tile attempts to reconcile their dual roles as men (in the eyes of their families) and as mere boys (in the eyes of the outside world). . . . There's a lot of artistry in this book, and where there is art, there is always hope."

—Austin American-Statesman

“Remarkable . . . His style is succinct and unadorned, yet the effect is lush and vivid, and after a few lines you are there with him, living in his documentary, his narration running through your head almost like your own thoughts. . . . Vignettes . . . observed with depth and tenderness but most of all with a simple honesty that rings as clear and true as a wind chime.”

—The Dallas Morning News

“Mesmerizingly honest, heart-breaking and full of promise . . . Tales of life among the excluded classes of the diaspora, they tread fearlessly where lesser writers gush and politicize—which is exactly their political and aesthetic power.”

—Si Magazine

“Remarkable.”

—Entertainment Weekly

“The talent is strong and individual . . . . Díaz’s language is careful and astringent . . . powerful and revelatory.”

—Houston Chronicle

“A powerful writer. Díaz makes no apologies.”

—Albuquerque Journal
Where have you been? Pesao asks.
I've been fighting evil.
I want to do that.
You won't like it, he says.

Pesao looks at his face, giggles and flings another pebble at the hens, who scatter indignantly.
He watches the sun burn the mists from the fields and despite the heat the beans are thick and green and flexible in the breeze. His mother sees him on the way back from the outhouse. She goes to fetch his mask.

He's tired and aching but he looks out over the valley, and the way the land curves away to hide itself reminds him of the way Lou hides his dominos when they play. Go, she says. Before your father comes out.

He knows what happens when his father comes out. He pulls on his mask and feels the fleas stirring in the cloth. When she turns her back, he hides, blending into the weeds. He watches his mother hold Pesao's head gently under the faucet and when the water finally urges out from the pipe Pesao yells as if he's been given a present or a wish come true.

He runs, down towards town, never slipping or stumbling. Nobody's faster.
My father, Ramón de las Casas, left Santo Domingo just before my fourth birthday. Papi had been planning to leave for months, hustling and borrowing from his friends, from anyone he could put the bite on. In the end it was just plain luck that got his visa processed when it did. The last of his luck on the Island, considering that Mami had recently discovered he was keeping with an overweight puta he had met while breaking up a fight on her street in Los Millonitos. Mami learned this from a friend of hers, a nurse and a neighbor of the puta. The nurse couldn’t understand what Papi was doing loafing around her street when he was supposed to be on patrol.

The initial fights, with Mami throwing our silverware into wild orbits, lasted a week. After a fork pierced him in the cheek, Papi decided to move out, just until things cooled down. He took a small bag of clothes and broke out early in the morning. On his second night away from the house, with the puta asleep at his side,
Papi had a dream that the money Mami’s father had promised him was spiraling away in the wind like bright bright birds. The dream blew him out of bed like a gunshot. Are you OK? the puta asked and he shook his head. I think I have to go somewhere, he said. He borrowed a clean mustard-colored guayabera from a friend, put himself in a concho and paid our abuelo a visit.

Abuelo had his rocking chair in his usual place, out on the sidewalk where he could see everyone and everything. He had fashioned that chair as a thirtieth-birthday present to himself and twice had to replace the wicker screens that his ass and shoulders had worn out. If you were to walk down to the Duarte you would see that type of chair for sale everywhere. It was November, the mangoes were thudding from the trees. Despite his dim eyesight, Abuelo saw Papi coming the moment he stepped onto Sunner Welles. Abuelo sighed, he’d had it up to his cojones with this spat. Papi hiked up his pants and squatted down next to the rocking chair.

I am here to talk to you about my life with your daughter, he said, removing his hat. I don’t know what you’ve heard but I swear on my heart that none of it is true. All I want for your daughter and our children is to take them to the United States. I want a good life for them.

Abuelo searched his pockets for the cigarette he had just put away. The neighbors were gravitating towards the front of their houses to listen to the exchange. What about this other woman? Abuelo said finally, unable to find the cigarette tucked behind his ear.

It’s true I went to her house, but that was a mistake. I did nothing to shame you, viejo. I know it wasn’t a smart thing to do, but I didn’t know the woman would lie like she did.

Is that what you said to Virta?

Yes, but she won’t listen. She cares too much about what she hears from her friends. If you don’t think I can do anything for your daughter then I won’t ask to borrow that money.

Abuelo spit the taste of car exhaust and street dust from his mouth. He might have spit four or five times. The sun could have set twice on his deliberations but with his eyes quitting, his farm in Azua now dust and his familia in need, what could he really do?

Listen Ramón, he said, scratching his arm hairs. I believe you. But Virta, she hears the chisme on the street and you know how that is. Come home and be good to her. Don’t yell. Don’t hit the children. I’ll tell her that you are leaving soon. That will help smooth things between the two of you.

Papi fetched his things from the puta’s house and moved back in that night. Mami acted as if he were a troublesome visitor who had to be endured. She slept with the children and stayed out of the house as often as she could, visiting her relatives in other parts of the Capital. Many times Papi took hold of her arms and pushed her against the slumping walls of the house,

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thinking his touch would snap her from her brooding silence, but instead she slapped or kicked him. Why the hell do you do that? he demanded. Don’t you know how soon I’m leaving?

Then go, she said.
You’ll regret that.
She shrugged and said nothing else.

In a house as loud as ours, one woman’s silence was a serious thing. Papi slouched about for a month, taking us to kung fu movies we couldn’t understand and drilling into us how much we’d miss him. He’d hover around Mami while she checked our hair for lice, wanting to be nearby the instant she cracked and begged him to stay.

One night Abuelo handed Papi a cigar box stuffed with cash. The bills were new and smelled of ginger. Here it is. Make your children proud.

You’ll see. He kissed the viejo’s cheek and the next day had himself a ticket for a flight leaving in three days. He held the ticket in front of Mami’s eyes. Do you see this?

She nodded tiredly and took up his hands. In their room, she already had his clothes packed and mended.

She didn’t kiss him when he left. Instead she sent each of the children over to him. Say good-bye to your father. Tell him that you want him back soon.

When he tried to embrace her she grabbed his upper arms, her fingers like pincers. You had best remember where this money came from, she said, the last words they exchanged face-to-face for five years.

He arrived in Miami at four in the morning in a roaring poorly booked plane. He passed easily through customs, having brought nothing but some clothes, a towel, a bar of soap, a razor, his money and a box of Chiclets in his pocket. The ticket to Miami had saved him money but he intended to continue on to Nueva York as soon as he could. Nueva York was the city of jobs, the city that had first called the Cubanos and their cigar industry, then the Bootstrap Puerto Ricans and now him.

