RED CITY: A SHORT STORY CYCLE WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

By

GRANT ANDREW HOLT

Bachelor of Arts
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas
1991

Master of Arts
Texas A&M University
College Station, Texas
1994

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate College of the
Oklahoma State University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
May 2000

RED CITY: A SHORT STORY CYCLE WITH

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Dissertation Approved:

Dissertation Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The summit at last. The mountain was high and the trip was long, but I had a beautiful time, because I didn't make it alone. Here are the people that helped me climb to the top. First, I owe the success of this accomplishment to God. He has never left me alone in this struggle. Thanks to those who helped me climb when it was so close, but seemed so far: David Beal, Luke Chauvin, Dan Hill, Martha Ewell, Kay Gordon, and Judy Pavilicek. To my friends from OSU, I offer my thanks and my love. Dr. Brian Evenson and Lisa Lewis made me pay attention to the craft; I am a better writer because of them. To Bo Burns (scoundrel), Melanie Springer Mock, Shirley Bechtel, Todd Fuller, Leslie Fife, how could I have made it without you? I cannot adequately thank Rodney and Dolores Holcomb. They have saved me time and time again and been my guardian angels. A very deep thanks to Dr. Jeffrey Walker, dear friend and mentor, who made me do it right and do it well. I am honored to have been his student.

To my brother, sisters, nieces, nephews, and in-laws: thanks for the love and support that sustained me. I dedicate this effort to two of the most noble people anyone could know: my dad, who taught me what education was worth and showed me the man I want to be; my mom, who never wavered in her commitment to my success nor in her faith in me. Finally, to Tammie, beautiful girl, who made the light in life brighter when she said "yes." On the other side of this mountain are blue waves and a warm beach. Before I start another climb, pardon me if I spend some time on the sand.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GENRE'S ROGUE CHILD:

RED CITY AND THE SHORT STORY CYCLE

The very thing that makes the short story cycle unique is also that which has precluded it from most critical discussions of genre. That is, at least until recently, when critics like Ingram, Dunn, Morris, and Mann raised critical awareness of the form, crediting it with a history and a level of achievement worthy of its own generic identity. While this list of critics is not exhaustive, it represents some of the most predominant defenders of a genre experiencing fresh growth. Their critical attention, as well as the continuing efforts of writers exploring the form's artistic opportunity, has invigorated the study of linked short narratives aimed at achieving wholeness through the combined effect of all parts. Forrest Ingram's term "short story cycle" has been generally accepted, but not without objection. Regardless, critics agree upon the need for further discussion of the unique literary form apart from those genres from which it most substantially borrows: the novel and the short story. Short story cycles attempt to blur the boundaries dividing genres by drawing from two or more genre traditions in a singular effort. Human impulse organizes according to similarities; the literary critical impulse is no different. Yet the short story cycle depends upon and subverts formal barriers of its more recognized relatives. Indeed, the short story cycle is an ambitious form, attempting to

walk the fine aesthetic line between short story's compact completeness and the novel's prevailing development and continuity.

The idea of smaller narratives working together to create an overall greater achievement is not new. Critically, however, terminology is particularly problematic regarding the form, as some critics prefer one term or another for one reason or another. Regardless, the rise of critical awareness stems from the rise in the form's social, cultural, and professional recognition. Yet the problem persists that many critics cannot agree on where the limits of the genre fall, since the form depends upon blurring limits of defined forms. Crossing those historical lines of generic tradition catapults the short story cycle in two directions simultaneously. In one way, it signals a relatively new awareness in critical and artistic terms. On the other hand, it relies upon the conventions of other more defined genres for its particular effect. The cycle presents an alternative to the novel or short story collection, but draws from and depends on traditions that, in American literary culture, are firmly established. Despite the longevity of the cycle form, it never has acquired a place all its own in the pantheon of literary genres. Only in the twentieth century has the mode acquired any lasting recognition as a separate literary achievement. What exactly is the short story cycle, and where exactly do the limits of its genre occur? Until now, these questions have relegated consideration of the short story cycle to *parts* of discussions of other literary forms, seldom commanding a discussion all its own.

Because of the relative youth of the short story cycle, only a few critics have devoted complete studies to the form as an independent genre. Those that accept the genre on its own merits will be mentioned frequently in this study. Additionally, short story cycle theory is growing. Dunn and Morris claim the form only began to attract

substantial attention, in varying forms, in the nineteenth century, and only in the twentieth century "did the [short story cycle] become a mature genre" (1). Because of relatively new critical attention, the genre does not enjoy the same depth of scholarship as other forms, such as the novel or short story. Several sources receive more attention here because they attempt historical and theoretical analysis, as well as posit structural theories for the genre's past and present manifestations. Further, they aim to place past works into manageable frameworks, remedying the problems of genre designation incompletely evaluating literary accomplishment. These efforts to define the form and stimulate deeper readings are widely recognized for their significance by others interested in short story cycle development. I expect that criticism and theory will continue to evolve on this subject in the coming years, bringing new developments and ideas into critical discussion and debate. When they do, they will do so in large part because of the groundwork laid by some of the names mentioned here. Lastly, these critics' labor represents scholarship that I believe to be the most important in assessing *Red City* against historical and contemporary standards and theory.

Since several works prefigure the development of the form, the short story cycle existed long before it came to be called by its present name(s).[1] The tradition of collecting stories of a certain location, thematic grouping, or other unifying element predates present critical dialogue by many years. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris begin their 1995 study with the goal to "define, discuss, and trace the two hundred year history of a literary genre that has hitherto existed and evolved without a name" (xiii).

The short story cycle depends on a rich history of smaller narratives working together to weave a larger effect. Linked multi-part narratives account for some of the

most popular and enduring works of literature. These works distinguish themselves in several ways, namely the through the elements that makes the relationships between the pieces clear. Historically, storytellers have always demonstrated an awareness of the attractiveness of the mode. Dunn and Morris suggest the idea of recurrence in the earliest vehicles for storytelling, pointing to reappearing characters and themes in stories in the bible, Arthurian legend, and *The Odyssey* (21). Epic poetry provides some of the clearest examples of linked storytelling. Throughout *The Odyssey*, for example, the "tension between framework and tales, between the whole story and story pieces" builds and sustains dramatic tension (Dunn 21). Such tension delays gratification on the part of the receiver, endearing the hero to the reader while building anticipation of his return to his homeland. In doing so, the overall effect of Odysseus' travels broadens when the individual episodes are taken together. Naturally, readers care more for the hero with whom they have struggled, battled, and journeyed. That quality powers the mode in many its forms throughout history. Mann discusses its earliest European ancestry, accounting Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as precursors to the modern short story cycle, but points to the Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* as one of the best early examples of linked related stories (2).

The nineteenth century saw the development of the genre continue. Many ancestors to the short story cycle appeared as sequenced or related stories in serialized format, especially during the nineteenth century's fascination with serialized publication. Whether through serialized format or otherwise, the formula of the "composite" endured. George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) represents three stories "realistically depicting the lives of clergy," while Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventures of Sherlock*

Holmes (1892) establishes continuity through the resonance of certain aspects of character, setting, and theme (Mann 5). In America, Washington Irving's *Sketch Book* (1820) and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) anticipated the burgeoning form years before Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914) and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) consolidated twentieth-century interest for linked story-telling.

Several early twentieth-century works served to refine and define the form in significant and far-reaching ways. Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) uses the linked story form to examine "the loss of traditional values and the search for new ones . . . a code of behavior that ensures a minimum of dignity in a world without values" (Mann 197). Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* (1938) and *Go Down Moses* (1942) explore notions of community values and genealogy, respectively. Two of the most recognized short story cycles are Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio.*

Setting allows a broadly defined organizing principle for the mode. Many cycles opt for this organization to be clearly designated from the start. *Winesburg*, *Dubliners*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* all indicate a loose organizing principle of setting. In such cases, the cycle name bears increased significance. Through such place-names, authors select titles based on thematic implication. Further, Mann discusses the importance of a story cycle's arrangement and coherence (16). She makes a distinction between collections that maintain superficial similarities to those that establish and maintain resonance by design (16). The image of collective accomplishment is pivotal to the success of the short story cycle, but must not be at the expense of individual parts. The organizational framework of setting helps to bolster the collective achievement through a common referential field.

Joyce's *Dubliners* and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* have proven themselves influential story cycle models. Each title suggests structural unity through place. Both depend upon individual stories to form the gradually expanding portrait of each town. The setting is vital to both works, as is that of *Red City* short story cycle, in that the environments serve to reveal the intellectual profiles of characters living there. Joyce's achievement gains more critical recognition every year, as critics bring to it a greater understanding of the form in which he worked. However, it did not take critics long to see that *Dubliners* was something more than a story collection. In 1922, John Macy recognized a connection between its parts even without clearly understanding it. He observed: "The sketches in *Dubliners* are perfect, each in its own way, and all in one way" (3: 202). Macy can be credited with great acumen, but a greater sense of understatement. Joyce's accomplishment represents literature ahead of its time, especially in terms of genre. Though we don't blame Macy for not knowing exactly what to make of *Dubliners*, we do owe him a debt of thanks for questioning the form. On the other hand, James Atherton's view ably penetrates the real binding coherence of Joyce's stories. He emphasizes the symbolic rather than actual connections between each piece. He sees the structure of the work empowered by a "superimposed network of significant details which could be elevated into symbols, and which produce an effect of unity and order that repays study by enhancing the reader's appreciation for the work as a whole" (Atherton 42). This "whole effect," based on the cross-referencing of its parts, yields a greater accomplishment than any short story achieves individually.

While Joyce's achievement with *Dubliners* cannot be understated, Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* cannot be separated from any serious attempt to understand the

development of the short story cycle. The town of Winesburg gains substance with each story and character. The town, separated from the characters populating it, loses narrative cohesiveness and the ability to unite the work in any significant way.[2] Of course, the title's suggestiveness inevitably commits the two components to parallel examination, allowing the reader to anticipate the development of one along side the other. Winesburg is then a psychological construct as well as physically defining environment. No less than Joyce's, Anderson's connections between stories transcend to the symbolic. The common setting of the town is understood; the echoes of emptiness in the character's lives, however, resonate more convincingly from story to story. Despite the presence of the sketch map included in many editions, Anderson's hamlet is less distinct than Joyce's Dublin. However, one Anderson character in particular is worth further consideration.

An important connecting element in *Winesburg* is the presence of George Willard. George evolves and grows during the stories' progression from start to finish. Anderson himself indicated the thread of connection Willard brought to the Winesburg stories, saying he wanted to give the "feeling of a boy growing into young manhood in a town" (qtd. in Dunn 53). Like Bingo Ortiz in *Red City*, George appears, interacts, or is spoken of in a number of stories. Unlike George, Bingo represents a unifying element minus the hopefulness associated with growth. George's world is similar to Dublin, as both shared communities paralyze their characters with disconnection and hopelessness. Despite the social implication, both exist as strange worlds of character isolation. *Red City* is also a world of loneliness in the midst of a crowd, but with an exaggerated sense of hopelessness. Bingo Ortiz unifies the stories of *Red City,* similarly to George Willard's

unifying presence in Winesburg, but has learned existence on a near-primal level. The naturalistic city brutalizes its residents in far more extreme fashion than George's Winesburg. Characters in both works suffer from vast emptiness of the soul, but Bingo's world fills that void with the randomness of drugs, crime, and extreme violence.

Anderson and Joyce attempt what Malcolm Cowley terms "[t]hat single moment of aliveness" in their collections (7). Each instance of pure revelation has spiritual ramifications. Cowley observes that the author of *Winesburg* aims at "that epiphany . . . that sudden reaching out of two characters through walls of inarticulateness and misunderstanding" (7). Concerning forms that Joyce experimented with prior to *Dubliners*, Atherton describes Joyce's effort to write what Joyce termed not stories but "epiphanies" (30). Such intense moments of insight are not as frequent in Red City, where impulses *approach* moments of understanding, but turn away at the last instant, or become lost in the miasma of internal chaos and disconnection. *Dubliners* and *Winesburg* share common themes of epiphanic revelation. With grim consistency, *Red City* is united through the absence of any real sense-making moment for its characters. That moment of spiritual insight that Dubliners or Winesburgers experience, no matter how bleak, represents a level of awareness that *Red City* residents are not privy to at all.

Critics disagree conceptually as to whether the genre should be called a "cycle," series," "sequence," or any of a number of other names. However, there is some consistency regarding general characteristics. Susan Garland Mann boils down the most important aspect of the short story cycle as one of simultaneous component autonomy and interconnectedness (15). This aspect, more than any other, gives the genre its individuality. In 1971, Forrest Ingram's *Representative Short Story Cycles of the*

Twentieth Century drew important attention to the idea of the "short story cycle," the term most recognized today. Ingram divides the short story cycle into three basic camps: the composed, the arranged, and the completed (17). He attempts to account for cycles that exist along a continuum, from the intensely coherent to the loosely arranged. The sheer multitude of works possessing some approximation of cycle form may necessitate such classification within the genre.[3] Of the three, he views the composed cycle to be the work "conceived as a whole from the time [the author] wrote its first story" (17). The *composed cycle* exists as a complete idea in the author's mind prior to any stage of its writing. These cycles are products of "master plans," like Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* (1935) (Ingram 17). An *arranged cycle* is one where stories are selected (by author or editor) and brought together to "comment upon one another by juxtaposition or association," and are "usually the loosest cycle forms" (Ingram 18). F. Scott Fitzgerald's *All the Sad Young Men* falls into this category. Lastly, a *completed cycle* represents the middle ground between the composed and the arranged cycle. It is neither completely one nor the other, frequently the result of single stories in which the author recognized threads of continuity and subsequently developed further in additional parts. These sets may begin as separate stories, but end up as concentrated efforts to harmonize one part with another (Ingram 18). Joyce's *Dubliners* and Steinbeck's *The Red Pony* (1945) most closely approximate completed cycles. Ingram's divisions are important because they attempt to create a flexible standard of reference for a form seen as indistinct, while recognizing greater levels of coherency in some works.

Much of the difficulty with the mode arises in its inability to be conveniently classified in terms of the genres it seems to be most like, the novel and the short story.

Since the form predicates its existence on genre combination, critics have assessed it according to standards and criteria that are only partially viable as instruments of measurement. Primarily, the short story cycle is an inclusive genre. Its adaptability makes it an attractive form for writers weary, discontent, or dissatisfied with traditional limits of short story or novel. Alain Robbe-Grillet postulated the importance of form transition and development in his 1955 essay "The Use of Theory." He pre-supposes the creative impulses of writers to recreate new forms to replace antiquated or inadequate modes. He employs the term "new novel" to suggest the future developments of literary artistic form that he believes time and progress necessitate. He states that the term is used suggestively, that it is,

> a convenient label applicable to all those seeking new forms for the novel, forms capable of expressing (or of creating) new relations between man and the world, to all those who have determined to invent the novel, in other words, to invent man. Such writers know that the systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and futile, but that it can even become harmful: by blinding us to our real situation in a world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow. (9)

Dunn and Morris would point to such reasoning as the validation for the form to be known by their preferred term, the "composite novel" (xiii). They believe the form to be precisely the type of literary evolution that Robbe-Grillet posits. The evolution of the form anticipates and "invents" new forms, and the short story cycle's relative versatility and potential make it an excellent example of what Robbe-Grillet anticipates in "The Use of Theory."

However, Robbe-Grillet is not alone in his assessment of necessary literary evolution of form. Tzvetan Todorov's study of Bakhtin's literary theory observes that "genre is, first of all, on the side of the collective and social. . . . a sociohistorical as well as formal entity. Transformations in genre must be considered in relation to social changes" (80). Forrest Ingram carries the idea a step further. He believes that cycles are impulses against tradition, that they "emerged from the center of the literary ferment of their times" (13). Sharon Spencer adds her voice to those calling for or anticipating change in the novel genre formula. Using terminology of spatial organization and perspective, she prefigures present critical discussions of the cycle's unifying elements. She states, "a single perspective, if moveable, provides just as accurate a mode of comprehensive perception as does a collection of perspectives focused upon the same object" (186). The urge to expand the limits of possibility in fiction specifically contributes the development of the genre. The story cycle depends upon such an urge, but in moving away from traditional forms to create its own space, it also embraces them as well. This puzzles critics, and perhaps rightfully so. Short story cycles emulate other forms, but only in part. This aspect of its nature hovers over every aspect of it structure—there is no escaping the "likeness" it has for its close formal relatives. However, the growth of the genre has slowly managed to cut the twin umbilicals connecting it to both short story and novel. No longer a rogue child of the two forms, the cycle has begun to claim an identity and individualism all its own.

