everything.

“Maybe it was way before or way after we were born.”

“It’s also possible that she actually gave the baby up for adoption.”

“Norma, I’m her daughter. I’m telling you what I feel, it’s the truth. That’s why she insisted on keeping us from the very beginning. Because I’m her daughter.”

“Or I am.”

“Or you, of course. Let’s do this: I’ll get a DNA test and we can resolve this once and for all.”

Neither one of us notices that Magda has walked into the house until she says:

“And why don’t you just ask her?”

Although Magda’s idea is a good one, it freaks me out. It would be extremely invasive and tough on la tía. Facing reality. Admitting she’s been lying all these years. Before I can continue with my reasoning, my sister interrupts.

“I think we have to try. In any case, the worst outcome would be that one of us is her daughter.”

“No, the worst would be if neither one of us is. Think about it, that would mean there’s a little girl out there who belongs to our family but who is living without us.”

The three of us just sit there, lost in our thoughts, unable to add another word.

“Rooting around in the past is not an easy task, but you have to ask her.”

“I don’t know, Magda, I’m not sure.”

“You have nothing to lose.”

Magda kisses me on my forehead and tells us she’s going to take a bath and rest for a bit before returning to the hospital.

Norma stares at me and then watches as Magda leaves the room. Like understanding what’s going on and at the same time not. I can’t manage to explain anything to her. Norma watches me for what seems like an eternity and then takes me by the hand, as she moves over to sit closer to me. She leans her head on my shoulder and says:

“Everything’s going to be fine, Gris.”

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Short hair looks good on you, do you like it? Pues sí, of course you feel weird, mija, before your hair was a mess. You look cute, and with your face cleaned up like that you really do remind me of someone, but I can't place who it is. You changed a ton, no one would recognize you, not even la Bonita. Now, if you'd let me put a little makeup on you. Ay, just a little bit. A little color in your cheeks, some lip gloss. No, what do you mean puta? I won't make you up like a puta. Besides I already told you not to say it like that, it sounds like an insult and it isn't. I know, I know, you've already told me a thousand times you don't want to be ... one of us.

Ay chamaca, you even act like me, like paranoid about everything.

Ugh, here we go again. I said no, no, you can't go outside, you can't even stick your nose out to see who farted on the street. No means no. Turn on the TV or read if you're bored, get a book. You haven't even looked at the books I brought you. What do you mean chick lit? Ay cabrona, now you think you're a literary critic or something. Bueno, if you don't wanna read, stare at the fuckin ceiling, but you aren't getting outta here. Mira, actually, you can help me with ... no, not as a puta, I know that already, pinche chamaca. I was thinking you'd help me with the accounting stuff, but stay stubborn and the only job you're gonna do is sweeping and mopping.

Patience, you need patience, after a few more weeks pass and those guys forget about you, you can come out again. I already told you, I'm gonna look for a school for you. What do you mean no? No, pues you've gotta do something, I'm not gonna want you sitting here with your arms crossed. No, I'm not kicking you out, I'm saying that ... Mira, we're gonna wake up the girls with our loudmouthing and I have no desire to deal with them right now. Let's move on. It's already gonna

be lunchtime, so find an onion and dice it up, I'm gonna make picadillo.

I've been checking the newspapers every day to see if they print anything about you or Don Chepe, but nada. Prolly everyone's forgotten about you and here I am still on pins and needles. But as my nana always said: Better a woman be safe than sorry. I promise, just let a few weeks go by and then you can come and go whenever you want. I can talk with el Javier to see if he has work for you. What do you mean he's a jerk? You haven't even spent time with him. Ah pues, okay, but that's some drama between him and me, it's not like you need to take sides. I have total faith in el Javier. No, no, he's not being mean to you, el Javier's just a little rough around the edges.

Ay, bueno, anyway if you don't wanna work with him, we'll figure out what you can do. A ver, pass me that onion and dice it up with the tomato, just cut out the little part that's spoiled. It's almost time to do the grocery shopping. Ever since you got here, I've been like distracted. The other girls are even starting to get a little jealous. Pinche chamaca, you really do bring out some kind of maternal instinct in me. I didn't even know I had one. Yeah, yeah, I already know you don't want a mother. Did you dice the tomato? Muy bien, now scooch over here, I'm gonna show you how to make picadillo like my nana. First, you fry up the onion till it pops and then ... With el Javier? Oh, well, it's a long story. Oye, open that door and get me the tupper that says raisins. Yeah, raisins, my nana's picadillo has raisins in it. What happened was el Javier and me were in talks to become partners, but what I was proposing was for us to be business partners—like capitalists—and for him to be our rompehuesos, but that guy, what he wanted was for me to sell him my part of the business and for all of us to work for him. Can you imagine? Me, lose my status as the holy godmother of wayward women? I told him no, that he'd be a silent partner, and he couldn't stomach that. I don't know why he wants to be the boss ...

