THE NEW YORKER

20 UNDER 40 FICTION AUGUST 16, 2010 ISSUE

# SECOND LIVES

**By Daniel Alarcón**

Photograph by Nubar Alexanian

My parents, with admirable foresight, had their first child while they were on fellowships in the United States. My mother was in public health, and my father in a library-science program. Having an American baby

was, my mother once said, like putting money in the bank. They lived near downtown Baltimore, by the hospital where my mother was studying, in a neighborhood of dilapidated row houses. Baltimore was abject, ugly, my mother said. Cold in winter, a sauna in summer, a violently segregated city, full of fearful whites and angry blacks. America, in those days, had all its dirty laundry available for inspection—the world's most powerful nation making war with itself in the streets, in universities, in the South, in Vietnam, in the capital just down the road. And yet my parents set about trying to make babies: on spring nights, when they made the room smell of earth, summer nights, when the city felt like a swamp, autumn nights, falling asleep on top of the covers, winter nights, when the room boiled with sex. They were not newlyweds, strictly speaking, but Baltimore reënergized them, made of their pairing something indispensable, something chemical.

For their efforts, they were rewarded with a son, whom they named Francisco. The district they lived in was one of the poorest in the country at the time, and once the birth was registered my parents were entitled to free baby formula, delivered to their doorstep every Monday morning. They found this astonishing, and later learned that many of the foreign doctors at the hospital were receiving this benefit, too, even a few who didn't yet have children. It was a gigantic bribe, my father said, the government pleading with its poverty-stricken residents: Please, please don't riot! Baltimore was adorned with reminders of the last civil disturbance: a burned-out block of storefronts, a boarded-up and untended house whose roof had collapsed after a snowstorm. Every morning, the sidewalks were littered with shattered car windows, tiny bits of glass glinting like diamonds in the limpid sun. No one used money in the neighborhood stores, only coupons; and, in lieu of birds, the skies featured plastic bags held aloft on a breeze. But none of this mattered, because my parents were happy. They were in love and they had a beautiful boy, his photo affixed to a blue First World passport.

Their American moment didn't last long. They would have had another child —they would have had me—if their visas hadn't run out. By the time my mother was done nursing Francisco, a coup had taken place back home, and the military junta that came to power was not entirely friendly with the Johnson Administration. My parents were required to renew their papers every eighteen months, and that year, to their great surprise, they were denied. Appeals, they were told, could be filed only from the home country. The university hospital wrote a letter on my mother's behalf, but this well-meaning document vanished into some bureaucrat's file cabinet in suburban Virginia, and it soon became clear that there was nothing to be done. Rather than be deported—how undignified!—my parents left of their own accord.

And then their gaze turned, back to their families, their friends, the places they had known, and those they had forgotten they knew. They bought a house in a suburb of the capital, where I was raised, an out-of-the-way place that has since been swallowed entirely by the city's growth. I guess they lost that old Baltimore feeling, because I wasn't born for another seven years, a crying, red-faced bit of flesh, a runt, undersized even then. No blue passport for me, but they consoled themselves by giving me an Anglo name, Nelson, which was the fashion at the time. Eventually, I got my Third World passport, the color of spilled red wine, but it was just for show. I still haven't had a chance to use it.

Francisco, of course, fled at the first opportunity. It was January, 1987, the situation was bleak, and leaving was the most logical thing to do. I was ten years old; the idea was that he'd get me a visa and I'd join him as soon as I finished school. We went as a family to see him off at the airport, took the obligatory photographs in front of the departures board, and waved as he passed through security. He promised to write. He promised to call. He disappeared into the terminal, and then we climbed the stairs to the greasy restaurant above the baggage claim, where we sat by the wall of windows,

waiting for a plane that looked like it might be my brother's to take off. My father drank coffee, fogged his glasses with his breath and polished the lenses between the folds of his dress shirt. My mother drew a palm tree on a paper napkin, frowning. I fell asleep with my head on the table, and when I woke up the janitor was mopping the floor beside us, wondering, perhaps, if we ever intended to leave.

My brother went to live with the Villanuevas, old friends of my parents from their Baltimore days, who'd settled in Birmingham, Alabama. His first letter was three handwritten pages and began with a description of winter in the Southern United States. That year, the Alabama rains fell almost without pause until the middle of March, a soggy prelude to an even wetter spring. For Francisco, unaccustomed to this weather, the thunderstorms were impressive. Occasionally, there'd be a downed power line, and sometimes the lights would go out as a result. It was in this familiar darkness, Francisco wrote, that he'd first felt homesick.