The Modernist impulse of the early twentieth century did much to prepare the way for the evolution of the literary mode. Their visionary angst helped fuel the drive to bend and break nineteenth century standards of form and meaning. The growing sense of

urgency to explore new means of representation slowly built upon the foundations of popular forms of storytelling. Richard Kostelanetz allows "the great truth of artistic modernism, especially reaffirmed in the late sixties, is that there need be no end to experiment and innovation in any of the arts" (85). Somewhere between the short story and novel was the opportunity to draw upon the strengths of both to produce a new form, a new way of telling stories unified with overlapping spheres of reference. This unified diversity, critics agree, is the soul of the short story cycle. Ingram's definition is fairly straightforward: "A short story cycle is a set of stories so linked to one another that the reader's experience of each one is modified by his experience of the others" (13). Shaw observes them as "collections [where] one or more unifying techniques are employed to bind stories together" (159). Robert Luscher's definition is similar, in that he sees cycles as experiences where "the reader successively realizes underlying patterns of coherence by continual modifications of his perceptions of pattern and theme" (148). Short story cycles must be, at once, many parts with a single overall collective consciousness. I have attempted such a level of consciousness with the *Red City* stories.

Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris, like Forrest Ingram, deserve a fair share of critical attention due to their extensive research with the form. Their book-length study *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* carefully analyzes the historical predecessors of the genre as well as positing an organizational device for structural analysis. They emphasize the need for the short story cycle to be known by a term they see as more representative of form, the "composite novel." Their rationale for the suggestion is the "inherent limitations" of the more critically accepted term preferred by Forrest Ingram, the "short story cycle" (2). They see the term "composite novel" as a

means of aligning the cycle with the predominant fictional achievement and marketable genre in the modern era (4). The authors are not hesitant to point out the preferential treatment that novels receive over short story collections, though they make no pretense of explaining it. Instead, they view the term as a way to increase marketability and establish credibility of the form alongside the novel proper. While Red City is most indebted to the influences of the novel and short story forms, the significance of Dunn and Morris' broader definition allows the short story cycle/composite novel more latitude and flexibility as a genre. Their willingness to include a variety of forms gives the "composite novel" greater application beyond the novel and short story. In this regard, the short story cycle would be one shape the form assumes, without restricting it to that specific mixing of genres alone.

Dunn and Morris define five unifying aspects of the composite novel. The five areas include setting, the single protagonist, the collective protagonist, pattern, and storytelling (15-16). While the authors separate the elements into five distinct categories, they concede that one or more of the factors usually work in harmony to establish a detailed set of inter-relationships (14). While each of these establishes unity according to different methods, setting is paramount in Red City. Setting is "highly complex and multivalent, offer[ing] numerous possibilities as an element of interconnection in the composite novel" (Dunn 30). The setting in Red City is highly charged; each story bears the weight of a brooding city consciousness in different ways. The social, racial, and cultural dynamics of the stories depend in large part on the interaction of the characters with each other in a larger world of asphalt, brick, and steel.

Red City represents a particularly American city landscape, scarred by all of the most brutal forms of abuse. Beyond this observation, it illustrates the first of Dunn and Morris' five divisions and shares common ground with Anderson's Winesburg and Joyce's Dublin: each setting suggests a close social proximity and sense of community. Other writers have hit upon this notion as well. Louis Auchincloss' *Tales of Manhattan* (1967), involving an upper class first person narrator, uses the obvious structural organizing unit of the city setting. In a smaller but no less community-oriented way, Russell Banks' *Trailerpark* (1981) uses the same unifying closeness and social proximity. The intensely social landscape presents fertile ground for the short story writer. Joyce and Anderson capitalized on this idea, and *Red City* attempts to draw upon the strength of the principle as well.

The city environment (or town) places characters in a highly complex social situation. All of the opportunities for conflict—internal, external, physical, emotional, spiritual, psychological—are prefigured in the notion of the concentrated community. Cities are ripe grounds for short story. Anderson and Joyce embraced the idea of community to illustrate the growing sense of isolation and paralysis. *Red City* mirrors and extends that sense of helplessness, developing it along with other paralyzing mental, social, and physical constraints. "Fixer" and "Coffee, and an Orange" contain characters struggling with intense psychological disconnection. In these stories, the characters approach their problems from opposite ends of life experience.

The young narrator of "Fixer," Jesús, struggles with increasingly difficult decisions as the story progresses. Thrust into the awkward position of babysitting a boy not much younger than himself, the narrator encounters escalating conflicts well beyond

the simple expectations of babysitting. To begin with, the character lives in a home with little interaction or connection between family members. The mother sits in front of the television, not moving even for her crying baby. Her drinking exaggerates the problem. Jesús eats his dinner alone from a can, a clue to the self-reliance he has learned in such an atmosphere. When he arrives at Mrs. Despallo's apartment, he is surprised to see her look as beautiful as she does. He becomes confused with the attraction he feels toward her and his feeling of obligation to his responsibility. Heightening the growing conflict within him is the nature of Paco Despallo's addiction. Already feeling awkward at babysitting a boy he believes too old for such care, his problems grow with the onset of Paco's withdrawal symptoms. Facing inward and outward conflicts, Jesus must navigate the evening with only his sense of judgment. His psychological isolation leaves his no recourse but to meet the problems as best he can, including giving Paco the drug he suffers without. The process of Jesús' decision-making is essential to understanding why he attempts to solve his problems as he does. With no form of guidance, he resorts to a juvenile rationale, feeding Paco's addiction and stealing to do so. His attraction to Paco's mother parallels these difficult decisions with additional distraction.

In "Coffee, and an Orange," the story of disconnection is not that of a teenager but of an old man. Mr. Eichenberg relates his story to the willing audience, a listener who is never named. Readers know that she works at a convenience café, and she seems to have a passing friendly relationship with Mr. Eichenberg. Her relative anonymity provides the narrative vehicle for Mr. Eichenberg's story. The man sits to visit and explain his recent absence to the woman, and over fresh produce, he tells the story of his daughter's death to lung cancer. In the telling, the essence of Mr. Eichenburg's isolation

becomes clear. His grandson has abandoned his mother for the wild lifestyle of the street gang, and Eichenburg is left alone to deal with his daughter's immanent death. The friction between the boy and his grandfather agitates the separation each feels for the other. When the daughter's pain increases to the point of being unbearable—and that of Mr. Eichenberg, as well—he makes a deal with one of the city's drug dealers to ease his daughter into death with overdoses of pain medication. When he becomes trapped in the building, he cannot gain anyone's attention for help. The building's residents are slowly deserting because of illegal pressure from the landlord. When no one comes to help, Mr. Eichenberg is left alone with the body of his daughter. Physically and mentally, Mr. Eichenberg is a castaway in the heart of a city. No one comes to aid him in the direst of circumstances. With the ironic separation, his isolation is exquisitely complete. The decision he makes results from his sense of abandonment. The fact that Mr. Eichenberg omits that information in his discussion with the woman reinforces the distance he feels between himself and anyone else. He believes no one can understand his despair, and suppresses any expression of it. His refuge rests in simple but consuming pleasures. The oranges, their freshness and color and flavor, become miniscule psychological escapes he willingly embraces, as Eichenberg's early discussion with the woman in the story attests. He is consumed with the small details of the fruit. After the story, the woman and the reader know why.

The city itself facilitates inadequate personal space, a symptom of architectural compression, layering, and concentration. *Red City* characters literally and figuratively live on top of one another. This lack of personal space generates edginess, a subtle rage seething below the surface. The rage is partly due to common circumstances the

characters must endure as a group, but also to the steady drain on internal resources that the city places on all its residents. This drain is especially taxing to those bearing the additional burdens of poverty, drug addictions, racial prejudice, or social friction. The multitude of potential character motivations and conflicts makes the city a rich setting for short story development. David Karp, commenting on the peculiar social effect of city living, stresses the difficulty in maintaining emotional reserves in a setting that robs city-dwellers of a sense of internal privacy necessary to mental wellbeing. City-dwellers are forced into experiences with,

> neighbors who trespass upon those areas of our personal life which we have reserved as our own (or, better, our family's). They have penetrated our shell of reserve to the extent that we have become all too aware of the antagonism beneath it. Sometimes that antagonism has been expressed or, at best, too thinly disguised. (26-27)

The passage suggests two issues important to understanding city environmental effects on city dwellers: the idea of "internal reserves" and that of social "antagonism" brought on by close living conditions. Both are important agents in the frustration of *Red City* characters.

The taxation of internal reserves figures significantly in the psychology of *Red City* characters. The environment is clearly hostile. Characters face, as a matter of fact, daily encounters with drugs, violence, gangs, and hostility of all sorts—internal, external, expressed, and latent. From the pressure of these encounters, some characters perceive primal survival skills as more valuable than civilized codes of behavioral and social conduct. The polarity suggested by the constant collision of primal and civilized forces

creates unavoidable friction. While the characters are not always aware of it consciously, the subconscious presence of it pressures constantly each of their lives. None are ever beyond the over-riding presence of urban pressure. As a result, each character's internal reserves of emotional and psychological wellbeing are constantly threatened. Such edginess creates atmospheres of hostility, antagonism, and violent expression. Indeed, no character in the cycle is ever truly safe; the threat is constant.

Louise Gossett's study of violence in southern fiction proves useful in understanding the complexity of *Red City* characters. In the course of discussing Faulkner, O'Connor, and Welty, Gossett interprets the violent response in southern fiction. She attributes fictional violence as a way to "elucidate theme, intensify mood, and delineate character" (51). The appearance of violence in *Red City* serves these purposes to some degree, as well. Further, violence becomes both an expression of confusion and a bid for power in a world that robs its characters of all sense of empowerment. Speaking of characters in southern fiction, Gossett makes observations that hold equally well for citizens of Red City. She notes that:

> Violence gives aesthetic value to the incongruous, the ugly, the repulsive, and the chaotic which these sensitive observers see in their world. It expresses the suffering of inarticulate and dispossessed persons. It questions an optimistic faith in progress and human self-sufficiency by asserting the darkness in the heart of man. It protests that without some formal ordering of his experience man will be overwhelmed with the accidental and the relative. (52)

The city environment drains the characters' internal reserves, keeping each close to moments of social breakdown and chaos. In these moments, characters act or are acted

upon in violent ways. Violence is the primal form that their frustration assumes. Such violence appears in a number of direct and indirect ways in *Red City*, but one of the most direct appearances of frustrated aggression bubbling over is in "214 Las Noches."

The narrator of "214 Las Noches" demonstrates the unseen struggle and sense of dispossession inside many *Red City* characters. His response to the hopefulness of the Golding's new business is at first contained in quiet observation. The more he watches the dream of the business become realized, the more his frustration grows. The gradual revelation of the narrator's inner resentment builds on the way to the climax. The violence substitutes for the narrator's sense of helplessness antagonized by unrealized potential. The language attempts a spare narrative style emblematic of the emptiness with which the narrator views his life and options. The reserved language parallels the narrator's skepticism toward any real hope for change. The real crux of the story resides in the narrator's violent expression. Without clearly understanding why, he channels his frustration into unmerciful violence and rage.

Violence is also the central image of the cycle's last story, "By the Numbers." The story tries to capture the absolute nature of the city's dangerous and volatile environment. Based upon the attempt by one drug dealer to eliminate the other, "By the Numbers" depends upon its violent imagery to succeed as a part of the cycle. Its place in the sequence is intentional. The last image of Red City should capture clearly the antagonism and violent possibility that are commonly part of the characters' lives. Each brutal encounter the nine hit men have barely concedes the nature of their task; The murders become merely "jobs" that needs doing, or so their boss Diggs would have them believe. The executions are merciless, quick, and precise. In the text of the story,

violence is literally and figuratively only a few steps away. The brutality of their killings is surprisingly matter-of-fact; the killers move from one to the next with a grim sense of completion. In their wake, bodies attest to the thin veil separating any of their lives from moments of intensely random and violent expression. At the end of the story, one of the original nine has survived, and their objective is incomplete. The violence of the night avails nothing, and the last member of the group hurries on through the night to tell his boss so.

Part of the greatest aspect of character frustration in *Red City* is the growing sense of dissociation. Mercy Gaines, the young narrator of "Repairs," and the narrator of "Fixer" all share a sense of internal distance that becomes more pronounced as each story progresses. Traces of the theme are also undercurrents in "Delivery," "Paints on Walls," and "Scenes from a Garbage Truck." Collectively, the *Red City* stories attempt to create a sense of unified disenfranchisement that increases as readers wind their way through bleak streets and alleys of the landscape.

In "Mercy Downstairs," Mercy Gaines' self-perpetuating exile causes her to refuse interaction with the outside world for any but the most unavoidable of reasons. Her disenfranchisement is not without her willing and intentional acquiescence. She prefers to view the world from the crumbling but safe confines of her apartment window. From there, she can critique the world in a way that, by Red City standards, represents an antiquated value system. Her neighbors in Red City do not share the hopeful optimism she retains in spite of her reluctance to participate in the world beyond her window. Her interaction with Bingo Ortiz captures the essence of the differences in Mercy's world and that of other *Red City* characters. Mercy's world is one of social kindness, decency, and

respect built on faith. Bingo, however, in this story, acts as an agent of symbolic negation. He becomes the means of comparison by which we can see the dramatic distances between Mercy's morality and the naturalistic environment of the city. In Linda Stoneall's discussion of human ecology, she anticipates the naturalistic tendency caused by competition in the city environment. Indirectly, she touches upon one of the defining differences in Mercy and Bingo as characters. Speaking of cities as competitive environments, she observes that one group usually becomes dominant through superior adaptive abilities, and that "[g]roups interact directly by their relationship to the environment and their competition for subsistence" (78). With this understanding, the disparity between Bingo and Mercy's adaptive personalities is magnified. Mercy resorts to a coping mechanism that, despite any moral superiority, is less effective than Bingo's survivalist impulse. The boy has learned, through whatever cruel or unfortunate set of circumstances, the primacy and urgency of adaptation. When Bingo accompanies Mercy on her grocery forays into the streets of Red City, the idealistic differences between the two becomes even more pronounced. Mercy finds a drunk sleeping through a hangover and wants "to confer a blessing, like [her] Mama did when [she] was growing up in Mississippi." After the difficult time she has saying the prayer over the man because of swollen joints, she finds that Bingo is not by her side. Instead, the boy pilfers from the sleeping man. She spies him "on his knees, going through the soul's pockets."

Because she is a woman of faith in a morally destitute environment, Mercy constructs for herself a much more private and navigable society. It consists of a single friend, Mr. Ramirez, who approximates Mercy in age and shared values. Their society is micro-society, complete with tradition (Wednesday Chicken), rules (the mandatory

secrecy of side dishes), language (broom-handle Morse code), division of labor (dessert and bread responsibilities) and formality (Ramirez's suit). The code they use to communicate—the passing of information back and forth between apartments through knocking on the ceiling/floor—represents an ordered communication rebelling against the randomness and senselessness of the world beyond their tenant house. However, in the privacy of their select society is the grain of disconnection in which many Red City residents seek psychological or emotional refuge. Mercy's locked door, her refusal to vacate the decaying complex, and expectations of "decent folk" are symptoms of her withdrawal. Even her selflessness and apparent kindness are not immune to the hardening effects of the city's very real threats. Ultimately, even the defenses that Mercy makes for herself prove ineffective against the onslaught of civilized chaos. This is made clear when Mr. Ramirez and Mercy become victims of violence. When the lights go out, Mercy checks the locks on her door and takes up watch at her window. She is completely aware of the opportunity darkness provides to tip the thin balance of order. Coupled with the fact that most families in the building have been driven out by a ruthless landlord, she has relatively few options when danger appears. Mercy is an anachronism in Red City. Her steadfast refusal to relinquish the past symbolically banishes her to psychological exile. She and Mr. Ramirez become prey to the nameless, faceless predators of the wild city landscape. Other stories in the cycle address the success and failures of those predatory characters—like "Repairs" and "By the Numbers"—but success and failure in Red City remain unpredictable. What is predictable, on the other hand, is the fragility of the line that separates the characters from chaos.