I mean no, it's not like we have to have one ... like what exactly is a rompehuesos? Pues like it sounds, a guy who breaks bones. I mean, not literally, it's just you have to be able to beat down anybody who fucks with the girls. You be the rompehuesos? Mmm, let me think about that one. What do you mean why? Well, because you, young lady, you need to stay inside. Or go to school. No, what do you mean scared? If you get your middle school diploma, you can go to high school and ... Yeah, that's how la Tijeras did it, just that she got her GED, and look at her now, she's in accounting school. No pos, you haven't met her cause she only lives here off and on. She has her own apartment, she got it with her old lady, but now that she left her, most likely she'll come back to live here full time. La Tijeras wants to open up a little corner store. But now I don't know, that was an idea she had with la Tere, her ex. But who knows what'll happen now, cause la Tere was the one with the connections to ... No, you can't work with her. First of all, cause she don't have a store yet and second cause I already told you, you still have to stay inside for a while and then you have to go straight to school. Why? Cause I say so, end of story. You're living under my roof, and under my roof you follow my rules, and don't give me that look of well then I'm outta here, cause you aren't going anywhere, I mean, I won't force you to stay but where would you go and what for? If everything's set up for you to be comfortable right here?

Look, the onion's popping.

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This Reyna lady's been cool with me. Gave me a room and food even though I told her not even half of what went down. And thing is at first she didn't let me speak, she just kept babbling and babbling. Then I'd start a story and I'd just barely get going, when she'd stop me, shh shh shh, don't say another word, she'd say. It's better if I know nothing than to be an accomplice. What do you mean accomplice? I asked her, but she didn't answer and instead got me to help her cook. She's totally batshit. La Reyna wants me to do everything with her. Doesn't leave me alone for a minute.

She gives me food to eat. Forces me to take a bath. Drops off books for me. Tells me her life story. I'm comfortable. No complaints. But I am pretty sure I won't be able to stay here much longer. Seems like all these putas don't like me hanging around, and now that Javier is sticking his nose into everything. The other day he came, and she told him about me. And he was like, why would you do that? Getting mixed up with those people puts us all in danger and remember what happened to la Cafre. Cafre, what a great nickname. I can tell those people are some dangerous motherfuckers, he said. La Reyna told him to fuck off and el Javier left. What he did say, though, when he was on his way out, he told her: Get rid of that girl as soon as you can.

Since I didn't know what to do, as soon as el Javier left, I got up and told la Reyna: I think I better leave. I didn't come here to get anybody caught up in my bullshit. But she didn't let me. You crazy? Come on, get over here, let's watch some TV and we can stop talking about all this crap. So weird to me. Real talk, I should leave, but where am I going to go? And what for? I have food and a bed.

I'ma hold out a little longer.

What I really can't stand is the room she gave me. All pink, like the one el Rogelio promised, just bigger than his actual imagination. Smells like perfume. Smells like it just got cleaned. But like it makes me dizzy or itchy or it makes me want to puke. Even the trash can is spotless here.

The way she shows affection also makes me itch, but at the same time I like it. The other day when we were watching TV, she caressed my head with one of her hands. I got goose bumps and I don't know why but it made me want to fuckin cry. But I held it in. I'm gonna cut this mess of hair a little shorter, she said, actually I think I'm going to dye it for you. No one will recognize you. Then she started back with some foolishness where she stares at my eyes from really close up and she said: Those almond-shaped eyes, I've seen them somewhere else, you really do remind me of someone, Alicia. I don't pay attention to her. Damn Reyna imagines a whole bunch of shit.

Maybe she's right. Maybe it's better to disguise myself so nobody comes and slices my belly open. Maybe I have to go to school and learn things. Maybe I do need to stick around here. But uuugh. At night, she always says: Relax Alicia, relax, you're already home. But no way I can relax, I've got my eyes peeled.