He had trouble finding his way out of the terminal. Everyone was speaking English and the signs were no help. He smoked half a pack of cigarettes while wandering around. When he finally exited the terminal, he rested his bag on the sidewalk and threw away the rest of the cigarettes. In the darkness he could see little of Northamerica. A vast stretch of cars, distant palms and a highway that reminded him of the Máximo Gómez. The air was not as hot as home and the city was well lit but he didn’t feel as if he had crossed an ocean and a world. A cabdriver in front of the terminal called to him in Spanish and threw his bag easily in the back seat of the cab. A new one, he said. The man was black, stooped and strong.

You got family here?
Not really.
How about an address?

Nope, Papi said. I'm here on my own. I got two hands and a heart as strong as a rock.

Right, the taxi driver said. He toured Papi through the city, around Calle Ocho. Although the streets were empty and accordion gates stretched in front of storefronts Papi recognized the prosperity in the buildings and in the tall operative lampposts. He indulged himself in the feeling that he was being shown his new digs to ensure that they met with his approval. Find a place to sleep here, the driver advised. And first thing tomorrow get yourself a job. Anything you can find.

I'm here to work,

Sure, said the driver. He dropped Papi off at a hotel and charged him five dollars for half an hour of service. Whatever you save on me will help you later. I hope you do well.

Papi offered the driver a tip but the driver was already pulling away, the dome atop his cab glowing, calling another fare. Shouldering his bag, Papi began to stroll, smelling the dust and the heat filtering up from the pressed rock of the streets. At first he considered saving money by sleeping outside on a bench but he was without guides and the inscrutability of the nearby signs unnerved him. What if there was a curfew? He knew that the slightest turn of fortune could dash him. How many before him had gotten this far only to get sent back for some stupid infraction? The sky was suddenly too high. He walked back the way he had come and went into the hotel, its spastic neon sign obtrusively jutting into the street. He had difficulty understanding the man at the desk, but finally the man wrote down the amount for a night's stay in block numbers. Room cuatro-cuatro, the man said. Papi had as much difficulty working the shower but finally was able to take a bath. It was the first bathroom he'd been in that hadn't curled the hair on his body. With the radio tuned in and incoherent, he trimmed his mustache. No photos exist of his mustache days but it is easily imagined. Within an hour he was asleep. He was twenty-four. He didn't dream about his familia and wouldn't for many years. He dreamed instead of gold coins, like the ones that had been salvaged from the many wrecks about our island, stacked high as sugar cane.

Even on his first disorienting morning, as an aged Latina snapped the sheets from the bed and emptied the one piece of scrap paper he'd thrown in the trash can, Papi pushed himself through the sit-ups and push-ups that kept him kicking ass until his forties.

You should try these, he told the Latina. They make work a lot easier.

If you had a job, she said, you wouldn't need exercise.

He stored the clothes he had worn the day before in his canvas shoulder bag and assembled a new outfit. He used his fingers and water to flatten out the worst of the...
wrinkles. During the years he’d lived with Mami, he’d washed and ironed his own clothes. These things were a man’s job, he liked to say, proud of his own upkeep. Razor creases on his pants and resplendent white shirts were his trademarks. His generation had, after all, been weaned on the sartorial lunacy of the Jefe, who had owned just under ten thousand ties on the eve of his assassination. Dressed as he was, trim and serious, Papi looked foreign but not mojado.

That first day he chanced on a share in an apartment with three Guatemalans and his first job washing dishes at a Cuban sandwich shop. Once an old gringo diner of the hamburger-and-soda variety, the shop now filled with Óyeme’s and the aroma of lechón. Sandwich pressers clamped down methodically behind the front counter. The man reading the newspaper in the back told Papi he could start right away and gave him two white ankle-length aprons. Wash these every day, he said. We stay clean around here.

Two of Papi’s flatmates were brothers, Stefan and Tomás Hernández. Stefan was older than Tomás by twenty years. Both had families back home. Cataracts were slowly obscuring Stefan’s eyes; the disease had cost him half a finger and his last job. He now swept floors and cleaned up vomit at the train station. This is a lot safer, he told my father. Working at a fábrica will kill you before any tiguere will. Stefan had a passion for the track and would read the forms, despite his brother’s warnings that he was ruining what was left of his eyes, by bringing his face down to the type. The tip of his nose was often capped in ink.

Eulalio was the third apartment-mate. He had the largest room to himself and owned the rusted-out Duster that brought them to work every morning. He’d been in the States close to two years and when he met Papi he spoke to him in English. When Papi didn’t answer, Eulalio switched to Spanish. You’re going to have to practice if you expect to get anywhere. How much English do you know?

None, Papi said after a moment.

Eulalio shook his head. Papi met Eulalio last and liked him least.

Papi slept in the living room, first on a carpet whose fraying threads kept sticking to his shaved head, and then on a mattress he salvaged from a neighbor. He worked two long shifts a day at the shop and had two four-hour breaks in between. On one of the breaks he slept at home and on the other he would handwash his aprons in the shop’s sink and then nap in the storage room while the aprons dried, amidst the towers of El Pico coffee cans and sacks of bread. Sometimes he read the Western dreadfuls he was fond of—he could read one in about an hour. If it was too hot or he was bored by his book, he walked the neighborhoods, amazed at streets unblocked by sewage and the orderliness of the cars and houses. He was impressed with the transplanted Latinas, who had been transformed by good diets and beauty products unimaginined back home.
They were beautiful but unfriendly women. He would touch a finger to his beret and stop, hoping to slip in a comment or two, but these women would walk right on by, grimacing.

He wasn't discouraged. He began joining Eulalio on his nightly jaunts to the bars. Papi would have gladly shared a drink with the Devil rather than go out alone. The Hernández brothers weren't much for the outings; they were hoarders, though occasionally they cut loose, blinding themselves on tequila and beers. The brothers would stumble home late, stepping on Papi, howling about some morena who had spurned them to their faces.

Eulalio and Papi went out two, three nights a week, drinking rum and stalking. Whenever he could, Papi let Eulalio do the buying. Eulalio liked to talk about the finca he had come from, a large plantation near the center of his country. I fell in love with the daughter of the owner and she fell in love with me. Me, a peon. Can you believe that? I would kill her on her own mother's bed, in sight of the Holy Mother and her crucified Son. I tried to make her take down that cross but she wouldn't hear of it. She loved it that way. She was the one who lent me the money to come here. Can you believe that? One of these days, when I got a little money on the side I'm going to send for her.