Mercy's desire to escape the violence and randomness of the city is a theme echoed in many *Red City* stories. The ever-present fire escapes, with a presence in nearly all the stories, are double-edged symbols. Simultaneously, they give the characters a means of "escape" while reinforcing the impenetrability of their social and cultural wasteland. The escapes give the characters a place to seek privacy, but represent the pervading social codes and systems of urban caste keeping them prisoners on the hostile streets. The boy in "Bread of a New Man," too young to understand the realities of the world he inhabits, views the fire escapes curiously and innocently: "Above them, fire escapes stretch against the faces of the buildings like metal bones. On some, people sit and smoke. Laundry drapes over rails and struts. Overhead, lines string between the buildings like webs. Clothes flap in the breeze, drifting in from over the rooftops." The fire escapes give characters a place to flee the press of concentrated humanity. It is the one place where, in plain sight of all, characters can rise above the streets or attain a moment of very public privacy. This is predominantly a discovery of the young in *Red City*. The structures provide a sense of personal space for the characters, a hang out, and a means of quick descent to the streets below. Additionally, the "metal bones" provide a means by which the characters can do their "watching." Fire escapes have significant places in "Delivery," "Fixer," "214 Las Noches," and "Repairs." Instead of rebelling against the rigidity of social structures restraining them, Red City residents adapt the structures into practical uses: "[l]aundry drapes over rails and struts. . . . clothes flap in the breeze." The escapes are at once ugly, rusted metal expanses obscuring the façades the buildings, hiding them in a constrictive grip in which they will crumble (die). The parallel for the stories is clear. Like the constrictive and unsightly existence of the

escapes, the characters will languish in the grip of their cultural, social, and psychological imprisonment. There seems to be little genuine sense that change is possible. In the absence of hope, *Red City* characters adjust, adapt, and prepare themselves for lives on brutal streets. Indeed, some characters even learn to thrive. Like animals in a hostile environment, *Red City* characters must either evolve or perish.

The second of Dunn and Morris' unifying elements is the single protagonist. In cycles joined by the consistent presence of a single character, main or otherwise, unity occurs as a result of the familiar presence. Italo Calvino's Qfwfq, "a protean character," in *Cosmicomics* (1965) unites the twelve stories of his cycle through his "chatty, comic-strip voice" (Dunn 47). Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1985) also employs the form of the single protagonist in the stories of a young girl growing up in Caribbean Antigua. Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* also falls into this category through the abiding presence of George Willard. Like the continuity of place, the existence of a familiar character draws the narratives together while offering readers, as in *Winesburg*, a gradual sense of character development or growth. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts* (1976), the persistent narrator acts as a thematic hub for the stories. However, Kingston's accomplishment treads strange literary ground, using "autobiography, mimetic fiction, history, and myth to produce a collage effect of varying forms" (Dunn 56).

The closest *Red City* comes to a single protagonist is Bingo Ortiz. The character, however, is not so clearly a member of the same classification as those of Calvino, Anderson, and Kingston. Bingo shares some of the qualities of Dunn and Morris' description as well as similarities with the Anderson protagonist. Anderson supposed the

Willard character as more than unifying strategy. Readers can trace George Willard's development throughout the cycle; he has a prominent place in the stories "Mother," "Death," "Sophistication," and "Departure." His roles include "protagonist, sought-out listener, or observer," as well as the subject of discussion in other stories (Dunn 52). Bingo Ortiz appears in the stories without ever assuming the role of primary protagonist. "Repairs" is the closest readers come to Bingo Ortiz, and that experience is filtered through the eyes of his narrator friend. He also appears in significant, if sometimes brief, ways in "214 Las Noches," "Mrs. Travez Sings the City," "Bread of a New Man," and "Mercy Downstairs." Bingo, unlike George Willard, lacks the potential for growth. The character represents the smartest and most street-wise of Red City inhabitants, but his intelligence is geared to the survival of self. This aspect of Bingo's character is less a condemnation of his moral vacuity as a symbolic personification of Red City's "urban naturalism." Readers cannot trace growth by charting Bingo's appearance in the stories, but can gain a practical sense of profitable characteristics in its deterministic environment.

Bingo's powers of observation and adaptability surpass those skills in other characters by leaps and bounds. He is primarily a "watcher." In his careful speculative approach to the streets, he gains an elevated awareness, a street-wise nature that enables and empowers him in the urban landscape. The narrator of "Repairs" gives voice to this awareness with child-like naivete. He follows Bingo's lead without question, recognizing at once Bingo's superior acumen and wisdom. He observes that his friend "is good at quiet communication" and at finding all the secret taboos worth seeing. Additionally, the narrator tells how Bingo taught him to use the fire escape ladders

fireman-like, for quick exits, by sliding down the outer supports. Later, Bingo wisely stays out of the reach of Satch and Wilkey until he is sure of their intentions, even though they have shown no sign of hostility. The narrator, who waits expectantly for the situation with the two older boys to turn one way or another, waits tensely in the shadows. He states "I don't say anything since Bingo's the one. He's talked us through this whole situation, and they haven't gone for us, so I would be blind not to see that he is the one. Whatever he said would be good." The narrator's confidence in Bingo is well placed. In Red City, Bingo *is* the one. He is the coyote, the fox, cleverest of Red City characters. Bingo Ortiz's importance in the cycle does not conclude with this. He figures significantly in the third centralizing agent of Dunn and Morris' five divisions.

The third area of Dunn and Morris' cycle classification is that of a "collective protagonist." The collective protagonist is, in essence, exactly what the name implies:

> a group that functions as a central character (a couple, an extended family, or a special interest group) or an implied character who functions as a metaphor (an aggregate figure who, cumulatively, may be 'typical' or 'archetypal' or 'the essence of' or 'the developing presence of' or 'the soul of'—and so on). (59)

Mann implies this theory in assessing the unifying structure of *Dubliners*. She claims "[s]ince there is no protagonist who reappears and develops in the process of the book, critics often fail to notice that the book presents the gradual maturation of what one might consider the archetypal Dubliner" (30). Some of the greatest examples of cycles employing this unifying technique are Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) and Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* (1942). Critics who view Hemingway's achievement as a cycle of collective protagonists do so based on the familiar narrator type the stories share. Also in

this vein, Faulkner's cycle places the McCaslin clan, over six generations, as the cycle's main characters. Ernest Gaines' *Bloodline* (1968), which has a structural unity similar to *Dubliners,* shares maturation as a prominent unifying theme. Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1940) utilizes the concept of the collective protagonist, as well. *Red City* has at its heart a cast of characters of diverse ethnicity (mainly black, Jewish, and Hispanic), age, and gender. But, they are united in their socioeconomic plight. In this regard, all of Red City's inhabitants can be seen as collective protagonists struggling against the friction of racial bias, random violence, destitution, and crime. In this interpretation, the stories become individual episodes speaking to the larger fate of the city's characters. Though individual and separate, all the stories—some not even mentioning Bingo Ortiz—can be grouped on the basis of the collective consciousness represented in multiple voices.

Strangely enough, the critics' third designation of unity also applies to Bingo Ortiz on the metaphoric level. Bingo, as collective protagonist, is the essence of the amoral, survival-oriented, indifferent character who has learned to invest himself only in activities where self-benefit is clear. He is a symbol of adaptation in the cruelest of human environments. Although the city's drug lords also seem motivated by similarly reductive visions of life, the dealers are adults. Bingo's character is all the more tragic because his selfishness has come so definitively early in life. A child, he learns his amorality and street wisdom from watching the world around him. He is a product of a capitalist social structure in the extreme: any action that is profitable for self is adopted, and non-profitable actions, like Mercy Gaines' morality, are culled from his system of values. Bingo represents the cruel awareness of the truth of these streets—the fittest

survive, the weak become prey. Bingo may not be by contrast "strong;" he is, after all, a child. He *does* have at his disposal, however, the benefits of his watchfulness and wisdom—and that has made him the most adaptable character in the cycle.

The fourth of Dunn and Morris' classifications informs *Red City* as a cycle, in part. The authors define pattern repetition as another significant focal point for the cycle genre. Flaubert's *Three Tales* (1877) includes three brief novellas about three unrelated characters. The similarities arise upon closer inspection and analysis; different characters and stories become united in similar patterns of theme. Eudora Welty's *The Golden Apples* (1949) manages similar thematic convergence using myth to create patterns. The tales achieve their sense of unity from the mythic patterns emerging from each. For these tales to acquire the same sense of interdependence and resonance, the reader must be able to extract meaning at a deeper level from the text.

Red City is a work of contemporary established pattern designs. Significant patterns of meaning in the details of setting are meant to weave a convincing tapestry of place. The minor pieces of the larger atmosphere relate to the overall environment as the smaller narratives relate to the greater whole of the cycle. The intended effects create a collective sense of completeness. The details that readers gather from the streets of the cycle include: streetlights casting disaffected, "yellow" light, winding fire escapes, dark streets, drab tenant complexes, vanishing sunlight, drunks, junkies, and drug paraphernalia. The cumulative effect of these pieces of the larger pattern is bleak in the extreme. As in *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio*, the characters suffer from identical feelings of emptiness, loss, powerlessness, paralysis, and disenfranchisement. All the stories of the series share a particularized brand of urban isolation that frustrates

characters all the more in a sea of people and social activity. Some of the characters adapt. Some of them explode in violence. Some hide in their apartments. Some retreat into drug-induced numbness. *All* of them are affected by the undercurrent of denied hope streaming through the city streets.

Storytelling is the last of Dunn and Morris' five unifying devices. This designation is by far the most elusive of their five-part analysis. It suggests that the *continuance of telling* unites works that, to this point in time, have been regarded as pastiches or collages. N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) "contains three narrative voice tracks—the mythic, the historical, and the personal" (Dunn 91). John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) manipulates the boundaries of storytelling and storyteller, art and artist, playing with the divisions as a consistent unifying device. This centralizing agent in these story cycles is, perhaps, the most flexible and confusing. *Red City* narratives vary in perspective but attempt to retain a consistency of narrative style. Allowances for personality, age, and gender differences are not meant to obscure the overriding similarity of narrative patterns. Even third person narrators strive to keep the vein of consistency and capture the form most consistent with, and appropriate for, the story landscape.

The narrative style of the *Red City* stories bears mentioning here, since it is one of the most important ways the stories attempt to create a feeling of immediacy. Anton Chekhov said of his own writing, "[w]hen I write, I reckon entirely upon the reader to add for himself the subjective elements that are lacking in the story" (195). The Red City narratives intentionally reflect the barrenness of the society's interior psychology. While rich with ethnic diversity, the environment manages to subvert all of the benefits of such

differences, uniting all characters under a single banner of social determinism. Mary Louise Pratt observes that the short story cycle is an especially gifted form for relating a group's social consciousness. She sees in it a "basic literary identity for a region or group, laying out descriptive parameters for character types, social and economic settings, principle points of conflict for an audience unfamiliar either with the region itself or with seeing that region in print. But the short story cycle sometimes is used to convey a particular social perspective too" (105). This universal sense of perspective is simplified, direct, and spare. All the stories in the cycle attempt to maintain a sense of continuity in the narration and perspective. Even when the narrator is not a character (3rd person objective), I have attempted to infuse each story with a resonant rhythm of reduced syntax, loosening it only as much as personality variations demanded. I believe this to be entirely appropriate to the characters the stories. After all, considering their lives, how else would they speak?

Overall, *Red City* employs some ingredients of all five unifying devices proposed by Dunn and Morris. This, in itself, is not strange, in that most critics agree that a number of unifying principles are at work in one way or another in most story cycles. Most conspicuously, the cycle uses the setting to anchor the stories with a common sense of place, culture and society. It reduces experience to bare narrative forms to imitate the metaphoric vacuity the characters feel physically and spiritually. I have tried to leave the reader with a growing sense of the city and its people, increasing the boundaries of that picture as each story resonates against the others. In the final estimation, I hope that readers come away with a gradually assembled picture of the city and the type of people populating it. Like Belino in "Paints on Walls," I have attempted the production of a

language mural, full of the lives that have contributed to it in part so that the whole might resonate with a life all its own. The final portrait of the city should be as hard, brutal, and relentless as the streets it defines.

END NOTES

1. Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris provide a representative compilation of terms used to refer to what has gained modest acceptance under the term "short story cycle." Their list demonstrates the slipperiness of the form and the difficulty it creates for critical discussion and agreement. Their list is as follows:

> *story cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, loose-leaf novel, short story composite, rovelle, composite, short story compound, integrated short story collection, anthology novel, modernist grotesque, hybrid novel, story chronicle, short story sequence, genre of return, short story volume, and narrative of community.* (4)

The problem critics experience with the form can easily be seen in the vast range of differences suggested by the terms. Dunn and Morris, however, attempt to reconcile all these differences under the inclusive "composite novel."

2. Of course, setting alone does not seem a significant enough unifying element without the addition of careful thematic architecture to buttress the work. Some critics will disagree, wishing to open the form to works on the margin. For me, the aspect of the short story cycle that gives it the integrity it needs to survive critical scrutiny and ensure longevity must demand more than some critics would allow. Susan Garland Mann agrees

and extends the point: "It is not enough—as is the case with most of John Cheever's and Ann Beattie's collections—simply to depict a particular class of people at a particular time and in a particular geographic setting" (16).

3. For an annotated listing of 20th century short story cycles see Susan Garland Mann's *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, 1989, 185-208. For a more comprehensive but unannotated listing of cycles, see Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris' *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition,* 1995, xix-xxxi.

WORKS CITED

Atherton, James S. "The Joyce of Dubliners." *James Joyce Today: Essays on the Major Works*. London: Indiana UP. 1966.

Chekhov, Anton. "To A. S. Souvorin." 1 Apr. 1890. *The New Short Story Theories*. Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 195.

Cowley, Malcolm. Introduction. *Winesburg, Ohio*. By Sherwood Anderson. New York: Viking, 1965. 1-15.

Dunn, Maggie and Ann Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. New York: Twayne, 1995.

Gossett, Louise Y. *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction*. Durham N.C.: Duke UP, 1965.

Ingram , Forrest L. *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*. The Hague: Mouton, 1971.

Karp, David A., Gregory P. Stone, and William C. Yoels. *Being Urban: A Sociology of City Life*. 2nd ed. NewYork: Praeger, 1991.

Kostelanetz, Richard. "New Fiction in America." S*urfiction: Fiction Now and Tomorrow*. Ed Raymond Federman. Chicago: Swallow Press, 1981. 85-100.

Luscher, Robert M. "The Short Story Sequence: An Open Book." *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Ed. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellen Clarey. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 148-167.

Macy, John. *Short Story Criticism.* Ed. Sheila Fitzgerald. Vol. 3. Detroit: Gale Research, 1989. 202-203.

Mann, Susan Garland. *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide.* Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989.

Pratt, Mary Louise. "The Short Story: The Long and The Short of It." *The New Short Story Theories.* Ed. Charles May. Athens: Ohio UP, 1994. 91-113.

Robbe-Grillet, Alain. "The Use of Theory." *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction.* Trans. Richard Howard. Evanston, IL.: Northwestern UP, 1965. 7-14.

Shaw, Valerie. *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction.* London: Longman, 1983.

Spencer, Sharon. *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel.* New York: New York UP, 1971.

Stoneall, Linda. *Country Life, City Life: Five Theories of Community.* New York: Praeger, 1983.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle.* Trans. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

BREAD OF A NEW MAN

The man coughs into his hand, moves his eyes to his son across the table, playing with his food. His son looks up at the noise.

"Are you sick?"

"I'm okay, boy." He coughs again.

"Why are the tortillas brown? They are not white like at the restaurant."

The man looks up at his wife, standing over a frying pan of onions, meat, and peppers. She looks back, worried. Her eyes shift from the man to the boy. Fragrant steam rising from the pan fills the tiny kitchen with the smell of cooked food and spice. The man squelches the urge to cough. When it passes, he answers the boy's question.

"The water here is dirty. The bread that comes from dirty water is never white. It's okay, son. Eat your supper."

The boy holds up the tortilla between two fingers, wiggles them, flapping the tortilla above his plate. He wrinkles his face. "They taste better at the restaurant."

"The food is good, son. It's good enough. Eat."