The second half of the letter dealt more specifically with the routines of family life at the Villanuevas. Where they lived wasn't a neighborhood so much as a collection of houses that happened to face the same street. Kids were permitted to play in the back yard or in the driveway, but never in the front yard. No one could explain why, but it simply wasn't done. People moved about only in cars; walking was frowned upon, socially acceptable for children, perhaps, if they happened to be accompanied by a dog. The Villanuevas did not have pets. Nor was there anywhere to walk to, really. A two-pump gas station sat about a mile away on Highway 31; its attractions included a pay phone and a magazine rack.

The Villanueva children, Marisa and Jack, ages fifteen and ten, respectively, made it clear from the outset that they spoke no Spanish. The language didn't interest them much, and their father, who insisted that my brother call him

Julio and not Mr. Villanueva, considered this his greatest failing as a parent. It was his fault, he confessed to Francisco, for marrying an American woman. In general terms, though, things were good. Speaking English with the Villanueva kids, while challenging at first, helped my brother learn the language faster. At school, not a soul spoke Spanish, not even Señora Rickerts, the friendly, well-intentioned Spanish teacher. Francisco was not enrolled with Marisa, as had originally been planned. She went to an expensive private school, which would not permit Francisco to audit classes, so instead the Villanuevas sent him to Berry, the local public high school, with the hicks. This last word, Francisco explained, was the rough English equivalent of *campesino* or *cholo*, only it referred to rural white people. He'd learned it from Marisa, and had been advised by Mr. Villanueva never to use it if he wished to make friends. My father found this part of the letter very amusing. How remarkable, he said, that Villanueva's daughter spoke no Spanish but had somehow imported her father's classism to North America! How ironic, my father noted, that his own son should learn proletarian solidarity in the belly of the empire!

My parents read and reread the letter at the dinner table, alternately laughing and falling into worried silence. In the early months, I recall them wondering aloud if they'd made a mistake by sending him away like this. Whose idea had it been? And where was Birmingham, anyway? Was it a city or a town? What kind of school was this place called Berry?

They wrote back, urging Francisco to send photos. A month passed, and the next letter arrived with a single picture. We saw Francisco with an umbrella and a yellow raincoat, standing next to the mailbox in front of the Villanuevas' house, a dense knot of purple clouds above. The front yard sloped dramatically, and Francisco stood at an odd slant. He'd put on a little weight —you could see it in his cheeks—and his hair had grown out. His face was changing, my mother said. He was growing up.

By his third letter, the winter rains had become spring rains, which were the same, only warmer. Storms spread like inkblots across the sky. On sunny days after a rain, the woods behind the Villanuevas' subdivision looked as if they'd been dipped in light. Everyone said that it was an unusually wet year. Francisco didn't mind—he was fascinated by the weather. It was everything

else that bored him. His great disappointment that spring was that he'd tried out for the Berry High soccer team, and spent three games on the bench, watching the action unfold without him. He'd quit in protest, and, to his surprise, no one had begged him to come back. They hadn't even noticed. Americans, he wrote, have no understanding of the game. The issue was not mentioned again.

By the fourth letter, the weather had turned; breezy, pleasant stretches were punctuated now and then by days of blasting heat. School would be over soon. He no longer complained about Berry or his classmates, whose dialect he could barely understand. Instead, he seemed to have settled in. Each week, Francisco went to the Spanish class and led conversation exercises with his American peers, and several of them had sought him out for further instruction. An exchange student from Mexico City had spent time at Berry the previous year, seducing Alabama girls and confounding deeply held stereotypes—he didn't wear a poncho, for instance, and was apparently sincere in his love of punk music. He'd also left behind a folkloric legacy of curse words: *panocha*, *no manches*, and *pinche guey*. Francisco wrote that he considered it his responsibility to teach these poor gringos to curse with dignity, and this was, as far as he could tell, the only linguistic knowledge they truly thirsted for. He introduced them to important words, words like *mierda*, *culo*, and *pendejo*, while offering the more advanced students a primer on the nearly infinite uses of *huevo* (*huevón*, *hasta las huevas*, *hueveo*, *huevear*, *se hueveó la huevada*). My parents were proud: "Our son the educator," they said. Photos included with this letter were of nearby Lake Logan Martin, where the Villanuevas had a weekend house. Sun glinting off the water, bathing suits hanging on a line, barefoot games of Frisbee in the freshly mowed grass. In summer, Francisco might learn to water-ski.