It was the same story, seasoned differently, every night. Papi said little, believed less. He watched the women who were always with other men. After an hour or two, Papi would pay his bill and leave. Even though the weather was cool, he didn't need a jacket and liked to push through the breeze in short-sleeved shirts. He'd walk the mile home, talking to anyone who would let him. Occasionally drunkards would stop at his Spanish and invite him to a house where men and women were drinking and dancing. He liked those parties far better than the face-offs at the bars. It was with these strangers that he practiced his fledgling English, away from Eulalio's gleeful criticisms.

At the apartment, he'd lie down on his mattress, stretching out his limbs to fill it as much as he could. He abstained from thoughts of home, from thoughts of his two bellicose sons and the wife he had nicknamed Melao. He told himself, Think only of today and tomorrow. Whenever he felt weak, he'd take from under the couch the road map he bought at a gas station and trace his fingers up the coast, enunciating the city names slowly, trying to copy the awful crunch of sounds that was English. The northern coast of our island was visible on the bottom right-hand corner of the map.

He left Miami in the winter. He'd lost his job and gained a new one but neither paid enough and the cost of the living room floor was too great. Besides, Papi had figured out from a few calculations and from talking to the gringa downstairs (who now understood him) that Eulalio wasn't paying culo for rent. Which explained why he had so many fine clothes and didn't work
nearly as much as the rest. When Papi showed the figures to the Hernández brothers, written on the border of a newspaper, they were indifferent. He’s the one with the car, they said; Stefan blinking at the numbers. Besides, who wants to start trouble here? We’ll all be moving on anyway.

But this isn’t right, Papi said. I’m living like a dog for this shit.

What can you do? Tomás said. Life smacks everybody around.

We’ll see about that.

There are two stories about what happened next, one from Papi, one from Mami: either Papi left peacefully with a suitcase filled with Eulalio’s best clothes or he beat the man first, and then took a bus and the suitcase to Virginia.

Papi logged most of the miles after Virginia on foot. He could have afforded another bus ticket but that would have bitten into the rent money he had so diligently saved on the advice of many a veteran immigrant. To be homeless in Nueva York was to court the worst sort of disaster. Better to walk 380 miles than to arrive completely broke. He stored his savings in a fake alligator change purse sewn into the seam of his boxer shorts. Though the purse blistered his thigh, it was in a place no thief would search.

He walked in his bad shoes, froze and learned to distinguish different cars by the sounds of their motors.

The cold wasn’t as much a bother as his bags were. His arms ached from carrying them, especially the meat of his biceps. Twice he hitched rides from truckers who took pity on the shivering man and just outside of Delaware a K-car stopped him on the side of I-95.

These men were federal marshals. Papi recognized them immediately as police; he knew the type. He studied their car and considered running into the woods behind him. His visa had expired five weeks earlier and if caught, he’d go home in chains. He’d heard plenty of tales about the Northamerican police from other illegals, how they liked to beat you before they turned you over to la migra and how sometimes they just took your money and tossed you out toothless on an abandoned road. For some reason, perhaps the whipping cold, perhaps stupidity, Papi stayed where he was, shuffling and sniffing. A window rolled down on the car. Papi went over and looked in on two sleepy blancos.

You need a ride?

Jes, Papi said.

The men squeezed together and Papi slipped into the front seat. Ten miles passed before he could feel his ass again. When the chill and the roar of passing cars finally left him, he realized that a fragile-looking man, handcuffed and shackled, sat in the back seat. The small man wept quietly.

How far you going? the driver asked.

New York, he said, carefully omitting the Nueva and the Yol.
We ain’t going that far but you can ride with us to Trenton if you like. Where the hell you from pal?

Miami.

Miami. Miami’s kind of far from here. The other man looked at the driver. Are you a musician or something?

Jes, Papi said. I play the accordion.

That excited the man in the middle. Shit, my old man played the accordion but he was a Polack like me. I didn’t know you spiks played it too. What kind of polkas do you like?

Polkas?

Jesus, Will, the driver said. They don’t play polkas in Cuba.

They drove on, slowing only to unfold their badges at the tolls. Papi sat still and listened to the man crying in the back. What is wrong? Papi asked. Maybe sick?

The driver snorted. Him sick? We’re the ones who are about to puke.

What’s your name? the Polack asked.

Ramón.

Ramón, meet Scott Carlson Porter, murderer.

 Murderer?

Many many murders. Mucho murders.

He’s been crying since we left Georgia, the driver explained. He hasn’t stopped. Not once. The little pussy cries even when we’re eating. He’s driving us nuts.

We thought maybe having another person inside with us would shut him up—the man next to Papi shook his head—but I guess not.

The marshals dropped Papi off in Trenton. He was so relieved not to be in jail that he didn’t mind walking the four hours it took to summon the nerve to put his thumb out again.

His first year in Nueva York he lived in Washington Heights, in a roachy flat above what’s now the Tres Marías restaurant. As soon as he secured his apartment and two jobs, one cleaning offices and the other washing dishes, he started writing home. In the first letter he folded four twenty-dollar bills. The trickles of money he sent back were not premeditated like those sent by his other friends, calculated from what he needed to survive; these were arbitrary sums that often left him broke and borrowing until the next payday.

The first year he worked nineteen-, twenty-hour days, seven days a week. Out in the cold he coughed explosively, feeling as if his lungs were tearing open from the force of his exhales and in the kitchens the heat from the ovens sent pain corkscrewing into his head. He wrote home sporadically. Mami forgave him for what he had done and told him who else had left the barrio, via coffin or plane ticket. Papi’s replies were scribbled on whatever he could find, usually the thin cardboard of tissue boxes or pages from the bill books at work. He was so tired from working that he mis-
spelled almost everything and had to bite his lip to stay awake. He promised her and the children tickets soon. The pictures he received from Mami were shared with his friends at work and then forgotten in his wallet, lost between old lottery slips.

The weather was no good. He was sick often but was able to work through it and succeeded in saving up enough money to start looking for a wife to marry. It was the old routine, the oldest of the postwar marromas. Find a citizen, get married, wait, and then divorce her. The routine was well practiced and expensive and riddled with swindlers.

A friend of his at work put him in touch with a portly balding blanco named El General. They met at a bar. El General had to eat two plates of greasy onion rings before he talked business. Look here friend, el General said. You pay me fifty bills and I bring you a woman that's interested. Whatever the two of you decide is up to you. All I care is that I get paid and that the women I bring are for real. You get no refunds if you can't work something out with her.

Why the hell don't I just go out looking for myself?

Sure, you can do that. He patted vegetable oil on Papi's hand. But I'm the one who takes the risk of running into Immigration. If you don't mind that then you can go out looking anywhere you want.