The woman and the man trade looks. He begins to cough again. She turns to the pan of frying meat and vegetables, stirs them with a chipped wooden spoon. She doesn't look when the man hacks into a napkin, wiping his mouth, crunching it tight in his fist when the cough subsides.

"When you finish eating, we have to see some people. I want you to come with me. Finish your dinner."

"Where are we going?"

At the stove, the woman puts down the spoon, stands still, listens to the man's answer. He notices her attention, speaks quietly to the boy.

"We have to go see some people I know, and we have to walk a long way. These people work with me, in a way." He clears his throat, stalls a cough.

"Okay. I don't mind. I can walk as far as you want." The woman scoops the meat out of the pan, carries it over to the boy's plate, spoons it on the tortilla. The boy rolls it closed and stuffs his mouth full.

Out on the street, the man keeps the boy close to his side. After walking a while, the boy asks where they are going.

"I told you. We have to see some of the people I work with."

"What people?"

"They live down there." The man points down a street where lights throw dim-yellow cones and shadowed people look their direction. The man squeezes the boy's hand and walks faster. Under one arm, he clutches a wrinkled but carefully folded paper sack. The boy waits for the man to show him what is in the bag, but the man doesn't explain. They pass some shadows murmuring from dark alleys, orange points of light glowing from cigarettes.

"Don't look at them, son. They're dying."

The boy looks up, unsure of the man's meaning.

"You see them, son? Don't be like them."

The boy nods, preoccupied by some women calling to a slow-moving vehicle.

"Are those women dying, too, daddy?"

"Everyone here is dying, boy. It's just the way they let it come."

The boy nods again, looking down at his torn tennis shoes and kicking at some loose pavement. The man kneels close to the boy.

"You won't grow up here. We are leaving soon. We are all leaving. Your mama, me, you." The man waits for the boy's questions, waits for the boy to be glad.

"Why are those people dying?"

He stands up, takes the boy's hand again. They walk down the street between dark buildings. Above them, fire escapes stretch against the faces of the buildings like metal bones. On some, people sit and smoke. Laundry drapes over rails and struts. Overhead, lines string between the buildings like webs. Clothes flap in the breeze, drifting in from over the rooftops. Somewhere a radio thumps out music with heavy bass. When the boy hears it, he bobs his head, shuffles his feet in time with the rhythm. Ducking and sliding, he dances a quick little step at his father's side.

The man watches him as they walk. "Who taught you that?"

"They do it at school. It's cool." His head swivels side to side to the distant beat. Two boys drinking beer on a nearby stoop point and laugh, amused at the boy. When the boy sees them, he pours extra effort into the routine, turning to face the boys, writhing in rhythm, spinning on his heels, snapping his arms, clapping his hands. When the song ends, the boys put their bottles down and began to applaud and whistle. The boy waves back, and the man sees his pride.

They keep walking. Beside a crumbling tenant building, a man rests on his hands and knees. He makes retching sounds, resting his head against the wall.

"What's he doing?" The boy points and stares.

"He's looking for his bottle."

"Is he sick? He looks sick."

"Lots of people are sick here. Everyone is sick. We could see that for the rest of our lives if we were staying. But we're not." The man looks to see how he takes the news, covering a cough with his free hand.

"No, we're not." The boy watches the retching man until he's out of sight.

Further down the street, someone stops to talk to the man. His father lets go of the boy's hand. The boy begins to dance in the street to a song he knows from the radio, humming to himself. When he looks up, he sees a dirty-faced child in the window across the street. They watch each other until it's clear each sees the other. The boy stops his dance. He waves. The boy in the window flips him off and says some words through a closed, cracked window. His face disappears behind the drape.

"I didn't do anything to you," the boy says, but the kid in the window is gone.

The man's voice comes from behind the boy. "Come on, son. We should go."

They walk together until the boy stops, points to things on the street. Near an alley the man sees a crushed glass pipe, blackened at one end, broken needles, syringes, and small broken vials. The man holds the boy by both shoulders.

"Those are needles. Don't ever touch them. Don't touch anything in this part of town." The man sighed.

"Don't touch things like that. Ever." The boy returns, reassured.

"Don't ever come down here by yourself. Don't come here at all. You understand?" A fit of deep-lung coughing sends the man away a few paces, hacking, hunching himself toward the street. The boy thinks of the man looking for his bottle. The man spits phlegm, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. The boy watches him, a question wrinkling his brow.

"Are you okay? Should we call mama or someone? We could get one of the people you work with to help you." He pats the man's hand, looks into his face, waits for a signal he's okay.

"I don't think anyone like that will be able to help us." He takes the boy's hand and begins walking. They walk past groups of men, women in black stockings, boys gambling with dice. The man hurries the pace. The boy sings as he skips at his side.

"Red City, Dead City, Come-an-lose-your-head City . . ." He gyrates his head again to the verbal staccato. He begins to dance once again, a curious cross-step hip twist that makes the man smile.

"Where'd you get that?"

"School. Eddie Pescador plays his radio and we make up words, but only at lunch or recess. Bingo Ortiz is the best at it, but the black kids say spics can't do it as well as nigger boys."

The man listens, nods, watches the boy closely. The boy dances around in place, watching his feet, music in his head and lips moving. When the man starts walking, the boy runs to keep up, skip-hopping to the man's side. They walk under a neon sign. The boy sounds out the letters, pointing to each. The man waits for the boy to decide what the sign says.

"Bonita's Salsa Club. It says Bonita's Salsa Club. What is this place?" Inside the boy hears loud music, laughing, people talking. The door of the place bolts open and a man and woman stumble out. Inside the boy sees red lights flashing, spinning, people dancing everywhere. The door slams shut.

The man says for him to wait outside by the trashcans, out of the light. He stands the boy by the cans, tells him not to move, to stay out of sight. Most of all, he says not to talk to anyone. The man goes inside where the music plays and the music pumps through the walls. The boy looks around, hums to himself. He tries to make up another song, like Bingo had taught him, but can't hear himself over the loud people and sounds coming from inside. The door opens twice as he waits by the trashcans, but the people don't even look at him.

"Hey, boy. Do you have any money?" The voice comes from behind him in the alley. The boy turns into the face of a dirty man, thrust down at him. He wears stained clothes, smells of body odor and liquor. The man comes a step closer. "Do you have any money?" He throws an empty palm out. His wide eyes look hard at him from behind the tangles of matted hair.

"I don't have any money. Why don't you have any money?" The boy is curious, glad to have someone to talk to.

"Spent it." The man holds up a glass pipe, burned at one end. The boy strains to see it. The dirty man holds it out, tells him to touch it, not to be afraid. When the boy turns, looks around, his father stands beside the boy. The dirty man raises a single hand, backs away into the alley. The man puts a firm hand on the boy's shoulder, turns him, walks him away from Bonita's Salsa Club.

The boy walks in silence, waiting for the man to be mad, to say something to him. The man coughs, looks ahead, clutches the bag tight. The boy looks hard at the face, tries to know if he's mad. He looks weary, but doesn't scold the boy for talking to the alley man.

Soon, the boy worked enough courage to break the silence between them. "What did you do in there?"

"I just said goodbye to some people."

"Were they your friends?"

Without looking at the boy, the man says no.

They pass a group of teenagers huddled on the steps of a tenant building. The boys reach their hands out. The girls squeal, slap their hands away, laughing. The sun sets, and all of the street lights unbroken begin to blink on. The group of boys and girls call out to them. The man does not increase pace, but in a whisper tells the boy not to slow down. He calls over the boy's head, flinging Spanish back at them, grouped on the steps. The words are harsh, but the group on the steps laughs. One comes down the steps, flashes them a sign in the falling darkness. The boy can't make it out, but the group on the steps laughs harder, louder.

"What's he trying to say?"

"He's not saying anything, son. Just showing off."

They keep walking. Sometimes, people call out to them. When the man meets someone he recognizes, he speaks quietly, looking at the boy out of the corner of his eye while he trades with the strangers. The bag unfolds and refolds many times.

By some empty gray buildings, they pass an old black man with bushy white hair. He sits on a crate in a boarded up doorway. In his thin hands, he holds a guitar close to his face, sliding a glass tube up and down the strings. His eyes are closed. An empty box stands open beside him, coins spotting the bottom. The music slides slow and twangy from the instrument. The man stops, and the boy hesitates before the old guitar player. The man waits, watching the boy's curious eyes track the skeletal hands up and down the neck, trembling the slide back and forth. The black man feels each note.

The guitar player's face, to that point filled with the music, relaxes, eyes remaining shut. The music plays on. The man coughs into his hand, looks at the boy. The guitar player opens his eyes, sees the man and boy. The black man nods his head and sings something about Jesus making up his dying bed. With one foot, he nudges the open box toward the boy. The man pushes money into the boy's hand, points to the box. Without looking at the money, the boy holds the bill out between his thumb and forefinger, waggles it back and forth above the box. He lets go, and the guitar player's hand shoots out. He catches the bill before it hits the box bottom, his other hand slapping the instrument in rhythm while he pockets the money. Eyes close, the song resumes as if he'd never stopped. He smiles and nods. The boy nods back, thinks it's expected. Walking away, he hears the man singing about a far-away shore where all the saints said glory and weren't gonna die no more.

A few blocks later, the boy says his feet hurt.

"We're almost done, son. Almost done and gone."

They come to a place where many people stand in groups at an intersection. Cars squeeze around the people. Most stand, talk, laugh in the middle of the street. The man

squeezes the boy's hand, looks hard at him, doesn't say anything. The boy thinks he understands. This time he decides not to say anything to anyone.

They approach a dark car. The driver's door hangs open. A black man in trim fitting clothes, baseball cap, and tinted glasses sits, pecks at the car stereo with one finger. Music erupts out into the street, pulsing and rhythmic. Two girls in tight-short skirts dance in the car's headlights. The man keeps the beat with his foot on the curb, and the boy instantly begins to move to the rhythm. His father releases his hand, goes to the car, pulls the wrinkled sack from his shirt. When he gets close, the black man looks him up and down. In the growing electric light, the boy watches the black man and his father talking.

The boy waits. Some of the groups notice and point to him. The boy tries to sing about the shores where everyone said glory, but can't remember the words, can't make any up, either. Bingo Ortiz could have done it, spic or no spic. He walks around, waiting, trying not to come close enough to any group to have to speak to them.

"Hey, boy. Hey, sexy little fella. Come and dance with us." The two women call to him, wave him over in big and friendly waves. The boy wants to dance, looks to the man. The man is still talking to the well-dressed black man. He waits, but the man does not turn around. The boy runs to the circles of light and music where the women laugh out loud at each other, themselves, moving to the music. Their skirts are short, and he can see the line where their breasts come together in tight shirts. They seem especially happy, and he thinks they dance like they don't care about anything. They smile at him; he begins to dance, as well.

They think he's a good dancer, clap for him, watch him and laugh. The boy dances hard, begins to sweat. Groups of people watch and wave, pointing and shouting. The boy tries extra hard, spinning on his hands, roll-twisting and somersaulting. He looks at his feet, shuffles them fast, doing all the things they practice to the radio at school, spinning and sliding in the headlights to the hoots and calls around him. He gets tired, but does not want to let the people down. He sees his father waving him over. When he stops and runs to his father's side, the girls call for him to come back and dance. The crowds call to him and clap. The man looks at him carefully. The black man stands between his door and the car, smiling a sparkling white smile at the sweating, huffing boy.

"Where'd you learn to dance like that, kid?" He smiles at the question. The boy looks to his father, back at the man whose eyes he can't see.

"School." He can't think of more to say. The man coughs into his hand, spits, coughs again. The black man looks at the man.

"Maybe you're too late. Should have left some time ago."

The man takes the boy's hand, walks away in silence through the street. When they are away from the music and crowds, the boy complains that his feet are hurting still. The rubber soles of his shoes are separated, peeling back. His shoes flap when he walks. The man tells him they're done, going home.

"That man wasn't your friend either, was he?"

"What makes you ask that?" The man spits phlegm into the gutter, coughs again.

"I just don't think he was."

"He's dying too, son. None of us have to see that any more."

"Where's your bag? Was it important what was in there?"

The man looked the boy in his eyes. "No. Not important at all." He seems pained, squeezes his son's hand tight. "From now on, we will only eat clean bread. Clean bread made from clear water. You won't have to eat brown tortillas again. We'll go where everything will be just fine." Then, an afterthought: "We will stop and buy your mother some fresh white tortillas."

"When will these people die, these people you say are sick?"

"I don't know. We won't be here to see it." Under a flickering streetlight, his father picks him up and begins to carry him home.

MRS. TRAVEZ SINGS THE CITY

The ache in her veins subsides as she watches the sunset through silhouetted struts of the rusted fire escape. She feels the surge and rush as it begins to take effect, soothing, silent pumping jets, flowing. Her breaths are tattered, waiting for the release of her muscles, the tension of deprivation, feeling her body accept the heat. She unclenches her fists. Soon, her hands aren't shaking anymore. She drops the needle over the window sash to the street below.

She hears people talking in the apartments around her, murmuring on all sides. She has learned to shut them out mostly, but her walls eternally whisper with the voices of her neighbors, and she hears more than she wants. When the ache is gone and she rides the flow of the drug, and the voices don't bother her. She watches the daylight slide up the brick of the tenant walls. The city hums inside her, a peaceful lull and roar, the quiet wash of city, sound, and drug. The music of the city becomes clearer; a secret rhythm emerges. This is when the city is beautiful to her. This is when she smiles, alone in the dark. The humid steam of new fallen rain turns the pavement black, and Mrs. Travez stares into the darkening evening, breathing deeply, steadily, holding her arm.

Above, the sky mellows into red and yellow. She feels the colors in her veins at last. The music of the city turns, pulses, alive.

***

"Maria, *chica*, where are you?"

"Here, Mama." Maria looks up from the notes, over the piano to where her mother calls. Mama comes into the room, drying a glass with a dishtowel.

"Why aren't you singing, child?" Mama scolds.

"I'm trying to learn this piece, Mama. It's not so easy."

"Play that nice song, the one you know so well. Sing for me, *chica*." Mama goes back through the doorway, disappears into the kitchen.

Maria Travez closes the music before her, puts down her pencil. She rests her hands on the keys, placing her fingers where the first notes of Mama's favorite begin. She closes her eyes and listens to the music, the voice.

***

Mr. Gregor takes his shirts and pants and socks, handing her seven dollars. He smiles but does not meet her eyes. She knows the Gregors do not need her to do the laundry, could do it themselves for less. She says that she is free to help whenever they need her, wishes to help them for real, but he only shakes his head, shuts the door.

Two floors below, Mrs. Wilton gives her four dollars for the clothes, washed, folded, ironed. Mrs. Wilton says that this will be the last time they need her help, that Mr. Wilton won't let her pay to have the laundry done when she can do it herself. She says she is sorry and shuts the door. Mrs. Travez stops on the stairs, holds the shaky

banister in the middle of the stairway. She looks back to the closed door half a floor above her. A man and woman step past her, look back for a minute before ascending out of sight. In her hands she clutches eleven one-dollar bills. She needs more. Above her, the stairs square-spiral up three floors. No customers up there. She hears a baby crying, a radio playing salsa, an argument in the hall. She thinks of customers and their money.

***

"Maria, play for the Esperados. They want to hear you sing." Mama looks proud, The Esperados are smiling, waiting.

Maria blushes but knows her piano, her voice; she has confidence in both. She sings and plays for the Esperados and does not need the notes, does not need to see Mama and her guests to know what they are doing. They are smiling like all of Mama's friends do when Maria plays and sings. When the song ends and she turns around, Mama and Mrs. Esperando are crying. They applaud from behind wet cheeks, reach out, hug her to them with desperation strange and beautiful.

***

Mrs. Travez knows where to go for money. She has sold most of the furniture in the apartment, holds jobs only briefly, but knows where she can get money. On the corner of *Los Azules* and 112th, there are men willing to pay. At her house she takes from

the drawer some clothes, puts them in one of the bags. On the stairs, two teen-agers, already drunk, kiss with sloppy urgency.

Ten minutes later, she reaches a tenant building, rings the bell to apartment 307. The tag by the buzzer reads "W. Diggs." When a voice answers, she speaks for a moment into the box, looking down. The intercom switches off and she sinks down beside the building. The street lights begin to pop on, flicking away the descending evening in new cones of yellow light. People move in and out, through the light and back into the unlit streets beyond. Mrs. Travez squeezes her eyes shut, begins the wait.