This was the first letter in which he forgot to ask us how we were.

Photograph by AdriÁn Portugal / Supay Fotos

That year—the only year he consistently wrote to us—the photos were mostly of Francisco by himself. Occasionally, he'd pose with the Villanuevas: Julio, his wife, Heather, and their two dark-haired, olive-skinned children, who really looked as though they should speak some Spanish. Once, Francisco sent a photo of the Berry High gymnasium, which was notable only for its size. The entire high school, he wrote, would soon be razed and replaced by an even bigger complex farther out in the suburbs. Everyone was excited about this, but he wouldn't be around to see it. He didn't intend to stay in Alabama; on this point he was very clear.

We did eventually get a photo of the few American friends Francisco acquired in those first months, and perhaps this could have clued us in about his eagerness to move on. At home, Francisco had always been part of the popular crowd, the center of a fitful, manic group of friends who loved trouble and music and girls. At Berry, he was on the margins of it all, one of a bunch of skinny outcasts, happy to have found one another in the crowded, cliquish hallways of this immense public school. In these photos: a Korean named Jai, a red-haired boy called Anders, who wore a neck brace, and a frail black kid named Leon, carrying a stack of books and looking utterly lost.

It was just as well that Francisco didn't ask us how we were. My parents might not have been able to explain. Or they might not have wanted to. Nineteen eighty-seven was the year of the state-employee strike, which was particularly troubling for us, since my father worked at the National Library and my mother at the Ministry of Health. It started in May, around the time that Francisco was learning to water-ski. There was also dismaying talk of a new currency to replace the one that was soon to be destroyed by rising inflation. Together these horrors would wipe out our already diminished savings. War pressed down on the country in all its fury. Adults spoke of

politics as if referring to a long and debilitating illness that no medicine could cure. Presidential elections were on the horizon; no one knew who would win, but none of the options were good. My father was shedding weight and hair at a frightening pace, the stress carving him to pieces.

Our letters to the U.S. did not include photographs, a small concession to my father's vanity in those taxing months. Nor did they mention the fact that Francisco was attending the public school because the tuition at Marisa's school was simply out of the question for us. Or that my parents had already written a letter to Mr. Villanueva postponing the monthly payment for his room and board. Certainly, my parents didn't tell Francisco how much shame they felt at having to do this. I doubt they even told him that they were afraid they'd lose their jobs, and were speaking with a lawyer about getting citizenship for all of us and coming as a family to join him. These were the issues my parents talked about at home, in front of me (as if I weren't there) but not with my brother. Why worry the boy? The calls were too expensive to waste time on unpleasant things, and wasn't he busy enough, learning English and spending his afternoons jumping from the Villanuevas' pier into the cool, refreshing waters of Lake Logan Martin?

For most of my childhood, our neighbors across the street were a friendly couple named Alejandro and Luz. They were a little older than my parents, the rare neighborhood couple with no kids, possessing no concept of the kinds of things children might like. They visited from time to time, usually bringing some sort of gift for my brother and me—a jump rope, a pinwheel, that sort of thing.

Alejandro had big ears and a quirky grin. He wore dark suits and liked to talk politics until late in the evening. He was a good man, my father told me once, and decency was not something to be taken lightly, but when it came to world view—he said this quite sternly—"we simply do not agree with him." Even

now I'm not sure if this meant that Alejandro was a reactionary or a radical. Those were confusing times. Alejandro worked long hours, and months might pass between his visits, whereas Luz often came by to chat with my mother or to play with us. And when both my parents were working late Francisco and I sometimes spent a few hours at her house, deeply involved in card games whose rules the three of us invented as we went along, or listening to the dark, suspenseful stories Luz loved to tell. Ostensibly about her family, these tales of adventure and daring seemed to draw more from Hollywood Westerns, featuring spectacular kidnappings, gambling debts settled with knife fights, or long, dismal marches through unforgiving mountain terrain. Luz's manner of speaking made it clear that she had no idea what she might say next. It wasn't that she made things up, strictly speaking—only that facts were merely a point of departure for her.