Even to Papi fifty bucks wasn't exorbitant but he was reluctant to part with it. He had no problem buying rounds at the bar or picking up a new belt when the colors and the moment suited him but this was different. He didn't want to deal with any more change.

Don't get me wrong: it wasn't that he was having fun. No, he'd been robbed twice already, his ribs beaten until they were bruised. He often drank too much and went home to his room, and there he'd fume, spinning, angry at the stupidity that had brought him to this freezing hell of a country, angry that a man his age had to masturbate when he had a wife, and angry at the blinkered existence his jobs and the city imposed on him. He never had time to sleep, let alone to go to a concert or the museums that filled entire sections of the newspapers. And the roaches. The roaches were so bold in his flat that turning on the lights did not startle them. They waved their three-inch antennas as if to say, Hey puto, turn that shit off. He spent five minutes stepping on their carapaced bodies and shaking them from his mattress before dropping into his cot and still the roaches crawled on him at night. No, he wasn't having fun but he also wasn't ready to start bringing his family over. Getting legal would place his hand firmly on that first rung. He wasn't so sure he could face us so soon. He asked his friends, most of whom were in worse financial shape than he was, for advice.

They assumed he was reluctant because of the money. Don't be a pendejo, hombre. Give fulano his money and that's it. Maybe you make good, maybe you don't. That's the way it is. They built these barriers out of bad luck and you got to get used to that.
Next week. I have to start on the paperwork right away.

He pinned the receipt over his bed and before he went to sleep, he checked behind it to be sure no roaches lurked. His friends were excited and the boss at the cleaning job took them out for drinks and appetizers in Harlem, where their Spanish drew more looks than their frumpy clothes. Their excitement was not his; he felt as if he’d moved too precipitously. A week later, Papi went to see the friend who had recommended el General.

I still haven’t gotten a call, he explained. The friend was scrubbing down a counter.

You will. The friend didn’t look up. A week later Papi lay in bed, drunk, alone, knowing full well that he’d been robbed.

He lost the cleaning job shortly thereafter for punching the friend off a ladder. He lost his apartment and had to move in with a familia and found another job frying wings and rice at a Chinese take-out joint. Before he left his flat, he wrote an account of what had happened to him on the pink receipt and left it on the wall as a warning to whatever fool came next to take his place. Ten cuidado, he wrote. These people are worse than sharks.

He sent no money home for close to six months. Mami’s letters would be read and folded and tucked into his well-used bags.
Papi met her on the morning before Christmas, in a laundry, while folding his pants and knotting his damp socks. She was short, had daggers of black hair pointing down in front of her ears and lent him her iron. She was originally from La Romana, but like so many Dominicans had eventually moved to the Capital.

I go back there about once a year, she told Papi. Usually around Pascua to see my parents and my sister.

I haven’t been home in a long long time. I’m still trying to get the money together.

It will happen, believe me. It took me years before I could go back my first time.

Papi found out she’d been in the States for six years, a citizen. Her English was excellent. While he packed his things in his nylon bag, he considered asking her to the party. A friend had invited him to a house in Corona, Queens, where fellow Dominicans were celebrating la Noche Buena together. He knew from a past party that up in Queens the food, dancing and single women came in heaps.

Four children were trying to pry open the plate at the top of a dryer to reach the coin mechanism underneath. My fucking quarter is stuck, a kid was shouting. In the corner, a student, still in medical greens, was trying to read a magazine and not be noticed but as soon as the kids were tired of the machine, they descended on him, pulling at his magazine and pushing their hands into his pockets. He began to shove back.

Hey, Papi said. The kids threw him the finger and ran outside. Fuck all spiks! they shrieked.

Niggers, the medical student muttered. Papi pulled the drawstring shut on his bag and decided against asking her. He knew the rule: Strange is the woman who goes strange places with a complete stranger. Instead, Papi asked her if he could practice his English on her one day. I really need to practice, he said. And I’d be willing to pay you for your time.

She laughed. Don’t be ridiculous. Stop by when you can. She wrote her number and address in crooked letters.

Papi squinted at the paper. You don’t live around here?

No but my cousin does. I can give you her number if you want.

No, this will be fine.

He had a grand time at the party and actually avoided the rum and the six-packs he liked to down. He sat with two older women and their husbands, a plate of food on his lap (potato salad, pieces of roast chicken, a stack of tostones, half an avocado and a tiny splattering of mondongo out of politeness to the woman who’d brought it) and talked about his days in Santo Domingo. It was a lucid enjoyable night that would stick out in his memory like a spike. He swaggered home around one o’clock, bearing a plastic bag loaded with food and a loaf of telera under his arm. He gave
the bread to the shivering man sleeping in the hallway of his building.

When he called Nilda a few days later he found out from a young girl who spoke in politely spaced words that she was at work. Papi left his name and called back that night. Nilda answered.

Ramón, you should have called me yesterday. It was a good day to start since neither of us had work.

I wanted to let you celebrate the holiday with your family.

Family? she chucked. I only have a daughter here. What are you doing now? Maybe you want to come over.

I wouldn't want to intrude, he said because he was a sly one, you had to admit that.

She owned the top floor of a house on a bleak quiet street in Brooklyn. The house was clean, with cheap bubbled linoleum covering the floors. Nilda's taste struck Ramón as low-class. She threw together styles and colors the way a child might throw together paint or clay. A bright orange plaster elephant reared up from the center of a low glass table. A tapestry of a herd of mustangs hung opposite vinyl cutouts of African singers. Fake plants relaxed in each room. Her daughter Milagros was excruciatingly polite and seemed to have an endless supply of dresses more fit for quinceañeras than everyday life. She wore thick plastic glasses and sat in front of the television when Papi visited, one skinny leg crossed over the other. Nilda had a well-stocked kitchen and Papi cooked for her, his stockpile of Cantonese and Cuban recipes inexhaustible. His ropa vieja was his best dish and he was glad to see he had surprised her. I should have you in my kitchen, she said.

She liked to talk about the restaurant she owned and her last husband, who had a habit of hitting her and expecting that all his friends be fed for free. Nilda wasted hours of their study time caught between the leaves of tome-sized photo albums, showing Papi each stage of Milagros's development as if the girl were an exotic bug. He did not mention his own familia. Two weeks into his English lessons, Papi kissed Nilda. They were sitting on the plastic-covered sofa, in the next room a game show was on the TV, and his lips were greasy from Nilda's pollo guisado.

I think you better leave, she said.
You mean now?
Yes, now.

He drew on his windbreaker as slowly as he could, expecting her to recant. She held open the door and shut it quickly after him. He cursed her the entire train ride back into Manhattan. The next day at work, he told his co-workers that she was insane and had a snake coiled up in her heart. I should've known, he said bitterly. A week later he was back at her house, grating coconuts and talking in English. He tried again and again she had him leave.