***

Maria watches her Mama hand the man an envelope stuffed with fives and tens. He sweats from exertion, and outside Maria sees three other men getting into a truck. The man nods twice, takes the envelope, and leaves, shutting the door too loudly as he goes. Then the house is quiet. There is a strange tension in the room between Mama, Maria, and the piano, as if it were an awkward guest and none knew what to say. Mama and Maria look to the used piano, then to each other.

"It's yours," Mama whispers, her voice small from emotion. It is the most expensive thing she has ever bought.

***

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Travez looks up, having dozed while she waited. A tall black man comes out of the tenant in blue jeans and a white shirt. He gives her a

quick kiss, hands her a key on a ring. He steps back against the wall, fingering a chain around his neck. Soon he lights a thin cigar, the smoke spins a slow circle around his head. Mrs. Travez looks the street up and down. Neon mixes with street light, vanishing the dark for the electric buzz and flash of bars, diners, strip clubs. She goes into Diggs' apartment and comes out in a dress tighter than she likes. She knows if the night is good to her, she won't have to wear it for long.

Under a street light, she tries to appeal to the slow moving cars, the steady gaze of men from both passenger and driver seats. When the cars do not stop, she does not quit the charade. Twenty minutes pass, no stops. Diggs looks off down the street, surveys her competition. Mrs. Travez feels the quiet voice in her veins. It will get louder. She begins to hum softly to herself, waiting for an offer.

***

"Don't be loud. I'm supposed to be practicing," Maria rasps at him as he straddles the piano bench and puts his arms around her. The clock sits above the open music notes, making the guilt she feels increase, stirring a mild panic in her stomach.

"Your Mama's not home, Maria. She'll never know. Not unless you tell her." His smiles are full of mischief; he pulls her tight. She resists, plying her arms out of his grasp, eyes locked on the door, ears open.

"Jorge, not now. What if she comes? I haven't practiced at all."

He motions to the opened window. "Then I am a ghost. She won't catch us, *bonita.*" She looks to the clock. She wonders what Mama would do if she walked up and did not hear the music, the singing.

He kisses her across the eyes, moves to her mouth. When she tries to get up, he does not release her, uses his weight to keep her from standing. He holds her wrists, moves to kiss her again, a smile on his lips. Maria turns her head and struggles to stand, almost falling from the bench. She lunges forward when his grip loosens, but he pulls back hard. Her imbalance sends both of them into the piano keys, a loud, discordant surge of sound that trembles away in a slow echo off the wooden floors. Maria and Jorge freeze, eyes wide. Footsteps on the porch. Keys at the lock.

"Maria, what are you doing, child?" Mama's voice carries from the porch. Maria and Jorge struggle to right themselves, his face red, her shirt unbuttoned. Jorge dashes to the window. Maria is on the third button when she hears her mother's gasp. Jorge drops through the window. Maria can hear his feet slapping the sidewalk, running clumsily away.

"Mama." She cannot think to say anything else.

Mama's face says everything. The clock on the piano chimes the hour for her lesson to end.

***

The small man approaches her, hesitating. "Cuanto?" he asks softly. His Spanish is terrible, but she only points to Diggs against the wall. Diggs doesn't move, hardly

registers the man until the stranger has finished speaking. He turns and faces the man completely, stands hint-of-threat close, gestures to the building. The small man nods, puts his hand into his pocket before shaking Diggs' hand. It's odd to see the small man and Diggs shake hands as if old friends, but this business is never conducted otherwise. Inside her, the slow dull pains begin to plow through her with more urgency, and the time begins to crawl.

***

Twenty minutes and the small man is gone, disappearing into the neon and traffic of 112th. Mrs. Travez follows him down at a distance, not wanting to see him, to have him speak another word to her. Tangled ball of sheets under one arm, and a ten dollar tip in the other, Mrs. Travez waits until the man is gone.

Diggs holds a dangling six pack by the plastic ring, drinking as she approaches, two empty cans at his feet. She apologizes for the time it takes to find one and finish business. He nods his head, neither of them commenting on the fact that pick-ups take longer and longer, fewer and fewer men showing interest. She says she'll have the sheets done by Wednesday. He hands her a thin roll of bills, and she kisses him once on the cheek.

The ball of sheets tucked under her arm, she thinks she'll have to sneak them into one of the loads she'll get on Monday from the Gregors. She thinks of the pain that seems to ride through her veins with every beat of her heart, and she knows how to make

it stop. Her face fixes in a hard gaze, but she doesn't see the sidewalk in front of her, nor the people that pass her on the street.

***

Maria squeezes the bench until her fingers hurt. The whistling crack of the belt against her bare back and buttocks fills the house, seems distractingly loud to her. Her clothes are folded neatly on the piano bench, the way Mama makes her prepare for discipline. She cries silently, but yelps against each blow, trying to cover the sound of leather on flesh with her own voice. She tries to keep from hearing the sound that means Mama's been hurt, that Mama is crying to herself, that Mama sacrifices for a slut with no discipline. How could she have let Jorge in, his groping hands, his troubling smile?

"How could you?" Mama says through tears.

***

Mrs. Travez watches the door to the laundry. If Mr. Ramirez comes, he'll throw her out. He told her never to come back after she collapsed once, quivering and sweating on the floor, scaring customers. While the hospital workers came to take her, he found the screwdriver she used to jimmy the washers, get her loads for free. "No junkies in my place, *mujer*. No whore junkies at all," he had said to her, in front of people they had both known since childhood. She remembers looking around at the people they had both

gone to school with, doing their laundry, trying to pretend they didn't know her. She took her clothes and left. Ever since, she has had to sneak.

She washes for the Rosadas, the Gregors, the Goldings, the Wiltons, and sometimes the Ortiz family. There are others, but none she can count on like these families. She knows their business is the business of friends, that most of them knew her as a child, grew up listening to her sing. They want to help her, but too many know where the money goes. Soon, even her friends will not let family history be the excuse for her spending. She waits for the rinse cycle, which takes nine minutes, then the spin, which is seven. Twelve more minutes is all she needs to have the loads done, and then she'll be gone. The humid night creeps on, one cycle at a time.

Someone walks by the door and looks in. It is the youngest Ortiz boy, Bingo. Three other boys are with him, but they do not stop. She waves at the lone boy, clutching an empty basket to her, her stomach rolling with the lack she feels, the nerves, the threat of discovery. She is relieved it is not Mr. Ramirez, but knows that Bingo plays with the Ramirez boy. Bingo scans the empty laundry, sees that she's alone, flashes her a peace sign, and is gone. Mrs. Travez's heart beats faster. She can still hear the rinse cycle, water sloshing, machines humming. She prays for the cycles to finish in case the Ortiz boy decides to tell. She guesses nine more minutes is all she'll need. She watches the door, counting the seconds.

***

The wood of the piano bench sticks to her bare legs and buttocks. She sits poised at the piano, naked, clothes still folded at her side. Mama stands in the doorway, holding the strap, waiting for Maria to practice, to play.

"I cannot read the notes, Mama." She sobs, but tries to sit straight, tall.

"Play the song, Maria. You don't need the notes," Mama commands from the doorway. Squinting through tears, Maria looks around the room, wishing to hide, to retreat from Mama's gaze upon her. Through the window, she sees Jorge on the steps of the building across the way, staring in at her naked form at the piano. He stands tiptoe on the rail of the steps, holding on to a lamp pole, trying to peek in on the scene he was a part of minutes ago. Mama did not shut the window when she whipped her, and Maria was too afraid to ask. He stares intently, does not speak or wave, only adjusts to get a better look. She looks back at the piano, red-faced. Her tears feel hot on her face. Maria plays the first notes, weak and wavering in the tense sir of the house. As the notes sound, slowly at first then gaining, they become stronger. Mama's voice cuts through the music.

"Now you will sing."

***

Mrs. Travez climbs the stairs to her apartment building, mostly silent in the still-dark morning. She opens the door, turns on the lights long enough to put down her grocery bags, shoo the roaches, and pull a hand sized piece of bread from plastic wrap. She fills a coffee mug with water and sits by the window, waiting for the sun to rise. Over the buildings, she can see traces of red and orange. She feels a hollow echo in her

veins, but knows the man she needs to see won't walk down her street until 8:30. She can do nothing but wait. Her hands begin to shake as she raises the cup to drink, washing down the dry bread. Sitting close to the window, she waits for the sun, the man. She begins to sing to herself, the taste of dry bread and rusty water in her mouth.

214 LAS NOCHES

Red City has new residents. They're Jews, opening a grocery, and the lady I take to be the wife places a sign in the new plate glass window: "Opening Soon! Specializing in Kosher! All Welcome!" Manny Ortiz and I sit and watch them scrub the wood on the floors, nod their approval at the painters, and shuffle in and out all day long trying to mend the building, prepare it for use.

"New people moving in," Manny says, kicking the beer bottles we accumulate at our feet. The barrel he sits on rocks when he swings his legs, threatens to give up under the weight. Manny doesn't seem to care. "Why would they come here?" he says, turning away. He throws an empty bottle at the wall across from us, spray painted with "*Vivan Los Borrachos*!" and art work too good to be on crumbling brick.

"I don't know."

The wife comes out carrying paper bags in both arms. She stops and sees us sitting on trash barrels, catching our eyes accidentally. When our eyes meet, hers say she's instantly sorry and trapped, forced to look away or acknowledge us. We are, after all, strangers, staring at her. She attempts a weak smile and a wave with a bag full of groceries, and I want to laugh at her. I think she's trying to head off trouble, keep it friendly between us. She gropes at the sliding bags collapsing in her arms, which tighten as she walks quickly away from the painters and workers busily working and painting

and making this corner of *Las Noches* and *Los Azules* live in a way that is strange and new.

Manny picks up a bottle again, getting ready to throw.

"I've got to get Bingo at school. Mama doesn't want him walking with his friends, so I told her I'd walk the little *cabrito* home," Manny says, throwing the bottle at the large face of a spray-paint angel, nicking a wing instead.

Two days later, most of the work is done. People walk by in the early twilight, curious at who would ever want to be the new ones in Red City. Manny and I trade puffs on cigarettes he snagged from his mom's purse, a sort of secret paycheck for Bingo's protection. The sign in the window now reads: "Two Days till Grand Opening! Free Samples and Coffee!" A gesture to the neighborhood. Manny and I knew the building before, when it was a collecting place for junkies. But now this.

The wife has a man with her, her husband. He has a bushy mustache, he's not young, and his motions reflect their anticipation, their hope. For them, this is a modest step into . . . what? I don't know. Manny doesn't know. They smile and turn out the lights, locking the door and pausing beneath the stretch of white billboard over the door. They look up, the man's arm around her waist. He makes a "C" of his free hand, reaching toward and moving it the length of the sign, leaning in close to whisper words into the woman's ear, making her turn and smile and hug him around the waist. They turn together and walk off into the streetlights, blinking into the darkening sounds of the city. For the first time, I notice bars in front of the windows.

"They're not stupid, at least," Manny says into his hands, cupping the flame and a cigarette, the light flickering dark and orange.

The grand opening. "Golding's Kosher Corner." My mother goes with Mrs. Ortiz. They ask us to go with them. They gabble all the way home about the nice store, how they hope it makes it, toting bags of bread and kosher pickles and sugar. Manny and I help with the bags, but don't say much. I'm thinking about a store well lit and bright, polished wood floors, aisles of food and strange names of things. I see Mr. Golding, smiling at a full store, a grand opening, making friends, saying nice things. He smiles at me as I picked up the bags Mama couldn't carry. When we left, he told us he hoped to see us again.

We walk down *Las Noches* after picking up Bingo at school. He asks for a cigarette, since Manny and I are both smoking. Manny hits him in the head and tells him no way, mama would die if she knew. After a minute, Bingo begins moving his lips to something inside his head. He whips his head occasionally, a juke and a jive to some rhythm he murmurs to himself. He's got a knack. Manny says he's big at school.

Mr. Golding stands at the door to the store. He's nodding at Mrs. Travez, a woman from our building, in and out of work because of a crack habit. My mother's nice to her because she says, "At least the woman's trying. You and Manny should pray for her." I don't pray for her.

Mrs. Travez holds a single bag. A loaf of bread hangs out the top. She's gripping Mr. Golding's hand, squeezing it, looking up at him, speaking straight into his mustached

face. He nods and pats her shoulder as she finally turns to go. He stands a moment, hands turned inward on hips, then goes back into the store. Mrs. Travez doesn't have a job now, everybody knows. We watch Mr. Golding go back into the store.

"Kike," Bingo says.

Manny laughs and hands him a cigarette, telling him he'll have to go play with the Ramirez kid until the smell wears off. He says to say the Rosary if he's going to smoke, but not to let their mama know.

I sit on the fire escape and listen to my mother talk about the store. The sun's setting over the Solovich Tenant, and the evening's hot. I sweat but smoke anyway, drinking beer from a Coke can in case Mama pokes her head out. The cigarettes bother her, she says, God help us, but she will not have anyone drinking in her house. Anyone except Papa. Even Papa comes out to the escape to drink most of the time. He taught me to use the Coke can.

"It's nice, Papa; Jewish food and things, groceries. Cheaper then Moran's and closer." I hear my father grunting. She goes on. The store is convenient. Grunt. It's close. It's cheap and the owner's nice. Grunt. I drop the empty can down the escape stairs, listening to it clank on its way to the pavement. Mr. Chavez two floors below sticks his head out and cusses at the heat and noise. Mama pushes aside the curtains and asks me what's that sound.

"Nothing, Mama. I'm coming in." The sun disappears, a horn honks down the street. A black lady across the street is hanging wet baby clothes on the fire escape. Somewhere, someone is singing in Spanish.

My Mama prays for Papa a new job. Night shifts on the dock are not paying well. Papa's money runs out around the middle of the month and Mama does laundry for people, but two families moved away last week. She goes to Mr. Golding and he opens a partial credit for her, because in the three months they've been open, she's been a good customer, he says. Mrs. Ortiz has already done the same. When laundry business picks up, she says they can give back what they borrowed and Mr. Golding says no problem. He gave her three shirts and some pants to get the laundry business rolling again.

Manny and I sit outside the store. Manny says he wants a drink.

"Let's go in," I say and he follows me.

We walk through the aisles looking at the things. The store is empty except for two other people ringing out. Mr. Golding is all smiles. He doesn't recognize us when he looks at us after the others leave. He tries out a smile, but behind it I see the edge of something else.

I pick up something, a jar of kosher whatever, but I keep looking at Mr. Golding. He looks at what I'm holding, then back at me. Manny is wandering around the aisles glancing up and down again at Jewish food he can't pronounce. I put the jar back and pretend to keep looking.

Then I'm at the counter. Mr. Golding looks at me.

"You boys need something?" The edge is in his voice now, loud in his eyes. Manny stands beside me.

"Cigarettes," I say, but we don't have money for cigarettes.

"You don't want cigarettes, you boys," he says. His voice doesn't quaver, and the edge in his eyes is now something different. They shift back and forth between Manny and me. Mr. Golding looks out at the street, but no one passes in the rising darkness. I lean in.

"Cigarettes." He starts to turn his body, but not his eyes. When he does, I'm on him, reaching over the counter and pulling him so that slides over, cringes before me. Small containers spill onto the floor, bouncing colored candies all around us. He mouths surprise, but his eyes say he isn't. I hold his shirt by the front, pulling him up close to my face.

"Cigarettes, I said," and I hit him in the mouth.

Teeth crack and I hurt my hand, blood fills his mustache. Regardless, he tries to talk. "You boys stop this." He's spitting blood with each word. Manny is surprised, but not slow to react. He begins to cram things into his pockets.

"Cigarettes. Cigarettes. Cigarettes," I say, hitting him in the face after each. His head recoils after each blow, but he doesn't move his arms; they hang at his sides. Instead, as if he were a spectator rather than victim to the violence, he begins to whisper.

"You kids should respect."

"*Cigarettes.*"

"This is my store."

"*Cigarettes.*" I punch him in the stomach.

He winces, sucks air, gasps through the pain. "Stop this. We built this store." Blood rushes from his mouth and his eye swells, and his mustache is matted and sticky with red. He is lisping through gaps in teeth and over blood. Manny is hysterical,

giggling, a crazy-nervous laugh. He runs from behind the counter where he's been stashing things into his coat. He turns out the light over the outdoor sign, watching us. Mr. Golding is choking out small words, and I've stopped hitting him to listen, holding him with one hand, looking into eyes that won't meet mine.