Luz modified whatever game we played, never apologizing, and we rarely minded letting her win, whether at cards or dominoes or hide-and-seek; in fact, it didn't feel like a concession at all. My brother, who usually kept a studied distance from me and all things preadolescent, regressed in her company, becoming, as if by magic, a gentler, more innocent version of himself.

Often Luz would let us watch an hour of cartoons while she rested on the couch with an arm draped over her face. We thought she was asleep, exhausted from so much winning, but every time a news break came on Luz would sit up in a flash, cover our eyes, and make us press our hands over our ears. The news in those days was not for children, she always said, and I took her word for it. But afterward, when I had opened my eyes and was blinking hopefully at the television, waiting for the cartoons to come back on, Francisco would say, "Did you see that, little brother? That's why I'm leaving."

Soon after Francisco had gone, Alejandro moved out. It happened almost without anyone realizing it, though the dearth of concrete details was soon overwhelmed by the neighborhood's combined speculative power: Alejandro had run off with his secretary, with the maid, with the daughter of one of his business associates. The mistress, whoever she might be, was pregnant, or maybe she already had children of her own, whom Alejandro had agreed to take care of. It seemed likely that she was much younger than Luz, that he wanted, after all these years, to be a father. There were a few who thought that his sudden disappearance had more to do with politics, but my father rejected that theory out of hand.

A few weeks had passed when Alejandro came by late one night. He wanted to speak to my father, alone. They shut themselves in the kitchen with a bottle of pisco, and when they emerged, a few hours later, it was clear that Alejandro had been crying. His eyes were swollen and his arms hung limply by his sides. My mother and I were in the living room. I was supposedly doing homework, but really I was waiting to see what would happen. Nothing did. Alejandro gave us a sheepish nod, while my father stood next to him, pisco bottle in hand. They hadn't even uncorked it.

The following day, my mother clarified things a bit. Or tried to. "An affair," she said, "is when a man takes up with a woman who is not his wife. Do you understand that, Nelson?"

Sure I did, or at least I thought I did. "And what if a woman takes up with a man who is not her husband?"

My mother nodded. "That, too."

I had other questions as well. "Takes up with"? Something about the way my

mother said this phrase alerted me to the fact that it was a metaphor.

And she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She seemed to be thinking rather carefully about what she might say, and I waited, tensely, perhaps even holding my breath. My mother patted me on the head. It was complicated, she said finally, but there was one thing I should be aware of, one thing I should think about and learn now, even if I was too young to understand. Did I want to know? "It has to do with a woman's pride," she said, and waited for these puzzling words to take hold. They didn't. It was all opaque, delightfully mysterious. Alejandro's affair was different from others, she said. Yes, he had left Luz, and, yes, this was bad enough. Plenty bad. But a woman is proud, and at a certain age this pride is tinged with self-doubt. "We grow old," my mother told me, "and we suspect we are no longer beautiful." Alejandro's new mistress was ten years older than Luz. This was what he'd confessed to my father the night before. A younger woman would have been understandable, expected even, but this—it wasn't the sort of insult that Luz would easily recover from.

I knew it was serious by the way my mother's eyes narrowed.

"If your father ever does something like this to me, you'd better call the police, because someone's going to get hurt. Do you understand?"

I told her I did, and her face eased into a smile.

"O.K., then, go on," my mother said. "Go play or something."

In those days after Francisco left, "go play" came to mean something very specific: go sit in your room and draw and create stories. I could spend hours this way, and often did. My scripts were elaborate, mostly nonviolent revenge fantasies, in which I (or the character I played) would end up in the unlikely position of having to spare the life of a kid who had routinely bullied me. The

bully's gratitude was colored with shame, naturally, and my (character's) mercy was devastating to the bully's self-image. I returned to this theme time and again, never tiring of it, deriving great pleasure from the construction of these improbable reversals.

With my brother gone, the room we had shared seemed larger, more spacious and luxurious than before. I'd lived my entire life there, deferring without complaint to my brother's wishes on all matters of decoration, layout, music, and lighting. He'd made it clear that I was a squatter in his room, an assertion I'd never thought to question. Just before he left, he'd warned me with bared teeth, frightening as only older brothers can be, not to touch a thing. In case he came back. If I were to change anything, Francisco said, he'd know.

"How?" I asked. "How will you know?"