Each time he kissed her she threw him out. It was a
cold winter and he didn’t have much of a coat. Nobody bought coats then, Papi told me, because nobody was expecting to stay that long. So I kept going back and any chance I got I kissed her. She would tense up and tell me to leave, like I’d hit her. So I would kiss her again and she’d say, Oh, I really think you better leave now. She was a crazy lady. I kept it up and one day she kissed me back. Finally. By then I knew every maldito train in the city and I had this big wool coat and two pairs of gloves. I looked like an Eskimo. Like an American.

Within a month Papi moved out of his apartment into her house in Brooklyn. They were married in March.

Although he wore a ring, Papi didn’t act the part of the husband. He lived in Nilda’s house, shared her bed, paid no rent, ate her food, talked to Milagros when the TV was broken and set up his weight bench in the cellar. He regained his health and liked to show Nilda how his triceps and biceps could gather in prominent knots with a twist of his arm. He bought his shirts in size medium so he could fill them out.

He worked two jobs close to her house. The first soldering at a radiator shop, plugging holes mostly, the other as a cook at a Chinese restaurant. The owners of the restaurant were Chinese-Cubans; they cooked a better arroz negro than pork fried rice and loved to spend the quiet hours between lunch and dinner slapping dominos with Papi and the other help on top of huge drums of shortening. One day, while adding up his totals, Papi told these men about his familia in Santo Domingo.

The chief cook, a man so skinny they called him Needle, soured. You can’t forget your familia like that. Didn’t they support you to send you here?

I’m not forgetting them, Papi said defensively. Right now is just not a good time for me to send for them. You should see my bills.

What bills?

Papi thought a moment. Electricity. That’s very expensive. My house has eighty-eight light bulbs.

What kind of house are you living in?

Very big. An antique house needs a lot of bulbs, you know.

Come mierda. Nobody has that many light bulbs in their house.

You better do more playing and less talking or I’m going to have to take all your money.

These harangues must not have bothered his conscience much because that year he sent no money.

Nilda learned about Papi’s other familia from a chain of friends that reached back across the Caribe. It was inevitable. She was upset and Papi had to deliver some of his most polished performances to convince her that he no longer cared about us. He’d been fortunate in that when Mami reached back across a similar chain of im-
migrants to locate Papi in the north, he'd told her to direct her letters to the restaurant he was working at and not to Nilda's home.

As with most of the immigrants around them, Nilda was usually at work. The couple saw each other mostly in the evenings. Nilda not only had her restaurant, where she served a spectacular and popular sancocho with wedges of cold avocado, but she also pushed her tailoring on the customers. If a man had a torn work shirt or a pant cuff soiled in machine oil, she'd tell him to bring it by, that she'd take care of it, cheap. She had a loud voice and could draw the attention of the entire eatery to a shabby article of clothing and few, under the combined gaze of their peers, could resist her. She brought the clothes home in a garbage bag and spent her time off sewing and listening to the radio, getting up only to bring Ramón a beer or change the channel for him. When she had to bring money home from the register, her skills at secreting it away were uncanny. She kept nothing but coins in her purse and switched her hiding place each trip. Usually she lined her bra with twenty-dollar bills as if each cup was a nest but Papi was amazed at her other ploys. After a crazy day of mashing platanos and serving the workers, she sealed nearly nine hundred dollars in twenties and fifties in a sandwich bag and then forced the bag into the mouth of a Malta bottle. She put a straw in there and sipped on it on her way home. She never lost a brown penny in the time she and Papi were together. If she wasn't too
tired she liked to have him guess where she was hiding the money and with each wrong guess he'd remove a piece of her clothing until the cache was found.

Papi's best friend at this time, and Nilda's neighbor, was Jorge Carretas Lugones, or Jo-Jo as he was commonly known in the barrio. Jo-Jo was a five-foot-tall Puerto Rican whose light skin was stippled with moles and whose blue eyes were the color of larimar. On the street, he wore a pava, angled in the style of the past, carried a pen and all the local lotteries in his shirt pockets, and would have struck anyone as a hustler. Jo-Jo owned two hot dog carts and co-owned a grocery store that was very prosperous. It had once been a tired place with rotting wood and cracked tiles but with his two brothers he'd pulled the porquería out and rebuilt it over the four months of one winter, while driving a taxi and working as a translator and letter-writer for a local patrón. The years of doubling the price on toilet paper, soap and diapers to pay the loan sharks were over. The coffin refrigerators lining one wall were new, as were the bright green lottery machine and the revolving racks of junk food at the end of each short shelf. He was disdainful of anyone who had a regular crowd of parasites loafing about their stores, discussing the taste of yuca and their last lays. And though this neighborhood was rough (not as bad as his old barrio in San Juan where he had seen all his best friends lose fingers in machete fights), Jo-Jo didn't need to put a grate over his store. The local kids left him alone and
instead terrorized a Pakistani family down the street. The family owned an Asian grocery store that looked like a holding cell, windows behind steel mesh, door reinforced with steel plates.

Jo-Jo and Papi met at the local bar regularly. Papi was the man who knew the right times to laugh and when he did, everyone around him joined in. He was always reading newspapers and sometimes books and seemed to know many things. Jo-Jo saw in Papi another brother, a man from a luckless past needing a little direction. Jo-Jo had already rehabilitated two of his siblings, who were on their way to owning their own stores.

Now that you have a place and papers, Jo-Jo told Papi, you need to use these things to your advantage. You have some time, you don’t have to break your ass paying the rent, so use it. Save some money and buy yourself a little business. I’ll sell you one of my hot dog carts cheap if you want. You can see they’re making steady plata. Then you get your familia over here and buy yourself a nice house and start branching out. That’s the American way.

Papi wanted a negocio of his own, that was his dream, but he balked at starting at the bottom, selling hot dogs. While most of the men around him were two-times broke, he had seen a few, fresh off the boat, shake the water from their backs and jump right into the lowest branches of the American establishment. That leap was what he envisioned for himself, not some slow upward crawl through the mud. What it would be and when it would come, he did not know.

I’m looking for the right investment, he told Jo-Jo. I’m not a food man.

What sort of man are you then? Jo-Jo demanded. You Dominicans got restaurants in your blood.

I know, Papi said, but I am not a food man.

Worse, Jo-Jo spouted a hard line on loyalty to familia which troubled Papi. Each scenario his friend proposed ended with Papi’s familia living safely within his sight, showering him with love. Papi had difficulty separating the two threads of his friend’s beliefs, that of negocios and that of familia, and in the end the two became impossibly intertwined.