I can't sleep. Don't know if it's the smell. Don't know if it's this mushy bed. Don't know if it's the noise from the street. Don't know if it's the music or all the shouting from the corner. But I can't sleep.

Something's bugging me.

Before conducting a genetic test on someone, the laboratory tech always has to do a full informed consent, that is to say, they have to explain the process in a detailed fashion and go over the possible consequences of the results before obtaining permission. The test is 99 percent reliable. So one either is or isn't.

We need to do the test. We need to know.

Everything is a mess. My attention is everywhere and nowhere. Due to safety concerns, the hospital has paused our fieldwork. The same thing has happened with la tía. Due to safety concerns as well, they've told us it's better that my sister and I not visit her. We disturb her too much, so they still have her there, at the hospital, sedated and isolated from the two of us.

I explained the process of the DNA test to Norma but she suggested we wait a little before doing it.

"I don't know what for, la tía isn't even going to realize we're doing it and it won't change anything for her."

"But maybe she'll open up and tell us what happened."

"If she's kept this secret for so long, what makes you think she's going to open up?"

Ever since we brought her home, Tía Mayela doesn't say a word. She spends all her time in bed, silent. Sometimes she distracts herself watching television; sometimes she just stays still, staring off into space. I tell her she has to get up and walk around a little. She doesn't answer. La tía is here but not here.

I hear her crying. I ask her what's going on, what hurts, but she just stays quiet and curls herself into a ball on the bed. I wonder if this is part of her sickness or side effects from the anesthesia. It happens with some patients. It's possible that it's

in her head, and that these symptoms are simply part of a postpartum depression. It's possible that la tía, all things considered, is sinking into that bed overwhelmed by guilt and pain, like any woman who has made the most difficult decision of her life.

When I can't sleep, I go around opening and closing drawers in all of the furniture in the house, trying to find something that I know isn't there. A name, a paper, something that might give me some vague idea of what happened to that baby. I do the same thing during the daytime; when I'm not tending to her needs, I rummage around in la tía's life.

If only things had stayed how they were. Magda and I taking care of la tía, Norma working hard at the office, me on my project, and now I don't even have that. I haven't even had the headspace to find out what exactly happened. Henry just told me that several areas were cordoned off and that there were bullet casings. On the news, they mentioned a couple people wounded, but Henry described there being people wounded and dead.

I thought about Alicia. I was worried, of course, but I quickly arrived at the conclusion that she would be alright. This girl has lived through so much both inside and outside the trash dump; she'd adjust to any circumstance. It's the rest of us who have no idea how to be okay with what we have.

Don't raise your voice with me. I'm the boss around here. Damn, what's y'all's problem? No, no, no. You're all talking at the same time and I don't understand. Let's start with you, Serena, explain what all this is about. Slow the fuck down, mujer, you're talking too fast and ... Ah, because of the girl, right. I should've seen this coming, don't think I didn't hear the things you were whispering or the way you were looking at my Alicia. Carajo, morras, supposedly you're adults and here you are acting like some envious chamaquitas trying to get their mother's attention, it's like y'all forgot I did the same thing for each one of you when you arrived. It's part of your orientation, it's part of your adjustment process, y'all really forgot already?

What do you mean this is different? Different how? Each and every one of you came here, yeah, Rusita, you did too, you and everybody else, y'all came here running away from something, that's what I did with la Bibi and with la Larousse, when they were part of this family. The two of em escaped from their towns, their families, all the finger-pointing, and they found refuge here. Damn, I know they're not here anymore, but they came here just the same as Alicia. Pues sí, they showed up looking for work, but in actual fact what they were asking for was a hand. Serena, aren't you here cause that fuckin pimp you were dating was also hitting you? A ver, and who helped you, who took care of you? Pos I did. And who pushed the doors open wide for la Chula? Me, Serena, I did, and I did it for you, cause you vouched for her. Chula, did you already forget about all that? I should prolly stop here, since I did every one of those favors out of the goodness of my heart, it wasn't to stand up here and make a list and prove you owe me, though it is true, completely true, totally fuckin true that every single of one of you, each and every one of you owes me, so just shut up with all these pendejadas.

That I did what now? Neglect? Ah, now it turns out that I'm the one neglecting the business I've taken care of for decades. You have a roof over your heads, don't you? You have food, electricity, water, a phone, you even have that stupid fuckin internet, don't you? Who do you think pays for that? Pues sí, it comes out of the cut you pay me, but who goes and pays on time every month? Who makes sure we have ...?