He threw an arm around me then, flexing it tight around my neck with the kind of casual brutality he often directed at me. I felt my face turning red; I was helpless. At ten and eighteen, we were essentially two different species. I wouldn't see him again until we were both adults, fully grown men capable of real violence. I suppose if I'd known this, I might have tried to appreciate the moment, but instead I remained defiant, gasping for breath and managing to ask one more time, "Yeah, but how will you know?"

Francisco, or versions of him, appeared in many of my early works.

I took note of what my mother had said about a woman's pride, and when I was alone with my father I decided to ask him about it. I wasn't sure if I'd got the full nuance, but I relayed the conversation with my mother as well as I could, concluding with the last bit about the police.

"She said that?" he asked.

I nodded, and my father, instead of shedding any light on the situation, just laughed. It was a hearty, surprising laugh, with tears pressing from the corners of his eyes.

"What?" I asked. "What did I say?" But he wouldn't answer me, and, finally, when he'd regained his composure, he gave me a big hug.

"Your mother is a dangerous woman," he said, and I knew enough to understand that when he said "dangerous" he meant it as a compliment.

Meanwhile, Luz drew her curtains and rarely left the house. Alejandro never came back.

A few months later, we learned that Luz was planning to travel to the United States, to visit a cousin of hers in Florida. This was in June, when the strike was under way, and my parents were beginning to feel the stress most acutely. We'd seen little of Luz in the weeks since Alejandro's visit, but she was often mentioned, always in the same pitying tone. Inevitably, the conversation veered back to my mother's comment about the police, and my father would tease her about it, until they laughed together. I'd chuckle, too, so as not to be left out.

Luz's trip couldn't have been more perfectly timed. It was scheduled for July, three or four weeks before Francisco's birthday, the first he would be spending abroad. My mother wanted to send Francisco a gift, just a token, so that he'd know we were thinking of him. After some deliberation, she bought him a dark-blue necktie embroidered with the logo of the National Library. My father approved, said it would help him get a good job. It was a joke, really; we knew that Francisco wasn't interested in the sort of job where he might need a necktie. The three of us signed a card; separately, my father wrote a long letter, and the whole thing was wrapped and sealed and ready to go. Naturally, there was no talk of trusting our local postal service for this, or for anything, really.

We would ask Luz to take it for us and drop it in an American mailbox. Perhaps, my mother said, Luz could even hand-deliver it, should her itinerary include a jaunt through Alabama, and, upon her return, report back—tell us how she'd found Francisco, what she thought of his prospects in the U.S.

One Sunday afternoon, my mother and I crossed the street and knocked on Luz's door. She seemed surprised to see us, a little embarrassed, but beckoned us into the house all the same. Immediately, we encountered a problem: there wasn't anywhere to sit. Sometime in the previous months, much of the furniture had been moved out, and the rooms, half empty now, seemed lonely and sad. Of the chairs that remained, no two faced each other. We strolled through to the living room, where a small television set rested awkwardly on a wooden chair. Luz was thinner than I remembered her, subdued; she seemed to have staggered recklessly toward old age, as if trying to make up in a matter of weeks the ten years that separated her from Alejandro's new lover. Her hair had faded to a stringy yellowing gray—she'd stopped dyeing it, my mother explained later—and her skin had taken on a similarly unhealthy pallor. Her eyes, even in the dim light, were glassy and unfocussed. Luz asked me to put the television on the floor.

"Where?" I asked.

"Oh, Nelson," she said. "Anywhere."

I placed it next to the chair, and Luz indicated that I should sit on it. I looked at my mother for reassurance. She nodded, and so the three of us sat, forming a not quite intimate circle.

Luz and my mother went through the protocols of a civilized visit: inoffensive questions, anodyne chitchat, the usual phrases and gestures intended to fill up space rather than convey meaning. It occurred to me as I listened that my mother and Luz were not close. They spoke without much fluency about a

minor universe of events that affected neither of them: the vagaries of neighborhood life, people they both knew but didn't much care about. My mother seemed determined not to speak of our family, of my father, my brother, or even me. It was excessive decorum, as if the very mention of family might be insulting to our grieving hostess. The strain to keep the words coming was noticeable, and I wondered how long it would be necessary to maintain this charade before coming to the point of the visit, Francisco's gift. Ten minutes? Twenty? An entire hour?