With the hum of his new life Papi should have found it easy to bury the memory of us but neither his conscience, nor the letters from home that found him wherever he went, would allow it. Mami’s letters, as regular as the months themselves, were corrosive slaps in the face. It was now a one-sided correspondence, with Papi reading and not mailing anything back. He opened the letters wincing in anticipation. Mami detailed how his children were suffering, how his littlest boy was so anemic people thought he was a corpse come back to life; she told him about his oldest son, playing in the barrio, tearing open his feet and exchanging blows with his so-called friends. Mami refused to talk about her condition. She called Papi a desgraciado and a puto of the highest order for aban-
doping them, a traitor worm, an eater of pubic lice, a cockless, ball-less cabrón. He showed Jo-Jo the letters, often at drunken bitter moments, and Jo-Jo would shake his head, waving for two more beers. You, my compadre, have done too many things wrong. If you keep this up, your life will spring apart.

What in the world can I do? What does this woman want from me? I’ve been sending her money. Does she want me to starve up here?

You and I know what you have to do. That’s all I can say, otherwise I’d be wasting my breath.

Papi was lost. He would take long perilous night walks home from his jobs, sometimes arriving with his knuckles scuffed and his clothes disheveled. His and Nilda’s child was born in the spring, a son, also named Ramón, cause for fiesta but there was no celebration among his friends. Too many of them knew. Nilda could sense that something was wrong, that a part of him was detained elsewhere but each time she brought it up Papi told her it was nothing, always nothing.

With a regularity that proved instructional, Jo-Jo had Papi drive him to Kennedy to meet one or the other of the relatives Jo-Jo had sponsored to come to the States to make it big. Despite his prosperity, Jo-Jo could not drive and did not own a car. Papi would borrow Nilda’s Chevy station wagon and would fight the traffic for an hour to reach the airport. Depending on the season, Jo-Jo would bring either a number of coats or a cooler of beverages taken from his shelves—a rare treat since Jo-Jo’s cardinal rule was that one should never prey on one’s own stock. At the terminal, Papi would stand back, his hands pressed in his pockets, his beret plugged on tight, while Jo-Jo surged forward to greet his familia. Papi’s English was good now, his clothes better. Jo-Jo would enter a berserk frenzy when his relatives stumbled through the arrival gate, dazed and grinning, bearing cardboard boxes and canvas bags. There would be crying and abrazos. Jo-Jo would introduce Ramón as a brother and Ramón would be dragged into the circle of crying people. It was a simple matter for Ramón to rearrange the faces of the arrivals and see his wife and his children there.

He began again to send money to his familia on the Island. Nilda noticed that he began to borrow from her for his tobacco and to play the lotteries. Why do you need my money? she complained. Isn’t that the reason you’re working? We have a baby to look after. There are bills to pay.

One of my children died, he said. I have to pay for the wake and the funeral. So leave me alone.

Why didn’t you tell me?

He put his hands over his face but when he removed them she was still staring skeptically.

Which one? she demanded. His hand swung clumsily. She fell down and neither of them said a word.

Papi landed a union job with Reynolds Aluminum in West New York that paid triple what he was making
at the radiator shop. It was nearly a two-hour commute, followed by a day of tendon-ripping labor, but he was willing—the money and the benefits were exceptional. It was the first time he had moved outside the umbra of his fellow immigrants. The racism was pronounced. The two fights he had were reported to the bosses and they put him on probation. He worked through that period, got a raise and the highest performance rating in his department and the shittiest schedule in the entire fábrica. The whites were always dumping their bad shifts on him and on his friend Chuito. Guess what, they'd say, clapping them on the back. I need a little time with my kids this week. I know you wouldn’t mind taking this or that day for me.

No, my friend, Papi would say. I wouldn’t mind. Once Chuito complained to the bosses and was written up for detracting from the familial spirit of the department. Both men knew better than to speak up again.

On a normal day Papi was too exhausted to visit with Jo-Jo. He'd enjoy his dinner and then settle down to watch Tom and Jerry, who delighted him with their violence. Nilda, watch this, he'd scream and she'd dutifully appear, needles in mouth, baby in her arms. Papi would laugh so loud that Milagros upstairs would join in without even seeing what had occurred. Oh, that’s wonderful, he'd say. Would you look at that! They’re killing each other!

One day, he skipped his dinner and a night in front of the TV to drive south with Chuito into New Jersey to a small town outside of Perth Amboy. Chuito’s Gremlin pulled into a neighborhood under construction. Huge craters had been gouged in the earth and towering ziggurats of tan bricks stood ready to be organized into buildings. New pipes were being laid by the mile and the air was tart with the smell of chemicals. It was a cool night. The men wandered around the pits and the sleeping trucks.

I have a friend who is doing the hiring for this place, Chuito said.

Construction?

No. When this neighborhood goes up they'll need superintendents to watch over things. Keep the hot water running, stop a leaking faucet, put new tile in the bathroom. For that you get a salary and free rent. That's the kind of job worth having. The towns nearby are quiet, lots of good gringos. Listen Ramón, I can get you a job here if you like. It would be a good place to move. Out of the city, safety. I'll put your name at the top of the list and when this place is done you'll have a nice easy job.

This sounds better than a dream.

Forget dreams. This is real, compadre.

The two men inspected the site for about an hour and then headed back toward Brooklyn. Papi was silent. A plan was forming. Here was the place to move his familia if it came from the Island. Quiet and close to his job. Most important, the neighborhood would
not know him or the wife he had in the States. When he reached home that night he said nothing to Nilda about where he had been. He didn’t care that she was suspicious and that she yelled at him about his muddy shoes.

Papi continued to send money home and in Jo-Jo’s lockbox he was saving a tidy sum for plane tickets. And then one morning, when the sun had taken hold of the entire house and the sky seemed too thin and blue to hold a cloud, Nilda said, I want to go to the Island this year.

Are you serious?
I want to see my viejos.
What about the baby?
He’s never gone, has he?
No.
Then he should see his patria. I think it’s important.
I agree, he said. He tapped a pen on the wrinkled place mat. This sounds like you’re serious.
I think I am.
Maybe I’ll go with you.
If you say so. She had reason to doubt him; he was real good at planning but real bad at doing. And she didn’t stop doubting him either, until he was on the plane next to her, rifling anxiously through the catalogs, the vomit bag and the safety instructions.

He was in Santo Domingo for five days. He stayed at Nilda’s familia’s house on the western edge of the city.

It was painted bright orange with an outhouse slumped nearby and a pig pushing around in a pen. Homero and Josefa, tios of Nilda, drove home with them from the airport in a cab and gave them the “bedroom.” The couple slept in the other room, the “living room.”