"This is not respect. You boys don't know. I built this store. My wife . . ." He's looking away from me, past me, to some point far beyond the walls of the store, like he's talking to someone else. "You boys."

I hit him again and again until he quits talking. His face is red, and he's barely conscious. I drop him. One eye is swollen shut, but he knows I've stopped. The floor is red under him, more than I would have expected. Manny is standing by the door, watching, half-hidden behind a display case. No one has come in. Manny turns out the lights, but some over the counter don't go out. Security lights.

"We got to go, man." It's the first thing he's said since we entered. Mr. Golding coils in the blood, moving weakly, his face wrecked. "You boys. You boys," he says quietly. I turn and walk to the door. I stand before Manny a second before reaching into his pockets.

"*Que paso, chico*?" Manny is surprised. I take the things out of his pockets, some cigarettes, a lighter, crackers in a small cellophane packages. I put them on the display case beside the door and push him through the door. He makes a face but lurches out, the bell overhead clinking lightly. Outside, I turn to look.

He reaches from the floor to a display of bathroom tissue. Some packages fall as the display becomes unbalanced, bouncing around him onto the floor. He tears one open, speaking through a mashed lip and blood that cakes his mustache. I can't hear the words,

but I imagine what they must be. Resting on his knees and a single hand, he begins wiping the blood on the floor, speaking words in the dim light.

DELIVERY

Diggs walks through the street as the light slides in slow-creep toward the space between buildings where daylight is still visible. He walks beneath tar-burnt roof tops, fire escapes, and lines stringing buildings together, criss-crossing the streets in flapping jeans and teeshirts. He watches his steps, watches them splash puddles still steaming from the rain, each a black small-mirror reflection of the city, the people looking down on him from roof-tops and escapes before dissolving into ripples.

He hears the sounds of the city as distant backdrop to thought, his hand sweating on the laquered wood and steel of the gun crammed deep in his pocket. People call his name.

Diggs. Hey, Diggs. Where you going? Faces appear from against the electric glow of livening neon, a moment of near recognition, then fade into the wash of city twilight. *What's with Diggs? Where's he going?* Diggs can only remember the past leading up to the decision, these streets, this walk.

*

Chino.

Diggs. Sorry. I got held up.

You got a job, Chino. His hand reached out, and I took the brown envelope. *Where's the rest?*

He looked side to side, up at the ceiling. *It's coming. I haven't sold it all. I'm going to 110th and 111th today. I have some contacts there. No sweat.*

Who's at 110th? I can't recall contacts on 110th.

Wilkey and Satch.

Wilkey and Satch are trouble. They're Jeremiah's boys. He wants to get rid of us.

They're okay. Trust me. I've known them both since we were kids.

I shifted the envelope in my hands, sighing, remembering Antonio and how unlike his brother he was. *Your brother was a good worker, Chino. He was a good friend. He knew what to do and what not to. He knew how to read people, when to act, when to sit still. Can you do that?*

Chino looked me in the eyes, serious. *I know, Diggs. I won't let you down.* My eyes move to the stain of picante sauce on his chin, the red dribbles on his shirt.

I looked him in the eyes. *Don't dishonor your brother.*

Never. He left the door open. I looked after him, gripping the half-empty envelope, clicking the door shut behind him.

*

He walks down 112th, past *Los Azules*, where women stall at street corners, waiting for reasons to leave the circles of dim streetlight blinking on in the humid stifle.

He passes, glancing at a few, recognizing some. More neon flickers into life, new-lit promises that will last well into morning when their allure will begin to falter. His memories shift against each other. He speaks to himself, mumbled curses, appeals to his absent friend, to the pavement beneath his feet. The city passes, and Diggs walks:

past Consuela Avida's impromptu daycare, a white-paint-peeling gray-board house, where she tries to take care of children in the lulls of her addiction, in business as long as she is able to keep her secret;

past the Buenas Suerte Pool Hall, where Jeremiah keeps his quiet entourage in the shadows cast by lights hanging over green expanses of seldom-used tables in the rear, absent the clicking of pool balls for the shuffle of bills and the exchange of masking taped black-trash-bag bundles;

past the lady sitting on the curb next to a shopping cart and writing furiously on paper tablets, tearing sheets and stuffing them down the front of her unwashed shirt when she senses someone watching;

over the 112th Street Bridge, where he hears a voice calling "Willis Diggs, Willis Diggs," and sees Jamal, who used to play stickball with him long ago, crawling out from a strut where he's smoking cigarettes with others who remain silhouettes in the dark.

Diggs hardly registers his friend.

*

Where is the money, Chino?

They said they wanted a test sample. They're good for it. I've known them a long time. He shifted on the couch, looked to me in the doorway.

Your brother never let anything out of his sight till he had the money in his hand. No one asks for free samples.

They're good for it. I tell you, Diggs, These are mis companeros, mis amigos del juventud. There are no worries. He held a television remote, turning the volume down.

I waited for more while he looked to the television, back to me. *You will have the money and new contacts on 110th. Wait and see. I am Antonio's brother.*

I have been waiting three days, Chino. Don't talk about your brother. Bring me the money. He shrugged, shaking his head.

You are missing an opportunity, Diggs. I am the key to Wilkey and Satch, to 110th. But if you want the money, we have to give them some product to test on good faith. I'll vouch for them. He put his hand on his chest, emphasizing the sacrifice.

I stood in the doorway, wishing Antonio would come through, slap me on my shoulder, talk to his brother, talk to me, make things right, keep them so. Chino finally looked up to me, standing still in the doorway.

Get it. The last thing I thought to say before leaving, disgusted.

I shut the door, strode down the hallway, anger burning in my cheeks, my face.

Antonio, what do I do now?

*

At *Amas Grande* Boulevard, Diggs begins to feel like a drink. Memories are hot like the night, and Diggs' mind burns as he walks the streets and alleys. There are people who speak to him, but he keeps walking, aware of their words, not stopping to understand or speak. He keeps walking to a place he doesn't want to go, wishes that he would end up anywhere else. He walks:

up *Casas Azules*, a steep hill that levels at cross-streets, where kids skip school to race bikes and get in fights when the race is too close to call;

past the Sacred Heart Church, where the architecture seems too beautiful to have been left alone among uglier facades, junk lots, crude basketball courts sculpted in the dirt by the feet of a thousand children;

by the *Café de la Luna*, where Beatrice Jackson waits tables, having once been very tender to Diggs, very soft in her touches, kind in her eyes;

past the crumbling complex where Mercy Gaines baby-sat Diggs, tried to get him to go to the Second Baptist Church bible hour with her by telling him how many pretty girls attended bible study.

The memories rush through his mind, one after another.

*

The building is like those around it, except this is where Antonio and Diggs spent evenings together with beer and cigarettes filched from Antonio and Chino's father, where they planned escapes from the city and opportunities they would create for themselves. Chino was a kid then, twelve or thirteen. He hung around the doorway to

Antonio's room, trying to get in on whatever the older boys had planned, even when it was nothing. A thousand times they barked at him, laughed at him as older brothers do. Antonio and Chino are part of his memory, part of his childhood. His mind quarters between friendship, business, honor, responsibility. He remembers when things were clearer.

*

Chino, you suck. Go join Los Borrachos. Here's your application. Antonio threw an empty can at the doorway. Chino retreated behind the frame, and the can clanked to the wooden floor.

Chino swore at his brother, but waited, tentative, wary of another missile.

I laughed, crawled out the window with the cigarettes, called to Antonio.

Antonio lit the cigarette, stared into the flame.

Chino threatened to tell, playing the trump card of little brothers: *Put that out in here or I'll tell mom.* A pause. *I won't tell if you let me have one.*

Stay outside, little cabron. Don't let me catch you coming in here. Antonio crawled after me out to the escape. The night was warm, rain threatened the sky with distant flashes. Chino waited at the door.

I'm old enough. Let me have one.

Antonio watched his little brother, bugged and amused, and finally flicked a smoke in through the window, bouncing it till it stopped midway between the window and the door.

It's your chance, cabrito. Get it at your own risk. He raised another can of beer as if to throw. Chino faked a go at the cigarette, and Antonio made as if to throw. When Chino rushed in, Antonio winged the can at him as hard as he could. It bounced, shooting warm beer across the wooden floor and onto Chino's retreating jeans.

He held the cigarette triumphantly, mockingly, as we laughed hard and held on to the railing. *I said stay out of my room*, launched another can, off-balance from laughing.

It bounced off the wall, didn't break, rolled down the hall. Chino retrieved it, holding it and the cigarette up together, a little brother's victory: *They're mine now.*

Good. Stay out of my room. Antonio tried to keep from smiling as he said it. I leaned against the building, slapped the brick, gasping, laughed some more. Chino still waited outside the door, holding his trophies. He put the cigarette in his mouth and opened the beer, looking cool at us.

I need a light. He pulled the cigarette out with two fingers, inspected the injured Marlboro.

Laughing as we went, we descended to the street, to the night.

*

He hears loud Spanish music through the door. He holds the knob, hesitating. Putting his head against the door, he sighs, then opens it without knocking. Chino stands over the table with a razor in one hand, straw in the other, shirtless. Louisa Mendina stands looking over his shoulder, already high. She tries to sing along with the music, her

face scrunched, trying to synchronize with lyrics quicker than she is. Chino looks up, surprised, the silver chain around his neck swaying.

"Diggs, *que paso*, man? What's going on?"

"Where's the money, Chino?"

"Satch is bringing it over tomorrow." He wipes his nose with back of his hand.

"We're going to get it now. Get dressed."

*

Chino walks quick-pace beside Diggs. He talks about a new corner he thinks they can work without Jeremiah, the dealer on the west end, knowing.

"Diggs, I don't know how they're going to like having us show up at their front door. *Jefe*, are you sure we can't wait?"

Diggs says no, keeps walking. When they turn down the first alley beside the abandoned Marquez department store, Diggs pulls the gun from his pocket, squeezes down the memories in his head. Chino doesn't see the gun, doesn't hear it go off. He collapses onto the garbage of the alley floor. Diggs stands above the body, red streams running into the gutter, mixing with brackish water. "Antonio, he wasn't anything like you." He looks at Chino's body, crumpled across itself. He feels dizzy, and the light seems to dim as he looks at the bleeding form on the ground. In seconds, rage swims up through the haze in his head and screams down at Chino.

"Why did you make me do that? You weren't anything like him!"

Diggs reverses the gun in his grip, whips it across the back of Chino's head.

"Stupid!" He swings, connects.

"Lazy!" He swings, connects again. The place on Chino's head turns black, and new streams begin to flow, down his neck, funnel into the gutter. When he stands, Chino looks pitiful on the ground. *What would Antonio think?*

He takes a wide circle route back to Chino's apartment. Louisa lies passed out on the couch. He shuts the door, rolls up his sleeves. Diggs takes a small metal bowl from the table, melts some powder into fluid, fills the needle. By the couch, he takes Louisa's arm, locates a vein.

"You won't feel a thing. Biggest high of your life." He pushes the plunger until the syringe is empty. Louisa doesn't move. Her arm drapes over the edge of the couch.

He loads Chino's supply into a zip-lock, tucks it into his shirt, whispering to himself all the while. His ears still ring with the echo of the shot. He shuts the door on his way out, locks it, drops the key and the empty syringe into a storm gutter as he walks away.

*

By the time he is half way home, he is talking to Antonio, asking forgiveness. His need for a drink has turned into something more desperate. He decides to do what he hasn't done in years. He knows dealers who use, and they always wash away before anyone knows it. He and Jeremiah make money because they have learned the rules, and one of the most important is a dealer never uses. But tonight, Diggs thinks it's different. Chino is dead.

When he passes the Sacred Heart Church, there are no lights on. The back door is easily jimmied, and Diggs makes his way through the dark church to the altar. He feels sweat on his face. His heels clump down the wooden aisle. At the altar, he lights the candles in brass holders, gathers himself in the gold halo of light. The echoes of his movement in the vast worship chamber come back to him from out of the dark, like the image of Chino's body, the face of Antonio.

"Everything's going to be all right, Chino. Right, but not good."

From his shirt he takes a small silver spoon attached to the chain around his neck. He opens the ziplock, scoops and shakes the spoon until the amount looks right to do the job. He holds it over the flame, staring as it turns the spoon black.

"Everything's going to be just fine." His voice is a whisper. The powder begins to melt. He fumbles inside his jacket pocket for a clean syringe, holds it before his eyes. He holds the needle and spoon reverently, like sacred things. The wooden Christ on the wall floats at the edge of the light. When the powder begins to bubble, he raises the needle, brings it close. He draws the plunger, fills the cylinder with the bubbling fluid. He lances a vein with hardly any trouble, and a gradual, pleasant mist begins to fill his mind. Slowly, the details of the face in his memory drift away into silvery oblivion. *The benediction will follow. God, I am sorry.*

The gleam of flame on sweat lights his face, shining in the darkness.

MERCY DOWNSTAIRS

Pounding on the floor means time for bed. I look to the ceiling. Mr. Dominquez, my Spanish friend upstairs, keeps tabs on me by pounding on the floor. It's a crazy way to communicate, but we think it's special because it's our little secret way of talking, like tying cans together with string when we were kids. Only thing is that Mr. Dominguez and I are well past seventy. Ain't no kids here. This old building is past due for renovating, but the owner wants to sell and hopes we'll all go away, so he won't lift a finger. The phones hardly work anymore; I think the super messed with the wires. But that won't flush us away, Mr. Dominguez and me. This is our home. Mr. Dominguez is close enough should something happen. It's nice to know we have each other.

Three taps, and I know it's 9:30 p.m., the time decent souls are in bed. Trouble with Red City is there just ain't enough souls that go to bed at 9:30 p.m. So many of them start to prowl at that hour. I reach from the rocking chair, straining to reach the broom in the corner. When I have it in my hands, a roach drops from the bristles and scurries across the floor into the wall cracks.

Mercy Gaines ain't got no time for roaches, Mr. Bug. Holding the broom by the bristles, the handle weaving unsteadily upward, I pound on the ceiling. *Goodnight, Mr. Dominguez, good night.* I picture him standing in the middle of the floor, poised and waiting for my response. When it comes, all is well. Another day is done. I hear feet in

the hallway walk past my door, clomp up the stairs. *Ain't got no time to make a ruckus like some folks, either.* In my room, I put on my comfortable nightgown. Lying on my bed, I hear more noise from upstairs. Lights flash through my window shades as cars motor around well after decent folks are heading for bed. *Lord, this is Mercy. Hear this tired old woman's prayer tonight.*

I sit by the window in the early morning and wait for the sunlight. The buildings all around make it hard for the light to make it to my window until late. A few cars pass on the early street. Regis and Kathie Lee play on the television behind me, but I don't worry about them this morning. *I wonder if all is right with Mr. Dominguez.* I send three taps with my broom, no roach this time. There is a long silence. Then three taps on the floor. *I'm sorry, Dominguez. I was just checking, didn't mean to wake you.* I go to the kitchen to make some coffee decaffeinated. I have to grocery shop today, and Mrs. Ortiz said she'd send Bingo to go along directly to help me with the bags. Last time I gave him a dollar for his help, but he didn't look none too happy about it. *Well, Mercy, you just will have to treat the boy better than that. Come next time, Mr. Bingo, we'll see what you think of two dollars.*

Bingo knocks on my door about eight thirty. He looks sleepy and doesn't say much, but the Lord loves good cheer, so I talk anyway as we make slow time down the sidewalk. Bingo helps me with the big steps over curbs, up or down stairs when I show I need it. The Lord didn't ask me if I wanted bad joints, he just expects me to deal with it. When I ask Bingo about school, he grunts and shrugs his shoulders. When I ask him

about girls, he looks at me like I'm crazy and rolls his eyes. *If there's one thing Mercy knows, Bingo, it's that sooner or later you'll be looking for some little girl.* Bingo looks off down the street, disinterested.