Aaah, but ... no, me ... no, no, no. That ... Bueno, okay, that's true, you're right about that one. Yeah, it was my mistake, it was my fault. I know, I already know, you don't have to tell me over and over again, I already know that guy assaulted la Chula cause I wasn't here, but you have to understand the situation, I can't leave this girl alone, she's in some serious shit, and I, I promised her I'd be like her bodyguard. That's why I told y'all to go and see el Javier if ... yeah, el Javier, I told y'all he's going to be our rompehuesos for a while as long as ... what do you mean? No, he and I decided that ... Ay, you're all talking at the same time again and I don't understand a goddamn thing.

Pinche Javier, he's just getting y'all riled up for no reason. There's nothing dangero— ... bueno, the situation is dangerous, but she's not. If I thought she was dangerous, I wouldn't even let her in the house. What's happening is that ... Look, that's why I have Alicia here stuck inside all the time. No, Rusita, don't talk to me like that. Now you really are getting everything backwards.

What do you mean kick the girl out? Muchachas, I'd like to remind you all that we're a family and that we're all in this together and that just like I took care of all of you and I taught you how to take care of each other, it's the same, the exact same thing we have to do now: take care of Alicia, cause ... what do you mean no? What the fuck do you mean no?

It's either her or y'all? Ay, qué mamada. Y'all can't be serious. You don't even know what you're asking for, I've had enough of your pendejadas, get the fuck outta here, it's almost time for us to head to the corner and, yeah, of course I'm gonna work today, so y'all see I'm not just Alicia's bodyguard,

but also one of y'all as well, you fuckin jealous-ass putas. Seems like y'all forgot how much I love y'all, each and every one of you. That's enough already, this conversation is over. One day we're gonna laugh about this shit. At least for now, Alicia's staying, I promise y'all I'll get back in the game and that's that. Ahora, muchachas, let's get pretty and get to fuckin work.

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Reyna wakes me up, pulls off my blanket, and gives me a few pats on the butt. Says it's time to get up, puts a robe on me, hands me some chanclas, takes me into the kitchen, and pours me a cup of coffee. She doesn't ask me if I want it or what I want for breakfast, she just starts cooking. It's super early and la Reyna is dressed like she's headed to a party. But she's not, she just came from one. She's been working for days. I think it's because of the fight she got into with the other putas.

The smell of chilaquiles returns me to my senses. Reyna serves me a plate piled up high, and right on top she puts cheese, crema, and a little onion, the absolute best ingredient, she says. Her chilaquiles are so good. I wolf them down right then and there, despite la Reyna complaining, saying I eat like a truck driver and not like a lady.

A lady, tsss, no thanks.

Little by little, the kitchen starts to fill up with all the girls who live here. All of them have funny or exotic names. I haven't learned them because when they talk to each other they just say baby or mija or chula or desta. Someone pops up and says: I got first on the shower and the others moan. Then they figure out who'll go second, third, fourth, fifth. All of em stake out their turns except me. And you? They ask. I took a bath yesterday, I say, and one of them, the tall one that doesn't live here but is around all the time says: Yesterday or last year, Pelona? All of them break out laughing. You're so funny, Pelona. Pelona, that's what they call me. Tijeras—the one who's always bullying me is named Tijeras—she gets on my damn nerves, because she's never straight up with me. When la Reyna's around, she talks nice to me or at the very least she talks to me. But behind my back, she makes fun of me. I'm not an idiot. I know she's making fun of me. I know she and the other girls don't want me staying here, but I don't give a

damn. Besides, la Reyna is the boss around here and if she says I stay, I stay. At least until I'm sick of it or enough time passes, and I decide to get the fuck out of here.

Someone turns on the radio. Somebody else sings. Somebody else dances. It's not even ten in the morning and the house is a party already. All of us eat together. The putas joke around with each other, but not with me and never with la Reyna. One of them picks up everybody's plates, but not la Reyna's. Another girl pours everybody a little more coffee but leaves la Reyna's empty. She doesn't say a word, but it pisses me off. I don't know why but it reminds of that day when I dragged Don Chepe around, his body badly beaten, and no one so much as lifted a finger.