Luz, as she spoke, as she listened, scanned the room as if looking for someone who was not there. The easy assumption would have been that the someone was Alejandro, but I understood instinctively that this wasn't the case. There were many people in the room with us, it seemed, a wide variety of people my mother and I could not see: principally, the players in Luz's life, those who'd known her at various stages of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, at moments of joy, of whimsy, of expectation. Of anxiety and fear. It seemed to me that Luz was wondering, How did I get to this place? How did this happen? Or perhaps, What are all these people doing in my house, and what must they think of me now? And it was all she could do not to ask these questions aloud. She was gritting her teeth, forcing her way through a conversation with my mother, an artificial exchange about nothing at all, hoping soon to return to her more important, unfinished dialogue with this other, floating gallery of observers. This was my theory, of course. Luz's eyes drifted to the near distance, to the seemingly empty space just behind us and around us. To the window, to the floor, to the ceiling.

At a certain point, my mother took Francisco's festively wrapped package from her purse. She passed it to Luz, who accepted it without saying much. I'd lost track of the words being exchanged, was focussing instead on the minute shifts in Luz's facial expressions: a sharpening of the creases at the edges of her mouth, or her eyes fluttering closed. My mother explained that the gift

was for Francisco, that it was his birthday, that we hated to ask the favor but we hoped it wouldn't be a problem. Could she take it with her?

Luz sat, shoulders slouched, neck curling downward. The gift was in her lap, and by the tired look in her eyes you might have thought that it weighed a great deal.

I'm not sure how I knew, but I did: she was going to say no.

"What is it?" Luz said.

My mother smiled innocently; she didn't yet understand what was happening.

"A necktie."

Luz's eyes were wandering again, following a dust mote, or the disappearing image of an old friend. She was ashamed to be seen this way, and she was going to take it out on us.

"Are you well?" Luz asked.

"We are," my mother said. "We miss Francisco, of course, but we're well."

"And the strike?"

At the mention of it, my mother's expression darkened. She and my father were walking the picket line five days a week, exhausting in and of itself, and, of course, there was the constant threat of violence, from the police, from the more radical elements within their own syndicate. My parents talked about it every night, oblique references at the dinner table, and later, as I fell asleep, I heard the worried hum of voices drifting from their bedroom.

"We're getting by," my mother answered. "God willing, it'll be over soon."

Luz nodded, and reached over to the coffee table. She pulled open a drawer and took out a letter opener. We watched, not knowing exactly what she was after, but she spoke the whole time, carrying on a sort of conversation with herself, a monologue about the declining state of morals in the nation, about a new, aimless generation, and its startling lack of respect for the rules of society as they'd been handed down since the time when we were a colony of the Spanish Empire. A colony? The Empire? I looked toward my mother for help, but she was no less confused than me. There was sadness in Luz's tone, a defeated breathiness, as if the words themselves were part of a whispered prayer or lament she would've preferred not to share with us. At the same time, her hands moved with an efficiency completely at odds with her speech: she held the package now, and, without pausing in her discourse, used the letter opener to cut the red bow my mother had tied. It fell unceremoniously to the dusty floor.

"Oh!" my mother said.

It was as if Luz had cut her.

Then, with the edge of the opener, she peeled back the clear tape my mother had stuck to the wrapping. The paper slipped to the floor, landing at Luz's feet. She pushed it away with the edge of her shoe. Her hands kept moving.

"People these days can't be trusted. So much has changed from when I was a girl. We knew our neighbors—our town was small. When a boy came around, my father would ask who his parents were, and this was all he and my mother needed to know. If they didn't approve of his lineage, they'd send the servant out to have a talk with him. To shoo him away, you understand. I watched everything from my window. I was very pretty then."

"I'm sure you were," my mother said, her voice breaking, unable to hide the concern she felt for Francisco's gift. The box was open now, the white tissue

paper was out, ripped in places, and the tie dangled from Luz's knee, its tip just grazing the floor. Luz opened the card we'd all signed, and spread my father's letter on her lap, squinting at the handwriting as if decoding a secret message.

"Is there something wrong?" my mother asked.

Luz didn't answer. Instead, she held the necktie up with one hand, and ran her thumb and forefinger carefully along the seam, lightly palpating the length of the fabric. She'd already checked the box and its lining. What was she looking for?

My mother watched in horror. "What are you doing? Is there a problem?"