Six blocks from my house, we cross a man lying on his back on the stairs to the Solovich tenant. He's got ratty clothes and whiskers, and I know it's one lost soul done given over to drink. I want to lay my hands on his sleeping form and say a prayer for him. But even holding onto the rail, I can't quite reach. Bingo watches me. I ask him to help me lay my hands on the poor soul to confer a blessing, like my mama did when I was growing up in Mississippi. He huffs and comes over to hold on to me reluctantly as I lean in to put my hands on the man's shoulder. I pray quick so as not to embarrass Bingo. *Lord, let this soul see something better in his days, and let our days be filled with the goodness of thy mercy and grace.* When I'm done, Bingo helps right me to walk, and I start toward Golding's market. When I look around, though, Bingo is not beside me. I turn and see the boy on his knees going through the soul's pockets.

At Golding's Kosher Korner, Mrs. Golding comes straight over to take my arm and lead me around. I hand Bingo a dollar and tell him to buy what he wants while I shop. He takes it and goes over by the cherries in produce before I can move myself another inch. Mrs. Golding is a blessed woman who knows how to respect a body. She asks me what I want, wraps up my fruit and vegetables, pushes my cart. It's good to find someone in this city you can count on. Standing by the olives, I thank the Lord for folks watching out for me. I close my eyes and say a prayer, and when I open them, Bingo stands at the head of the aisle, popping cherries in his mouth. I give him a disapproving

look when he spits the seed s on the floor. He smiles and eats another cherry to spite me. Kids didn't used to be like this in Mississippi. No sir.

When I finish shopping and Bingo is carrying my two small bags, it's harder for me to make curbs and the six steps to my building. Bingo's arms are full of groceries, so he just waits as I make my way as best I can. As I struggle with each stair into the apartment building, he waits at the top, looking out over the street and singing to himself. My prayer is simple, and the good Lord's heard it before. *Lord, ain't no steps I can't climb with you lending your strength to this old body. Bear this old soul up these steps, like you've done so many times before.* I put my head down to see my feet, and carefully hold the rail with both hands.

Inside my apartment, Bingo put the bags on the table. He helps me put things away because his mother told him to. He folds the bags and puts them between the wall and the refrigerator with the rest.

I hand the boy two one dollar bills, thanking him for his good company. He nods but looks bored, takes the bills and goes, slamming the door behind him. I shake my head and wonder if I bought enough. With as little as I have, it seems I never have enough, and surely not enough if something bad happens. *Just be grateful, Mercy Gaines. The Lord loves a grateful soul.* I try to be thankful, but I spend almost all my money, and rent for the apartment gets a good part of my checks.

At the mailbox in the hallway, I find some flyers from Golding's and another letter from the landlord. Says the same thing it's said for ten months: "Improper procedures by the owner prohibit certain owner actions including eviction of present residents, but despite city court rulings, the owner requests residents to exit the premises for property development proceedings." The building man's been squeezing Mr. Dominguez and me to move on, as well as the five families left on upper floors, but Mr. Dominguez and me don't have any place in mind better than where we áre now. Moving would be more worry than we need, even if the building man has let things run down. Water still works, but tastes funny and runs touch-of-brown at night. Electrical wiring still work in three of four rooms, but I hardly go into the extra bedroom except in the daylight anymore. And the locks are still good. Even if the higher floors keep bad hours and make more noise than pleasant people should, I got a good neighbor upstairs. As long as those high-floor folks do their midnight-to-early-morning things up there, there's not another place for me. Mr. Dominguez said once that the city was on our side, at least when it came to our rights as tenants in this building.

Sitting by the window when the sun sets is one of my favorite times of the day to watch people going home or going out. Some of them are going out to make mischief, but I can only watch out for myself and pray for those going here or there. Watching out for ourselves is hard enough in this building.

I sit and wait for Mr. Dominguez to come down so we can visit and cook our tiny dinner of Wednesday Chicken, as he calls it. Mr. Dominguez always did keep himself a good sense of humor. The main dish is always chicken, but the side dishes are where we

make it interesting. He chooses a vegetable and bread, and I choose a vegetable and a dessert. The vegetables are, according to our rules, always to be a surprise. Sometimes we laugh like young folks when we both try so hard to bring something new and different that we end up bringing the same thing. Ain't nothing like a great mess of lima beans to make us look silly trying to outdo each other. And it's funny every time. Mr. Dominguez is my saving grace.

Three knocks on my door at 6:00, and I know it's time. Like tapping on the floor and ceiling, Wednesday Chicken is something that's all our own. Mr Dominguez, ever the gentleman, always wears the suit he wore when he became an American citizen. I would offer to sew the seams that have begun to let loose, but I think me asking might just hurt the dear man's feelings. To him, the coat's something more than fancy dress-up for Wednesday Chicken.

He's all smiles when he pulls a frozen package of corn niblets and carrot pieces from inside his coat. *You're safe tonight, Dominguez. I've got boiled potatoes.* Mr. Dominguez always hangs his coat up and sits in the chair by the window to smoke his stinky cigars. He's at least learned to open the window all the way. I rode him pretty hard about a while back, but all that stopped when he was diagnosed with cancer in his prostate. After he recovered from surgery and became well enough for us to revive Wednesday Chicken Night, I decided my friend could do any darned thing he wanted. I would just pray that God looks the other way for my friend and not hold his abuse of the body, the Lord's holy temple, against him. Mr. Dominguez always smokes by the window with a look of tiny victory in his eyes. I let him feel cute about it. Those ten weeks without him were the loneliest days of my life.

On WJMG, Wednesday nights, the radio plays old time spirituals, followed by a jazz hour. Sometimes we squabble over who gets to choose the radio station, because he always says if he can get it on the Spanish station for just ten minutes, he can have me dancing in no time. I inform him I will *not* dance, as I couldn't reckon it according to God's will for an old lady like myself. I don't tell the dear man that I never danced a day in my life growing up in Mississippi. Sometimes, he shows me the dances they danced in Mexico when he was a boy. He stomps and stomps and throws his hat down and stomps some more around it. This also makes Dominguez feel cute.

Over supper, Mr. Dominguez tells me about seeing the Villareal boy, the super's son, hanging *Los Borrachos*, the gang that makes a big deal of being tough. The boys are always looking for trouble; they find it most of the time. They like to play with dope and drugs and whiskey and fight when they can. Dominguez says the boy was laughing and talking with the boys like he was one of them, just having a big time wasting the whole day away, yelling at girls and old people. Lord knows the boys ain't got proper respect, and it's getting to the point that a body can't walk down the street no more. It's no-accounts like that Villareal boy that make it hard on folks content to mind their own business and love their neighbor proper like. Dominguez tells me times are different, that the city is a good example of time moving on without us. With whatever tea is left in the pitcher, we toast another good Wednesday Chicken. We stand another ten minutes under the light in the hallway. Once, years ago, I thought. Dominguez was working up the courage to steal a kiss goodnight. But we've never crossed that line, even though I wonder why at times. I guess we both realize we're not kids anymore. *Good night, Dominguez. God Bless.*

Inside, I prepare for bed. I wait for the signal thumps from Dominguez upstairs. When they come, I know I can sleep.

Two weeks later, when Bingo shows up to take me to the market again, he asks if we can hurry this time. I don't know where he's hot to get off to, and I don't say a word about my joints, but pray the Lord will show the boy some patience. I am thankful for his help, but the boy never has got his mind around the idea of kindness. Lord knows I go as fast as these old legs will carry me.

At Goldings, I make my way up and down the aisles, picking out the things to help a body rest at night and keep digestion regular. Bingo reads the labels in the cart and eyes me funny. The boy doesn't understand that at my age what he thinks is gross is just a fact of how things are. I spread my kerchief over some of the personal items, pretend not to see when I catch him peeking.

When I pass the produce aisle, I see Mr. Villareal, the super, and his boy picking through the fruit. Now, Lord knows I try, but it's just hard to be Christian to a man like that. The families left in that building of his are not on the man's Christmas list, and that's about the nicest way I know to put it. I turn away and examine some peaches. Golding's peaches are always one day from turning. I peek over my shoulder, and am surprised to see the boy hiding plums in his shirt while the boy's daddy weighs two melons in either hand. He has two plums midway between the stand and his coat when he looks up and sees me. I look away quick like, try to pull some filmy plastic apart and cram peaches in. I feel hot in my face and think I have just about everything I need. I'll

tell the Goldings next time I come about the Villareal boy, but, Lord forgive me, I don't want to give those young boys any ideas. It's hard enough for old folks in a city, where being old don't mean much more than being in someone else's way.

I unload my cart, try to ring out quickly. Bingo concentrates on a handful of cherries. Mr.Golding, bandages on his face and both eyes blackened, tries not to meet my eyes, knows the question on my tongue before I can speak it. His eyes cut to some boys across the street, then back to me. The boys are the same ones you can find on just about any corner you look to, these days. They're just a bunch of do-nothings set on making trouble. All at once, Mr. Golding and I understand each other completely, neither able to speak the fear that good people share around here. I am conscious of the Villareal's coming closer behind me, their steps popping off the clean-swept tile. The question dies right on my lips. *I'm glad you're okay, Mr. Golding.* The words are tiny and soft, and I realize I'm trying to keep the landlord from hearing me. I don't look at either of them as they stand next to me, waiting, melons in hand. It makes me feel weak, but I just would rather not deal with the man who's trying to boot me out of my home.

Outside, I get a better look at the boys standing in a loose group on the corner. There's alcohol, seems there always is. Everyone knows these boys. Not by name. Not by face. But we *know* these boys. Soon there won't be enough street corners for them to do nothing on.

At the steps to the apartment, I see men without shirts moving things out onto the street into two clumsily loaded trucks. Two bare-chested boys sit atop piles of couch and cushion and tables and chairs, tying loops over and around, lacing it all together. Bingo

is up the steps with my groceries, waiting at the door of my apartment, impatient as always, but absorbed watching the activity of the movers. I say my prayer, try to find an open space to make my slow way up the stairs in the moving traffic of lamps, televisions, and bed frames. I hold up traffic, but can't stop to look around, my joints being as unsure as they are. I pray they'll understand and give an old woman right-of-way. At the top, I thank the Lord that I didn't fall, and then that no one decided to curse me for holding them up as I did. When you're old there's some things you just can't help.

Mr. Dominguez comes down, glares at Bingo for being less help than he is, moves the groceries into my house. I give Bingo five dollars. He takes it, looks up to me, curious. I tell the boy he won't have to help me anymore, but to tell his mother I thanked God for her generosity. I thank Bingo for his help, tell him to go find him some good companions. He looks at the bill, shrugs, slams the door on his way out. The boy never was that great a help, but I resolve to keep a good spirit about him.

I pour two glasses of tea, decaffeinated. Dominguez looks worried when he tells me two families moved out this morning, that only three families and he are left upstairs. He says he's worried we'll lose all bargaining power, no matter what the city says, and everybody will cut and run, and we'll have no place to go. I hear it all and think if the Lord has a plan, it would be mighty nice if He'd let Dominguez and myself in on it, seeing as how we only have each other.

We drink our tea at the table, thinking, quiet. The city is on our side. Two families moved out this morning, probably tired of brown water and shorts in the electric wires. Bad elements come around more and more. But the city and God are still on our

side. Even though I know faith is a beautiful thing in the eyes of the Lord, I hope he won't hold it against me if I say I don't see any good ending to this.

Pounding on the ceiling, and it's time for bed. Tonight I have a lot to say in my prayers. I take more and more troubles to bed with me each night it seems, and I hope He don't get tired of the list getting longer. While I stand there in my nightgown, the television goes off, the lights go out, the refrigerator stops running. Everything goes dark, so I move to my chair by the window, bumping into things, but making my way, slow and deliberate. Outside, all the electric lights and streetlights are out. In a while, I hear people running and moving around outside the window, but can't really see in the darkness. I decide to sit out the power failure by my window, and pray that everything works out. Using the broom handle like a blind man uses a cane, I make my way to the door to be sure the locks are set. Then I sit down to wait.

Some time later, people are running around in the dark street. I can hear them, and once in a while I see figures darting in and out of buildings, but my eyes can't find their specifics. *Lord, keep those souls from mischief, and keep Mr. Dominguez and old Mercy safe this night.* I see some shadows trying doors across the street. Somewhere down the block, glass breaks. Sirens whirl in the distance. Some boys come from down the street, whispering to each other. They climb the steps quickly to our building.

Next, voices in the hall bounce off the hardwood floor. The door shakes as someone tries to push in. I get up and hold the broom ready to swat, praying for strength, for the Lord to uphold these tired old woman's arms.

"Stay out, I say! You boys go home! Stay out!" My voice cracks. I feel sweat trickle down my armpits, running down inside my gown. The door stops shaking, and I hear more voices—*did someone out there say my name?*—then feet running upstairs. *Oh Lord, Mr. Dominguez needs your help.* Using the bristles as a handle, I quickly begin to pound the ceiling, send a warning. This time, I don't stop at three, but keep pounding, pounding as hard as I can.

"Mr. Dominguez! Mr. Dominguez! They're coming, oh, God, they're coming. Mr. Dominguez!" I am afraid my shouts are too weak, but I keep pounding the broom against the ceiling. Pound pound pound. *Lord, let him hear this.* Pound pound pound.

I hear the door upstairs burst open, many feet rushing above. I freeze with the broom. Feet thump here and there above me, shuffling. I hear voices raised, but can't make out what they're saying. Mr. Dominguez, the only voice I recognize, calls out something, begins to scream at them in Spanish. Shuffling, pounding, bumping on the ceiling, a thud on the floor above, then silence. *Oh Mr. Dominguez, please. Oh sweet Savior, please, please, please.* Scattered steps scurry lightly around for a minute or so, like bugs in the walls, then disappear into one corner of the ceiling. The next thing I hear is a number of hurried steps on the wooden stairs in the hall, running down and past my door. Outside the window, I see the figures leap the full length of the steps to the building, arms full with things I can't make out. They scatter like roaches into the darkness, their hands clutching things they didn't come in with. *Mr. Dominguez.*

I wait to be sure they're gone, that no more sound comes from above. When the ceiling is quiet, I tap three times. *Oh, Mr. Dominguez, please, knock on the floor.*

No answer.

Knock Knock Knock.

No answer.

"Mr. Dominguez, you answer me!"

Nothing.

In the hallway, I look up the stairs ascending into darkness and silence. The broom is with me, but I don't feel safe. *Lord, oh Lord. Lead this body on. Mr. Dominguez, I'm coming. Hang on, soul, I'm coming.*

The stairs are steep. I have never been to Mr. Dominguez's apartment, because I didn't want to try the stairs, and the super never fixed the elevator. *But now I have no choice.* I have to do this, and I don't know if I can. My gown is wet with sweat. The air doesn't move in the dark hall. I am shaking and weak, but I must work these old joints up the stairs, even if I can't see the top. Even if I fall, I know the Lord will catch me; even if someone finds me at the bottom of the stairs tomorrow morning, it'll be all right. I begin to pray out loud, like my mama said was good when you were afraid.

I set my foot on the first step.

REPAIRS

The fire escape people are out early tonight; the sun has not even set. The tenant apartments heat up especially bad in the summer, and one of the only ways to beat it is outside. I don't go out until it's darker. Too many of the boys nearby like to make fun of me. It won't be a problem when I grow some, but until then, I keep out of the way. Until then, I have learned to deal with a little extra sweat. I sit inside and watch Sandy Mendez, fifteen and in the 9th grade, carry her baby brother down the street while Lucho Esperanza and Jesse Vaya call to her from three floors up. They like to sit and wait for women to walk by. It doesn't matter how good looking or how ugly they are, because they even yelled at Marrielle Bajemos, and everyone around knows that she is ugly as well as slow in the head. She smiled when they did, but I don't think she knew they were making fun of her. For Lucho and Jesse, it's more of the thrill of making women worry, feel uneasy.

From behind me Mama says the heat makes people crazy, fanning herself with one of Papa's hats. She watches the news while she waits for him to come home. The television blares about a murder somewhere in town, and Mama says the same thing as always: "Lord, what's to come of us?" I sit and wait for the escapes to be safe for kids, wait for the darkness that works on my side. Down on the street, Sandy looks over her shoulder at Lucho and Jesse, doesn't stop walking.

I hear the clatter-clip of small objects striking the metal of the escape, and know that Bingo waits below. Mama doesn't turn around. Stretching over the sill, I see him below, looking up. He holds a crinkled bag in one hand, reaches into it and throws with the other. Bingo likes cherries from Golding's store, buys them when he can, steals them when he can't. I am used to him carrying the bag. He uses the cherry pits to signal me to come down, and I am used to their familiar scattered pinging when he throws them by the handful. It's a good way to signal. The older boys would hear us otherwise. It's better to be safe when you aren't very big. Bingo is good at quiet communication. There are many things to see in Red City if you just keep quiet. Bingo is good at finding them.