One by one they walk off. To watch TV. To their rooms. To wash their clothes on the roof. La Reyna refills my mug and says, now it's time to study, señorita, and she plops down the books she got from the school. Math. I tell her I'd rather do science. No, that's an easy subject for you. Better to start with the hardest thing and then tomorrow you can knock out the rest.

La Reyna is going to look for a prepa for me. So you can attend school like any other girl your age, she says. I explain that I'm too grown for high school and she says not really. You might even get a boyfriend. I tell her I don't want a boyfriend and she laughs. That's what you say now. But I don't want one, really I don't, I tell her. Boyfriends waste your time and they fuck you and get you pregnant and I don't want that either. She smacks me: Don't talk like that, chamaca. The smack doesn't hurt. Just makes me laugh. All the same, I argue back: Everybody here says bad words, I tell her. But she just repeats herself: Time to study.

I just listen to her. I hold off on saying there's no point in studying science or math. I don't tell her I'm just waiting a bit longer before I get my ass out of here. I don't tell her that, because the truth is I don't know where I'll go. The dump isn't an option. But there are other dumps out there. Those doctors talked about another dump in Chihuahua, one even bigger than

mine. How hard could it be to get there? And if not there, then to another one. For sure, there's some other one. I mean, it's the same everywhere, there's always more than enough trash.

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La tía isn't my mother. La tía is my aunt. There's a part of our family's history that's going to be lost forever, and there's nothing to be done about it. Now la tía can't even recognize anyone; she has lost her words and control of her body.

The day we took her to the nursing home was awful. Norma and Magda had to take care of it all, because I was, I don't know, blocked. A chill ran up my back, settled into my hands, and I couldn't make it go away.

La tía didn't notice there'd been a change. And if she did notice it, she had no words to say it. She left her house, her things, her life; now she'll be with other people in her same situation.

We started to lose la tía with the arrival of her illness, and, despite that, I am just now beginning to understand what it means to live without her. I'll be able to visit her at the nursing home, spend the afternoon with her, but the lack of recognition will be mutual, like strangers spending time together. Losing la tía has made me lose control of my life. Losing her has meant losing myself. If I am who I am because of la tía, who am I without her? My studies, my projects, all of my achievements. I only wanted her approval, to hear her say she was proud of me. As if my success were the proof she'd done right by adopting us.

“How much of what I have done is really for me and how much for Tía Mayela?”

“It doesn't matter, Gris. What you've accomplished has always been for her, for yourself, for me.”

“I'm not sure, I don't know anymore.”

“Look, right now you can't see it, but your work is the result of your interests, and, when you feel better, you'll be

able to go back to it.”

Ever since we dropped off la tía at the nursing home, Norma has spent all her time at la tía’s house. She says it’s because her stomach is too big for her house.

“I can sleep here more comfortably, with the whole mattress just for me. Believe me, your brother-in-law is happy about it.”

But I know she’s here to help me with all this grief.

I’ve considered asking for additional days off or simply resigning from my job, moving somewhere else. But I can’t do it until after Norma’s baby is born. That’s the only thing I have left: being with my sister, helping her a little, taking care of her like she’s taken care of me since all of this started.

Maybe later I’ll leave. I could travel. I could move to another city. Or I could stay here and figure out who I am.

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I'm so fed up, I'm just so damn over all this motherfuckin bullshit. It was la Linda, wasn't it? Yeah, la Linda was the one who called. But I bet all of you bitches already knew that, right? Yeah, it was la Linda who told me either I get rid of the chamaca or I can forget about living here. No, no, no, where the fuck do you think you're going? Not one of you bitches is leaving this table until we get this shit figured out. Let's see, out of all you hijas de su madre, all you hijas de su pinche madre, hijas de su muy reputa madre, which of you was it? Cause of course it was one of you. Tell me already, who the fuck was it?

Don't start with that calm-down-Reynita bullshit.

Which one of you was it?

Whoever it was, you've got some balls, some big fuckin balls to go tell Linda some crap about how Alicia is dangerous, how she's putting us all at risk, about how ... ay, and then that bullshit about how I'm obsessed with the chamaca, that I've gone crazy and that's why I'm calling her hija, this is how you ungrateful bitches repay me? Like this?

Who? Which one of you was it? Tell me already. Rusa? Serena?