"Where are your people from?" Luz asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"The north, the south, the center? The mountains, the jungle? How well do we know each other, really, Monica? Do I know what you do? What your family does? What about that union you belong to, the one making trouble downtown? Did you expect me to get on a flight to America with a package I hadn't bothered to check? What if there were drugs inside? What if there was *cocaine*?"

My mother was stunned. Absolutely immobilized.

"Am I supposed to rot in an American prison because your impoverished family is willing to gamble with my life?"

Luz's eyes were open wide, and she held them that way, staring at us.

My mother stood abruptly, snatching the necktie and my father's letter from

Luz's hands. I ducked to grab the box, the wrapping paper, and the bow, but my mother took me by the arm. Her face was a bright and unnatural shade of red.

"Leave it."

Luz reverted now, drawn back into that lonely place she'd been trapped in for months. "Did I say something wrong?" she asked, but the question wasn't addressed to us.

The empty rooms were a blur as we raced toward the street. On our way out, I managed to kick over a chair, and I knew by my mother's expression that she didn't mind at all.

The day passed and my mother was in a foul, toxic mood. The neighborhood, always so eager to gossip, was now gossiping about us. We'd tried to send contraband to America, people were saying. Drugs. Tried to take advantage of an unsuspecting elderly woman with a broken heart.

These were the kinds of humiliations we put up with for Francisco's sake. There were others. Francisco left Birmingham that October, and only later did we find out why: one afternoon Marisa skipped her S.A.T. prep class, and Mrs. Villanueva came home early to find them groping in the downstairs television room. For me, the most astonishing aspect of the story was undoubtedly the idea that the Villanuevas had a downstairs television room. The rest of the anecdote—even the titillating hint of sex—hardly registered next to this remarkable detail. Mrs. Villanueva gave my brother an hour to pack his things. By the time her husband got home, Francisco had already been dropped off at his friend Jai's house, forever banished from the Villanuevas' ordered American lives.

For months after he'd moved on, we continued to wire money to the

Villanuevas to pay off our debt. My father sent several long letters to his old friend Julio, apologizing for his son's behavior, but these went unanswered, and, eventually, he gave up trying to make things right. The friendship was never repaired, of course, but, then, how could it be? The two men had met in the nineteen-seventies and had seen each other only twice in the intervening years. The mutual affection they felt was an almost entirely theoretical construct, based on memories of long-ago shared experiences—not unlike what I felt toward my brother by then, I suppose. Part fading recollections, part faith.

Francisco never got around to applying to college, as my parents had hoped he would. He moved briefly to Knoxville, where his friend Leon had enrolled at the University of Tennessee. But soon after that we got a letter from St. Louis (along with a photo of the Arch), and then one from Kansas City (with a picture taken in the parking lot of a rustic barbecue joint). Francisco's constant movement made it difficult for my parents to get their citizenship paperwork going, though at some point, I imagine, they must have told him what their plan was and how desperate our situation was becoming. Maybe he didn't understand. Or maybe it was inconvenient for him to think about. Maybe what he wanted most of all was to forget where he'd come from, to leave those troubles and stunted dreams behind and become what his passport had always said he was: an American.

People talk a lot these days about virtual reality, second lives, digital avatars. It's a concept I'm fully conversant with, of course. Even with no technical expertise or much interest in computers, I understand it all perfectly; if not the engineering, then the emotional content behind these so-called advances seems absolutely intuitive to me. I'll say it plainly: I spent my adolescence preparing for and eventually giving myself over to an imagined life. While my parents waited in line at the American Embassy, learning all the relevant statutes and regulations to insure my passage, I placed myself

beside my brother in each of his pictures. I followed him on his journey across America, trying always to forget where I really was.

He repaired bicycles in suburban Detroit; worked as a greeter at a Wal-Mart in Dubuque, Iowa; moved furniture in Galveston, Texas; mowed lawns at a golf course outside Santa Fe. At home, I read Kerouac and Faulkner, listened to Michael Jackson and the Beastie Boys, studied curious American customs like Halloween, Thanksgiving, and the Super Bowl. I formulated opinions on America's multiple national dilemmas, which seemed thrillingly, beautifully frivolous: gays in the military, a President in trouble for a blow job.

My brother turned twenty-one in Reno, Nevada, gambling away a meagre paycheck he'd earned busing tables at a chain Italian restaurant. It could be said that he was happy. This was 1990. He was going by Frank now, and had shed whatever Southern accent he might have picked up in those first few months as a putative member of the Villanueva household.