Are you going to see them? Nilda asked that first night. They were both listening to their stomachs struggling to digest the heaping meal of yuca and hígado they had eaten. Outside, the roosters were pestering each other.

Maybe, he said. If I get the time.
I know that’s the only reason you’re here.

What’s wrong with a man seeing his familia? If you had to see your first husband for some reason, I’d let you, wouldn’t I?

Does she know about me?
Of course she knows about you. Not like it matters now. She’s out of the picture completely.

She didn’t answer him. He listened to his heart beating, and began to sense its slick contours.

On the plane, he’d been confident. He’d talked to the vieja near the aisle, telling her how excited he was. It is always good to return home, she said tremulously. I come back anytime I can, which isn’t so much anymore. Things aren’t good.

Seeing the country he’d been born in, seeing his people in charge of everything, he was unprepared for it. The air whooshed out of his lungs. For nearly four years he’d not spoken his Spanish loudly in front of the
Northamericans and now he was hearing it bellowed and flung from every mouth.

His pores opened, dousing him as he hadn’t been doused in years. An awful heat was on the city and the red dust dried out his throat and clogged his nose. The poverty—the unwashed children pointing sullenly at his new shoes, the familias slouching in hovels—was familiar and stifling.

He felt like a tourist, riding a guagua to Boca Chica and having his and Nilda’s photograph taken in front of the Alcázar de Colón. He was obliged to eat two or three times a day at various friends of Nilda’s familia; he was, after all, the new successful husband from the North. He watched Josefa pluck a chicken, the wet plumage caking her hands and plastering the floor, and remembered the many times he’d done the same, up in Santiago, his first home, where he no longer belonged.

He tried to see his familia but each time he set his mind to it, his resolve scattered like leaves before a hurricane wind. Instead he saw his old friends on the force and drank six bottles of Brugal in three days. Finally, on the fourth day of his visit, he borrowed the nicest clothes he could find and folded two hundred dollars into his pocket. He took a guagua down Sumner Welles, as Calle XXI had been renamed, and cruised into the heart of his old barrio. Colmados on every block and billboards plastering every exposed wall or board. The children chased each other with hunks of cinder block from nearby buildings—a few threw rocks at the guagua, the loud pings jerking the passengers upright. The progress of the guagua was frustratingly slow, each stop seemed spaced four feet from the last. Finally, he disembarked, walking two blocks to the corner of XXI and Tunti. The air must have seemed thin then, and the sun like a fire in his hair, sending trickles of sweat down his face. He must have seen people he knew. Jayson sitting glumly at his colmado, a soldier turned grocer. Chicho, gnawing at a chicken bone, at his feet a row of newly shined shoes. Maybe Papi stopped there and couldn’t go on, maybe he went as far as the house, which hadn’t been painted since his departure. Maybe he even stopped at our house and stood there, waiting for his children out front to recognize him.

In the end, he never visited us. If Mami heard from her friends that he was in the city, with his other wife, she never told us about it. His absence was a seamless thing to me. And if a strange man approached me during my play and stared down at me and my brother, perhaps asking our names, I don’t remember it now.

Papi returned home and had trouble resuming his routine. He took a couple of sick days, the first three ever, and spent the time in front of the television and at the bar. Twice he turned down negocios from Jo-Jo. The first ended in utter failure, cost Jo-Jo “the gold in his teeth,” but the other, the FOB clothing store on Smith Street, with the bargain basement buys, the enormous
bins of factory seconds and a huge layaway shelf, pulled in the money in bags. Papi had recommended the location to Jo-Jo, having heard about the vacancy from Chuito, who was still living in Perth Amboy. London Terrace Apartments had not yet opened.

After work Papi and Chuito caroused in the bars on Smith and Elm Streets and every few nights Papi stayed over in Perth Amboy. Nilda had continued to put on weight after the birth of the third Ramón and while Papi favored heavy women, he didn't favor obesity and wasn't inclined to go home. Who needs a woman like you? he told her. The couple began to fight on a regular schedule. Locks were changed, doors were broken, slaps were exchanged but weekends and an occasional weekday night were still spent together.

In the dead of summer, when the potato-scented fumes from the diesel forklifts were choking the warehouses, Papi was helping another man shove a crate into position when he felt a twinge about midway up his spine. Hey asshole, keep pushing, the other man grunted. Pulling his work shirt out of his Dickies, Papi twisted to the right, then to the left and that was it, something snapped. He fell to his knees. The pain was so intense, shooting through him like fireballs from Roman candles, that he vomited on the concrete floor of the warehouse. His co-workers moved him to the lunchroom. For two hours he tried repeatedly to walk and failed. Chuito came down from his division, concerned for his friend but also worried that this unscheduled break would piss off his boss. How are you? he asked.

Not so good. You have to get me out of here.
You know I can't leave.
Then call me a cab. Just get me home. Like anyone wounded, he thought home could save him.
Chuito called him the taxi; none of the other employees took time to help him walk out.

Nilda put him in bed and had a cousin manage the restaurant. Jesús, he moaned to her. I should've slowed down a little. Just a little bit longer and I would've been home with you. Do you know that? A couple of hours more.

She went down to the botánica for a poultice and then down to the bodega for aspirin. Let's see how well the old magic works, she said, smearing the poultice onto his back.

For two days he couldn't move, not even his head. He ate very little, strictly soups she concocted. More than once he fell asleep and woke up to find Nilda out, shopping for medicinal teas, and Milagros over him, a grave owl in her large glasses. Mi hija, he said. I feel like I'm dying.

You won't die, she said.
And what if I do?
Then Mama will be alone.
He closed his eyes and prayed that she would be
gone and when he opened them, she was and Nilda was coming in through the door with another remedy, steaming on a battered tray.

He was able to sit up and call in sick by himself on the fourth day. He told the morning-shift manager that he couldn't move too well. I think I stay in bed, he said. The manager told him to come in so he could receive a medical furlough. Papi had Milagros find the name of a lawyer in the phone book. He was thinking lawsuit. He had dreams, fantastic dreams of gold rings and a spacious house with caged tropical birds in its rooms, a house awash with sea winds. The woman lawyer he contacted only worked divorces but she gave him the name of her brother.

Nilda wasn't optimistic about his plan. Do you think the gringo will part with his money like that? The reason they're so pale is because they're terrified of not having any plata. Have you even spoken to the man you were helping? He's probably going to be a witness for the company so that he won't lose his job the same way you're going to lose yours. That maricon will probably get a raise for it, too.

I'm not an illegal, he said. I'm protected. I think it's better if you let it drop.