Ah, now your lips are sealed. Now all your damn lips are sewn shut. You better fuckin tell me which one of you it was, cause if you don't I'll beat each and every one of you down, each fuckin one of you. What? You think just cause I'm in my fifties that I can't bust your fuckin head in? Of course I can, I'll do it, believe you me, I'll bust your head in just like I did all those cabrones who tried to cross the fuckin line with you. Or did y'all forget about that already?

Miserable fuckin bitches, goddamned traitors. La Linda is coming here tomorrow and you know how long it's been since la Linda came? Years, literally, yeeeeeaaars. And if she comes and tries to fire me then you'll see, you'll see, you can forget about your pretty little faces and your precious little noses cause I'm gonna beat em to a pulp, cabronas, a fuckin pulp, you hear me? A ver, a ver, Chula, speak up, I can't hear you.

Tijeras, what's this pendeja talking about?

No, don't even try to say it was you, cause I will not forgive you, after all the things I've done for you. No, Tijeras, it can't be you. I took care of you when you were sick, I've listened to you, I got you out of jail, pinche Tijeras, I even got you out of the fuckin closet. Who opened their doors for you when your little dream about the corner store was smashed? Tell me, who was it? You better tell me la Chula's lying cause ...

And why is la Chula saying that ...?

Pues sí, la Chula's always getting confused, but.

So then, if it wasn't you, who was it?

Wha-wha-what? No. No, it can't be him, if it was ... No, no fuckin way, that can't be true, why would he ... Ooooh, now I'm starting to understand. Aha, now I'm getting it. All this shit is because, cause I said no to being his business partner.

No shit, that's why. No shit.

He's got no shame, not a shred of fuckin shame. Only took a second for him to forget I was on his team all these years. Does he not remember he showed up here outta nowhere and I helped him, I introduced him to la Linda, and I ... I mean, he showed up just like my Alicia. The same way. Broken, bruised, and beaten to shreds with no idea what to do with his life. How quick he forgot who lifted him up, who helped him to leave one life behind and start a new one. This shit is seriously fucking with me. Pinche Javier, your ass is gon pay for all this. I can be a very nice person and I can forgive if I set

my mind to it, but betrayal, this kind of betrayal really ... wait, but, are y'all positive, like 100 percent positive it was el Javier? You better not be spreading lies and ... because, how did he call La Linda, how did he get her teleph— ...? Pinche Tijeras, are you that much of a pendeja? Why'd you give it to him? Why the fuck'd you give it to him? No pues, it was him then. Well, he can erase me from his fuckin phone, he can forget about all of us, in fact he can forget about his little business too, pinche Javier, he has no idea who he's messing with.

Pinche Javier, pinche puto Javier. That asshole is gonna regret it, you don't fuck with Reyna Grande's family. Y'all are gonna see what I'ma do to his ass, you'll see the shit I'ma do to his dumbass, you'll see.

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It was la Tijeras. I heard her. She was talking under her breath with one of the other girls out on the roof and then she opened her cell phone and dialed. I heard it all. I was out on the patio too. I go there when I need some time to myself, as far as I can get from all of la Reyna's nonstop drama. A total miracle they didn't realize I was there. I mean, how were they going to see me anyway if they were so damn busy planning their bullshit?

I thought of telling la Reyna. I thought of telling her, Listen, la Tijeras and that other skinny bitch, the one you say doesn't talk but then when she does talk, she fuckin talks, the two of them want to take over your spot. They turned you in to your jefa. They told her you're getting them mixed up in my shit. La Tijeras wants your spot. But I didn't tell her.

I remembered that thing about: don't tell one hand what the other's doing.

I know it's not the same as with Don Chepe, but it's a similar situation, and it's better not to stick my nose into it.

But then I did anyway.

La Reyna believed all that about it being el Javier and she was really pissed, she was burning up, was getting carried away about all this shit. She came into my room and she told me: Pack your things. I just said: What things? All this stuff, she said, as she took out the three shirts, two pairs of pants, and four pairs of socks she gave me. We're getting outta here, I'm quitting before they fire me, hear me? I quit.

Then she started to scream: He's gonna pay, that motherfucker Javier is gonna have to pay for this shit. Repeated it over and over. Open that closet and get that box, she said. The box had a bunch of bills, not a lot of money, but more than I'd ever seen at one time in one place. I don't know

where we'll go, but we're leaving, mija, we're outta here. Anyways, maybe I'm just fed up with this place. In any case, I have money hidden away in spots all over the building. Hold this for me. Hand me that bag. Put everything in here. Pinche Javier, you're gonna pay, you've got no idea who you're fuckin with. I'm gonna hit him where it hurts the most, I don't know how yet, but I'm gonna fuck him up so damn bad.