Six months passed, and we learned that he had abandoned water-skiing for snow skiing; he was working at a ski resort in the Rockies, and sent photos, panoramic shots of the light mirroring brilliantly off the white snowpack. It was intriguing and absolutely foreign territory. He spent a page describing the snow—dry snow, wet snow, artificial snow, powder—and I learned that people can get sunburned in winter from all the reflected light. I never would have guessed this to be true, though in hindsight it seemed fairly obvious, and this alone was enough to depress me. What else was obvious to everyone but me? What other lessons, I wondered, was I being deprived of even now?

In school, my favorite subject was geography. Not just mine, it should be said. I doubt any generation of young people has ever looked at a world map with such a powerful mixture of longing and anxiety; we were like inmates being tempted with potential escape routes. Even our teacher must

have felt it: when he took the map from the supply closet and tacked it to the blackboard, there was an audible sigh from the class. We were mesmerized by the possibilities; we assumed every country was more prosperous than ours, safer than ours, and at this scale they all seemed tantalizingly near. The atlas was passed around like pornography, and if you had the chance to sit alone with it for a few moments you counted yourself lucky. When confronted with a map of the United States, in my mind I placed dots across the continent, points to mark where my brother had lived and the various towns he'd passed through on his way to other places.

Of course, I wasn't the only one with family abroad; these were the days when everyone was trying to leave. Our older brothers applied for scholarships in fields they didn't even like, just for the chance to overstay their visas in cold and isolated northern cities. Our sisters were married off to tourists or were shipped to Europe to work as nannies. We were a nation busy inventing French great-grandparents, falsifying Spanish paperwork, bribing notaries for counterfeit birth certificates from Slavic countries that were hardly better off than we were. Genealogies were examined in great detail—was there an ancestor to exploit, anyone with an odd, foreign-sounding last name? A Nazi war criminal in your family's dark past? What luck! Pack your bags, kids—we're going to Germany! This was simply the spirit of the times. The Japanese kids headed back to Tokyo, the Jewish kids to Israel. A senile Portuguese shut-in who hadn't spoken a coherent sentence in fifteen years was dusted off and taken to petition the Embassy; suddenly all his grandchildren were moving to Lisbon.

The state-employee strike didn't last forever. It ended, as everything did in those days, with an uneasy and temporary resolution: across-the-board pay cuts but no immediate layoffs, a surfeit of mistrust and rancor on all sides. My father was there at the climactic march, when a bank in the old center was burned by government infiltrators and dozens of protesters were beaten and

jailed. He was gassed and shot at with rubber bullets, and he, like tens of thousands of others, fled the violence like a madman, running at full speed through the chaotic streets of the capital, a wet rag tied across his nose and mouth. It was, he told me later, the moment he realized he wasn't young anymore.

The dreaded election came and went; the crisis deepened. The new President privatized everything, selling the state off piece by piece and dividing the profits among his friends. The truce that had been reached at the end of the strike was broken, and the next year thousands of workers, including my mother, were suddenly laid off. She was unemployed for months. Prices shot up, the currency crashed, the violence spread, and our world became very small and very precarious. We waited in breadlines, carrying impossibly large stacks of banknotes, which had become a requirement for even the tiniest transaction. People spoke less; strangers distrusted one another. The streets, even during morning rush, had a perverse emptiness to them. We listened to the radio in the dark and emerged each morning fearful to discover what tragedy had befallen us in the night.

These emotions are quite beside the point now, like an artifact looted from an ancient grave, an oddly shaped tool whose utility no one can quite decipher. But back then, walking through the gray, shuddering city, I thought about my brother all the time. I was ten, I was eleven, unfree but hopeful; I was thirteen, I was fourteen, and my brother had escaped. Fifteen, sixteen: waiting for something to happen, reading obsessively about a place I would never see for myself, in a language I would never actually need. Twenty, twenty-one: small failures, each humiliation a revelation, further proof that my real life was elsewhere. Twenty-five, twenty-six: a dawning awareness that my condition as a citizen of the Third World was terminal.

And Francisco lived through none of this. As punishment, I set about trying

to forget him: the sound of his laughter, his height relative to mine, the content of the conversations we'd had after the lights went out but before we fell asleep.

I never managed it, of course. ♦