He called Chuito to sound him out. Chuito wasn't optimistic either. The boss knows what you're trying to yank. He no like it, compadre. He say you better get back to work or you're quitted.

His courage failing, Papi started pricing a consultation with an independent doctor. Very likely, his father's foot was hopping about in his mind. His father, José Edilio, the loudmouthed ball-breaking vagrant who had never married Papi's mother but nevertheless had given her nine children, had attempted a similar stunt when he worked in a hotel kitchen in Río Piedras. José had accidentally dropped a tin of stewed tomatoes on his foot. Two small bones broke but instead of seeing a doctor, José kept working, limping around the kitchen. Every day at work, he'd smile at his fellow workers and say, I guess it's time to take care of that foot. Then he'd smash another can on it, figuring the worse it was, the more money he'd get when he finally showed the bosses. It saddened and shamed Papi to hear of this while he was growing up. The old man was rumored to have wandered the barrio he lived in, trying to find someone who would take a bat to the foot. For the old man that foot was an investment, an heirloom he cherished and burnished, until half of it had to be amputated because the infection was so bad.

After another week and with no calls from the lawyers, Papi saw the company doctor. His spine felt as if there were broken glass inside of it but he was given only three weeks of medical leave. Ignoring the instructions on the medication, he swallowed ten pills a day for the pain. He got better. When he returned to the job he could work and that was enough. The bosses
were unanimous, however, in voting down Papi’s next raise. They demoted him to the rotating shift he’d been on during the first days of the job.

Instead of taking his licks, he blamed it on Nilda. Puta, was what he took to calling her. They fought with renewed vigor; the orange elephant was knocked over and lost a tusk. She kicked him out twice but after probationary weeks at Jo-Jo’s allowed him to return. He saw less of his son, avoiding all of the daily routines that fed and maintained the infant. The third Ramón was a handsome child who roamed the house restlessly, tilted forward and at full speed, as if he were a top that had been sent spinning. Papi was good at playing with the baby, pulling him by his foot across the floor and tickling his sides, but as soon as the third Ramón started to fuss, playtime was over. Nilda, come and tend to this, he’d say.

The third Ramón resembled Papi’s other sons and on occasion he’d say, Yunior, don’t do that. If Nilda heard these slips she would explode. Maldito, she’d cry, picking up the child and retreating with Milagros into the bedroom. Papi didn’t screw up too often but he was never certain how many times he’d called the third Ramón with the second son Ramón in mind.

With his back killing him and his life with Nilda headed down the toilet, Papi began more and more to regard his departure as inevitable. His first familia was the logical destination. He began to see them as his saviors, as a regenerative force that could redeem his fortunes. He said as much to Jo-Jo. Now you’re finally talking sense, panín, Jo-Jo said. Chuito’s imminent departure from the warehouse also emboldened Ramón to act. London Terrace Apartments, delayed because of a rumor that it had been built on a chemical dump site, had finally opened.

Jo-Jo was only able to promise Papi half the money he needed. Jo-Jo was still throwing away money on his failed negocio and needed a little time to recover. Papi took this as a betrayal and said so to their friends. He talks a big game but when you’re at the final inning, you get nada. Although these accusations filtered back to Jo-Jo and wounded him, he still loaned Papi the money without comment. That’s how Jo-Jo was. Papi worked for the rest of it, more months than he expected. Chuito reserved him an apartment and together they began filling the place with furniture. He started taking a shirt or two with him to work, which he then sent to the apartment. Sometimes he’d cram socks in his pockets or put on two pairs of underwear. He was smuggling himself out of Nilda’s life.

What’s happening to your clothes? she asked one night.

It’s that damn cleaners, he said. That bobo keeps losing my things. I’m going to have to have a word with him as soon as I get a day off.

Do you want me to go?

I can handle this. He’s a very nasty guy.

The next morning she caught him cramming two
guayaberas in his lunch pail. I'm sending these to be cleaned, he explained.

Let me do them.
You're too busy. It's easier this way.
He wasn't very smooth about it.
They spoke only when necessary.

Years later Nilda and I would speak, after he had left us for good, after her children had moved out of the house. Milagros had children of her own and their pictures crowded on tables and walls. Nilda's son loaded baggage at JFK. I picked up the picture of him with his girlfriend. We were brothers all right, though his face respected symmetry.

We sat in the kitchen, in that same house, and listened to the occasional pop of a rubber ball being batted down the wide channel between the building fronts. My mother had given me her address (Give my regards to the puta, she'd said) and I'd taken three trains to reach her, walked blocks with her address written on my palm.

I'm Ramón's son, I'd said.
Hijo, I know who you are.
She fixed café con leche and offered me a Goya cracker. No thanks, I said, no longer as willing to ask her questions or even to be sitting there. Anger has a way of returning. I looked down at my feet and saw that the linoleum was worn and filthy. Her hair was white and cut close to her small head. We sat and drank and finally talked, two strangers reliving an event—a whirlwind, a comet, a war—we'd both seen but from different faraway angles.

He left in the morning, she explained quietly. I knew something was wrong because he was lying in bed, not doing anything but stroking my hair, which was very long back then. I was a Pentecostal. Usually he didn't lay around in bed. As soon as he was awake he was showered and dressed and gone. He had that sort of energy. But when he got up he just stood over little Ramón. Are you OK? I asked him and he said he was just fine. I wasn't going to fight with him about it so I went right back to sleep. The dream I had is one I still think about. I was young and it was my birthday and I was eating a plate of quail's eggs and all of them were for me. A silly dream really. When I woke up I saw that the rest of his things were gone.

She cracked her knuckles slowly. I thought that I would never stop hurting. I knew then what it must have been like for your mother. You should tell her that.

We talked until it got dark and then I got up. Outside the local kids were gathered in squads, stalking in and out of the lucid clouds produced by the streetlamps. She suggested I go to her restaurant but when I got there and stared through my reflection in the glass at the people inside, all of them versions of people I already knew, I decided to go home.

December. He had left in December. The company
had given him a two-week vacation, which Nilda knew nothing about. He drank a cup of black café in the kitchen and left it washed and drying in the caddy. I doubt if he was crying or even anxious. He lit a cigarette, tossed the match on the kitchen table and headed out into the angular winds that were blowing long and cold from the south. He ignored the convoys of empty cabs that prowled the streets and walked down Atlantic. There were less furniture and antique shops then. He smoked cigarette after cigarette and killed his pack within the hour. He bought a carton at a stand, knowing how expensive they would be abroad.

The first subway station on Bond would have taken him to the airport and I like to think that he grabbed that first train, instead of what was more likely true, that he had gone out to Chuito’s first, before flying south to get us.

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¡Guasábana!