Honestly, I wasn't even thinking when I let it slip out: We should get the congressman's thugs to beat him down. And La Reyna: What congressman? The one who's chasing me. La Reyna just stared at me with a blank look on her face. I told her: His thugs, those vatos are masters of beatdowns and getting revenge and they can fuck him up something awful.

I said it just to say it, but it worked like a fuckin charm. I didn't have to say or do anything else. La Reyna started to run around my room, she was talking to herself, saying: Think, Reyna, think. Round and round. She rubbed her hands like some villain from her favorite telenovelas, just like they do. Then she stood up straight, right in front of me, and asked me for the congressman's name. Traced one of those big smiles you know aren't out of happiness but something else, a smile I wanted to copy later when she gave me half the money and asked me to keep it in the same bag with my things.

Don't leave this room, lock the door. Actually, if you hear any motherfuckin noise inside or out on the street, hide under the bed with the suitcase and everything else. Don't come out till I tell you, Alicia, hear me?

So here I am under the bed. Outside, more than motherfuckin noise, there's the sound of glass breaking, shouting, gunfire. Outside, more than motherfuckin noise, it's the same sounds I heard in the trash dump the day I ran away.

How much longer do I need to wait? How much longer till I can get out of here?

La Reyna said we'll take a bus. Didn't say exactly where to. Actually, she did say, she said a bus to wherever. And I can do that, leave with her in a bus to wherever because for sure

there's a trash dump wherever we end up and for sure in that trash dump I can start from zero again and build up my own promised land again. For sure.

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I was in the middle of a dream that I was in the dump. I was surrounded by the shells of cars, a bunch of mummified dead dogs and a cloud of flies. But the normal smell of the place was gone. Then the phone rang. It was my brother-in-law saying they were headed to the hospital. My sister had gone into labor.

“I’ll meet you there.”

In the dream, I was walking on a bunch of things that were crunching: plastic, cardboard boxes, pieces of wood. I had a long stick in my hand; I was working. But not like I did with my research. I was like everyone else there. Looking for good trash.

No, I was looking for someone. I walked along nudging things, walked along and knocked on the doors of all those ramshackle houses with their crooked walls. I opened refrigerators that were lying around, dusty and unused outside of the same houses. I searched and searched. Then, far off, I heard a voice:

“No, Gris, no, it’s not there.”

The voice was telling me I was in the wrong place. I asked it where I should be looking and nothing, the voice went silent.

The phone again. Getting out of the car, her water broke. My sister on speaker:

“If my water had broken in the car, this girl would’ve been born and I swear, Gris, she’d have her first punishment waiting for her.”

“How do you feel?”

My sister, like la tía, like my mother, is going to bring a girl into the world. After making a lot of lists and talking about it

endlessly, she and my brother-in-law came to a decision about the name. They're going to call her Luz.

As I got ready to go to the hospital, I went back to my dream. Or my dream came back to me. There I am dressed in dirty clothes and exhausted from so much searching. Just like now.

The truth is, we'll never know what happened with la tía and where her baby ended up. I should stop rooting around in the familial trash dump and accept what was lost.

What I need to do now is focus on this little girl who's about to arrive and to be her aunt.

Sí, it's my turn to be la tía.

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Grab that suitcase, get that other one too. Did you see how they left his place? It's like a hurricane blew through that bitch. What a good idea to call the congressman. They really fucked him over, it's a goddamn miracle they didn't kill him. But if they had killed him, well whatever. By any means necessary, if it's for my family. It was like a machine gun had riddled all the doors, windows, walls, everything. He earned that shit with his big mouth, no, truth is, I earned it by ever believing him in the first place. But god punished his ass, just like he's been punishing me my whole life. Everything in this life comes back around eventually. Hand me that other bag, we're gonna put that ... no, you know what? Nothing goes in there, let's leave that stuff right here, the girls can stuff it all up their stupid asses, even la Linda with her bullshit about putting la Tijeras in charge. Good luck with that. Throw it all on the floor, yeah, I mean it, seriously. Throw it: shoes, blouses, dresses, wigs. All of it, damn it. Just wait and see how this whole little business is gonna come crashing down around them, and meanwhile you and me are gonna be fine, don't know exactly how but we're gonna be just fine, we'll look for ... we're gonna ... Ay mija, I'm getting a feeling here, an idea, I'm getting a plan here, a really good plan. We can go to Ecatepec, Alicia, to Ecatepec. What does it matter if you don't know where it is? I do, I spent the summer there, I grew up there, I was happy there, amá and my nanita are buried there, and, mija, you and me are gonna set up our own business over there, a much better one, and far away, way far away from all this. The cerros are going to watch out for us, I'm telling you, the Cerro de Córdoba, el Chiquihuite, all the mountains. We'll make it so the Lago de Texcoco fills up with water again, you'll see. Progress, mija, we'll bring progress down there. And we're gonna have girls a lot prettier than these fuckin brujas, the two of us are gonna be entrepreneurs, and

everybody's gonna be talking about Ecatepec and we'll make it famous and everybody's gonna wanna try our services cause we'll have the best in the whole damn country.

You and me, mija, we're leaving, and over there we'll build our own promised land.

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JD Pluecker's works with language inhabits the intersections of writing, history, translation, art, interpreting, bookmaking, queer/trans aesthetics, non-normative poetics, language justice, and cross-border cultural production. They have translated numerous books from Spanish, including *Writing with Caca* (Green Lantern Press, 2021), *Gore Capitalism* (Semiotext(e), 2018) and *Antígona González* (Les Figues Press, 2016), and *Trash*. Their book of poetry and image, *Ford Over*, was released in 2016 from Noemi Press, and in 2019 Lawndale Art Center supported the publication of the artist book *The Unsettlements: Dad*. From 2010 to 2020, they worked as part of the transdisciplinary collaborative Antena Aire and from 2015 to 2020 with the local social justice interpreting collective Antena Houston. JD was a 2016 recipient of the Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writing Grant and has exhibited work at Blaffer Art Museum, the Hammer Museum, Project Row Houses, and more. More info at www.jdpluecker.com and www.antenaantena.org.

In Mexico, **Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny** has published four short-story collections: *Gente Menuda* (Voces del Desierto, 1999), *No son gente como uno* (Premio del Libro Sonorense, 2003), *Nenitas* (Premio Ciudad de la Paz, 2013), and *Señorita Ansiedad y Otras Manías* (Premio Narrativas Emergentes, 2014). She is also the author of four novels—*Una no habla de esto* (2007), *Todo Esto Es Yo* (Premio Nacional de Novela Tamaulipas, 2015), *Basura* (Nitro-Press, 2018), and *El Libro de Aisha*, (Random House, 2021)—as well as *The Everything I Have Lost* (Cinco Puntos Press, 2020), an English-language rewriting of *Todo Esto Es Yo*. Theater director Josafat A. Rodriguez adapted her book *Nenitas* into a series of monologues, and the play has toured throughout Mexico to cities such as Monterrey, Merida, La Paz, Ciudad Juárez, and Mexico City. A short film based on Aguilar Zéleny's short story "Morder la vida toda" screened at various film festivals in Mexico. Her work has been included in anthologies in México, the United States, Australia, Peru, and South Korea. She has also given conferences and participated in various

panels addressing the work of women writers of Latin America, as well as panels on teaching bilingual creative writing and fiction to first- and second-generation students.

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“The masterful way that Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny develops the characters is evidence that the author has a high level of narrative power.” —Raul Picazo, *Crash*

“Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny has constructed a novel that impregnates itself into the skin and the nose: *Trash*. Not infrequently, I was submerged into its pages and suddenly felt that something around me smelled awful. And it’s the truth: something smells awful in this country.”

—Óscar Alarcón, *El Popular*

Aguilar Zéleny’s English-language debut shows the complexities of survival and joy, love and violence for three women: a teenager abandoned by her guardian at the dump, a scientist doing research on the residents of the dump, and a transwoman living nearby who is the matriarch of a group of sex workers.

Each one of the characters navigates family, abandonment, power, jealousy, greed, and multiple taboos around sexuality and gender violence. Their stories are linked by geography and by ideas of waste and abandonment.

As Aguilar Zéleny explores these territories in her book, she asks crucial questions: Who is seen as disposable and why? How do women find their own means of survival and joy in the midst of a perilous sociopolitical context? What does it mean to live a life in a time of austerity and extreme violence? *Trash* is a critical intervention in Mexican literature.



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