I tell mama I'm going to see Bingo. She doesn't stop watching the news but says to be back before supper. I slide down the fire escape, using the outer rails, quick, like Bingo taught me. He smiles over cherries as I approach. His teeth look red, and his bag is damp with cherries and pits.

"Where'd you get those?" I ask, hoping he'll tell me whether he paid for them or not. Bingo is pretty smooth for a kid.

"Golding's." He doesn't offer more, but offers me the wilting bag. I scoop out some cherries, separate the pits and stems he has spit back, and taste them. They have a few bad spots, but we don't complain. Cherries are cherries. While I work on my first mouthful, I can tell he wants to tell me something big. I wait for the news, chewing the cherries, saving the pits in my pocket.

"They're taking a car."

"Who?" I begin to think of the older boys in the neighborhood, the ones we would expect to do such a thing.

"Satch and Wilkey."

"Satch and Wilkey are stealing a car? Where?" We both recognize the opportunity.

Bingo spits two pits into his palm. "We have to hurry if we want to see."

In the alley by the Solovich Tenant and an old warehouse, we see two sets of shoes sticking out from beneath a brown car with cracked windows. We stay back, out of the way. The streetlights weakly light the scene. Satch and Wilkey have another car pulled up, shining its headlights on the opened hood of the brown car. Beside them in the alley are red toolboxes smeared with grease and paint. We watch them pull themselves out from under, wave wrenches, gesture with their hands. Beneath the car, we can see the reflection of work lights on the pavement beneath them. Bingo looks confused, dumps fruit in his mouth absently, watching.

"What are they doing, Bingo?"

"I don't know. Fixing it, I think." Bingo looks puzzled, curious. This is not what either of us suspected stealing a car was like. "They don't look like they're stealing it. They'd be trying to get away, wouldn't they?" He chews thoughtfully.

"Who fixes a car before they steal it?" I shake my head.

We stand and watch, but nothing worth watching happens. They work on the car while we wait for the getaway that doesn't come. Finally, Bingo hands me the damp bag, mostly pits now. "Let's find out what they're really doing." He starts walking toward the boys and car.

"Bingo! Hey Bingo!" I whisper it as loud as I can without Satch and Wilkey hearing. Bingo says over his shoulder, "Be ready to run," and keeps walking toward the two working boys. I throw a cherry pit hard at him, but he doesn't stop or look back.

He walks up to the car where the boys work. I can see him spotlighted in the beams of the other car. When he blocks the light, the boys wriggle out from under, look up.

"Are you guys stealing this car or not?"

The boys look to each other then back to Bingo, grease smeared across their faces. "Who are you, kid?" Wilkey watches Bingo carefully. Bingo's fists are in his pockets. He acts cool, like it's no big deal.

"Bingo Ortiz. Manny's my brother. Do you know Manny?"

The boys nod their heads. "We know Manny. You're his kid brother. Well, well." They look him up and down.

"That's my friend over there," Bingo says, points to me hiding behind a trashcan. I wave but don't come out. I'm not sure we still won't have to run. Bingo and I are good at running, good and fast. Bingo stands out of their reach.

Wilkey studies Bingo, thoughtful. Satch waits to see what Wilkey will do. Finally Wilkey speaks. "This is not our car. We found it here. It's been here awhile, as you can see. We checked it, and the problem's not that bad. Got a use for it."

Bingo nods, looks satisfied. "What do you need it for? You have a car right there."

Satch snorts like he can't believe us. Bingo doesn't look at him.

Wilkey stands up. Bingo tenses. I move out into the alley, no longer hiding, giving myself room to go if we have to. Wilkey doesn't reach for Bingo, only stands, looking down at him in a strange way. He points to the car.

"This car is abandoned. No one wants it, but we need it."

I come to stand by Bingo, figure he would have gone for us if he wanted.

"Need it for what?" Bingo looks at the old, rusted body, the dents, tries to see something about the car that would make it special.

Wilkey smiles. Satch says, "The kid has *las ganas*!"

"I can't tell you, little amigo. It's a trade secret." I can tell he is amused with us. He adds, "Want to help us fix the car?"

Bingo looks to me. I don't say anything since Bingo's the one. He's talked us through this whole situation, and they haven't gone for us, so I would be blind not to see that he is the one. Whatever he said would be good.

"Are you kidding?" Bingo glances at the car, hood stretched open. "This isn't your car. You want us to help you fix it." Wilkey nods. His eyes glitter in the headlights.

"We'll do it for a ride."

Bingo drops and begins to crawl under the car. Satch and Wilkey look to each other, a *can-you-believe-this-kid* look on their faces. Both crawl under with him, and I hear them begin to call out the names of parts, clinking their wrenches against the under-frame of the car. Bingo repeats the names as they say them. He surprises them when he knows some without being told. I dig in my pocket for some cherry pits, begin to throw them against the wall, waiting for Bingo to help fix the car.

From far off, over the sounds of traffic, I hear Mama calling that supper is ready.

Three days later, Bingo throws a signal on the escape for me to come down. When I get there, he tells me that Wilkey and Satch are driving up and down *Los Azules*. We begin to walk down the block to *Las Noches*, where we can cut across to *Los Azules*. Bingo looks excited.

At the corner, Bingo asks me if I want something to eat, but I've had supper already. He disappears into Golding's Kosher Korner. Some boys in ball caps turned sideways hang out a window and yell at me from a slow-rolling, rap-pounding car. I try not to meet their gaze, don't answer them when they call to me. Bingo comes out with a bunch of grapes, popping them into his mouth in a way he has down to one movement. Through the window of the store, I can see Mrs. Golding reading something at the counter.

"Did you buy those, or take the Bingo special?"

Bingo smiles, waves his hand at the question. "They were out of cherries."

Down the block, I see the repaired car rolling toward us, accelerating and braking quickly. Satch sits behind the wheel, Wilkey looks from the passenger window at the people passing on the street. When he sees us, he waves, motions to Satch, who swerves over to the curb where we stand, honks the horn two long blasts. "Bingo Ortiz, what do you think?" He leans out the window, spreading his hands, offers the car for our judgment.

The windows on just about every side look to have been shattered. Black-blue smoke swirls out of the tailpipe, puffing a cloud of car-stink around us. The car

shudders, idles, chokes like it wants to die. Bingo surveys the dents and cracks. "I guess we got it running, all right." Wilkey and Satch laugh, nod. The car, barely alive, shudders hard upon itself. "Won't run long, though."

Satch adjusts the cracked rear-view mirror. "Don't need it very long." He doesn't explain, but I think how weird it is to spend time and work on a car just to run it a short while.

"You boys want a ride?"

The door swings open.

From the back of the car, we watch the backs of Satch and Wilkey's heads. The radio doesn't work, but Satch hums slightly to himself, just barely audible in the loud car. The engine stutters and lurches sometimes, causing Satch to swear and rev the engine. Jamming the gears, Satch peals around corners, lays on the horn, swears out the window at people moving too slow. Wilkey turns, leans over the seat, one arm resting on the seat back.

"It runs a little rough."

"How's the acceleration?" Bingo is not afraid to ask any question. To anyone.

Wilkey turns, tells Satch to go to 112th, where there is a good straight away.

The back seat is torn, and the stuffing gets on our clothes. I look out the window, see Marielle Bajemos. I don't point her out to anyone, though. I think Satch and Wilkey might do something. She walks awkward down the street, smiling in the way she always does, at nothing.

On 112th, Satch gives her the gas. She stutters, then revs up, building speed, slow at first, then moving more quickly. People look to us in the speeding car, watch us burn down the road, leaving a swirling blue haze behind. Satch jams on the brakes, throwing us into the floor.

Both boys turn and laugh at us. "You boys should wear your seatbelts. Cars can be dangerous things." Bingo picks himself up from the floorboard.

"Why do you need this car? It's a piece of junk." He wipes some grease from his jeans.

Wilkey doesn't answer, but gives Satch an address. Satch nods, turns down *Los Azules*.

I turn to Bingo. "Where are we going?" He shrugs, looks out through the cracked windshield.

From the front of the car, Wilkey answers.

"We'll show you."

Satch rolls up to groups of people standing around by the Alejandro tenant building. Marcy Nuñez lives there, I think, and Bingo says one day, she will have legs worth wanting. I think he meant it as a compliment. I have been watching her legs at school ever since, waiting to see a change.

Satch pulls up so the one headlight pans across a black man in a dark car with tinted windows. He stands up, walks toward the car in the beams. Satch stops the car, tells us to stay put. Wilkey views us over his shoulder a moment, then joins them in front of the car.

"What's going on, Bingo? Who are those guys? Is that Jeremiah?"

Bingo strains to see through the cracks in the glass, nods. We can see Satch, Wilkey, and Jeremiah talking, lips moving. After a minute, Jeremiah hunches over, looks into the car, sees us waiting in the back seat. His eyes scare me, and I begin to think of the things I've heard.

"Bingo, I don't like this. This guy's a dealer. We don't have anything to do with him."

"Quiet." He says the word hard.

We watch them talk, occasionally leaning down to see in. I feel exposed, don't like the feeling of being out in the open, unable to hide. In the back of the car, we can't hide, can't run, can't do anything. I wait for them to come back, wonder what they'll say. I sink into the seat, thinking I must be missing dinner.

When they come back, they get into the car, don't say a word to us. Jeremiah, alone in the headlights, waves to us as we pull away. After we have driven for a while, Wilkey turns to us, hangs over the seat to speak into our faces.

"Do you know who that was?"

We nod.

"Do you really want to know what we use these kinds of cars for?"

At that moment, I change my mind, don't want to know. Bingo, on the other hand, has other ideas.

"Tell us."

Wilkey nods. "Tomorrow. 110th and *Casa Grande*."

I feel sick, think that all of our fun is turning bad. Wilkey leans in closer. I can smell alcohol on his breath.

"How bad do you want to know?"

Bingo and I sit three floors up. Nobody walks the street below us. Mostly warehouses line the streets, two old shoe companies long out of business, their signs fading against the aging brick. For fun, Bingo and I throw crushed cans across the street at an open dumpster. The day is hot even as the sun sets. We take turns going down to collect the cans. Bingo is winning by three cans when we run out. Cats hiss and squeal beneath us. Bingo leans back, takes his shirt off. He digs in a damp brown paper bag, sucks the cherries before chewing them, spitting the pits to the pavement below. We sit, not saying anything. I am wondering what the secret of the car is going to be, feel vaguely guilty for wanting to know. The evening presses humid around us. Bingo's hair sticks to his neck.

"It's too hot." He wipes his sweat with his bunched-up shirt.

The sound of a car engine idles up to us. Bingo points to the street, where the car has pulled to the mouth of an alley. The headlights are dark. We can't see inside the car, and there are no interior lights.

Bingo pushes me against the wall, motions for me to scrunch down. Peeking through the bars of the escape, we can see the car resting quietly in the alley. A man steps out from one of the warehouses, holding the handles of two bags, one in either hand. Setting one down, he fishes in his pocket, locks the door, picks up the bag, looks

around. When he sees no one, he turns to the street, walking quickly through the failing light.

The car turns down the street. Bingo nudges me, motions to the man on the sidewalk. He hasn't heard the car yet, doesn't know that it moves toward him gaining speed. I can't help but stand up, lean against the rail. Bingo leaps up beside me. Together we watch, afraid of what might happen, is happening. The man sees the motion above him, stops in alarm, looks quickly up at us. His face relaxes when he sees us, only two kids, but I feel a sickening inside. While the man stands looking up at us, the car bears down on him. I think how normal the man looks at that moment.

As the engine noise begins to rise, the man's face flinches at the sound gunning engine behind him. It's the first time he separates the noise from the surrounding wash of city noise, identifies it as threat. Its urgency draws his face at once into a fearful confusion.

The car screams toward the man, the sound bouncing off the metal walls of the warehouses, roaring echoes against our ears. I tense, await the end to this mad rush of adrenaline, fearing the next few seconds. The man spins, bags whirling around him, sees the car and begins to run. From where we stand, clutching the rail and helpless, my mouth starts to move, but no words come out. I feel Bingo's grip on my arm, squeezing. We watch as the distance between the man and the car disappears in a flicker of time.

The man sprints toward a building, drops the bags. He throws himself against a door. It remains steadfastly locked. He jerks at it in crazy alarm, looks up to the car hurtling toward him. Too late, he bolts from the door into the open street. He stumbles,

arms flailing, running with the speed of pure fear. The car adjusts to meet the man in the middle of the street.

At the second before impact, the headlights flash on. The effect is like a photograph, a moment in time I will not forget. The man's face reduced by terror, arms uselessly raised in an effort to protect himself, his face looking wildly at the car. His face looks to be screaming, but I hear no sound.

When he is hit, he launches through the air, loose and broken. There is a crunching thud, then a strange moment when he is suspended in the air. When he hits the pavement, his head snaps off the surface, red jets squirting into the air, across the ground. The car screeches, brakes, spins a half turn in the middle of the road. The car rumbles up to the bags on the ground where the man dropped them. Wilkey gets out, takes the bags. He pauses when he sees us poised above, riveted, fixed against the rail of the escape.

"I see you wanted to know after all." He calls up at us. "*Adios*, Bingo and friend." He disappears into the car. In a moment, it stutters around the corner and is gone.

The feeling in me drains away to despair, dread, and I feel weak. I turn to Bingo, but he is not there. I see him sliding down the escape ladder. It feels strange to move after what's happened, but I manage to make my way down the ladder after him.

Bingo stands looking. In the distance, the echo of screeching tires fades. The man's eyes are open, his mouth gapes. His head rests turned and cocked at an angle the neck can't manage on its own. Traces of blood flow from his nose, his mouth, puddle slow on the hot pavement.

"Got him good." Bingo whistles at the damage. He picks up a limp arm, sprawled out before us on the road, holds it aloft, drops it back to the ground. "Yep, he's checked out for good. Evicted from Red City."

"Do we call someone? The cops? The hospital?" I have never seen a body twisted like this, never imagined it could look this gruesome. I've seen bullet wounds, knife cuts, over-doses, but none of them sit on my mind like this.

"We can't call anyone." Bingo looks off in the shadows where the car went.

"Why not?"

"Jeremiah knows us. He saw us. Satch and Wilkey know it, or they wouldn't have told us at all." Bingo fishes into the bag of cherries.

He looks carefully at the stranger. "I don't know this guy. Do you know this guy?" I shake my head. Bingo has an idea. "Check his pockets."

I look up and down the street. No one around. While I try to unfold the limp arms to get to the pocket, Bingo sucks a cherry, examines the man's frozen, gaping face. I get blood on my hands, manage to squeeze the man's wallet, a money clip, a brown vial, and some coins from his pockets. I flick away the blood, slinging it off my fingers, my stomach rumbling with revulsion.

Bingo takes the vial, holds it up to see it better in the dying light. "He had some bad habits." Bingo drops the vial in his pocket. I hand him the wallet and the money clip, and he begins to count, flipping the bills with his thumb. "Keep a watch out," he says without losing count. I look around nervous while he counts, fold the bills into his pocket.

"Five hundred and forty dollars. It splits even."

I hold out a handful of change. "There's this, too." Bingo looks at the coins, back at me.

"Change is nothing."

We stand in the street. I'm not sure what to do next. I feel a growing urge to get away from the body, away from this whole thing. I want to forget seeing the man frozen in the headlight, terrified, seconds from the smack of metal on flesh. I cringe at the strength of the memory. It will take a long time for the edge to be worn smooth in my head.

"Bingo. Let's go. I don't feel good. I want to go home."

"Just a second." Bingo studies the body carefully. He reaches down and replaces the arm, smoothes the pocket where I dug for the wallet. He turns, whistles, looks the street up and down.

"Should we say something to somebody?" I feel dizzy, excited, scared.

Bingo shakes his head, walks away from the man on the pavement.

"It wouldn't fix a thing."

SCENES FROM A GARBAGE TRUCK

She gets off work at 6:00am, hits the parking lot around 6:05, swags her way over to her car, and waves to Benny and me as we cruise by *La Madre del Cristo* hospital. She usually offers us a special treat with the way she slides into the driver's seat, showing more than a hint of thigh, pretending to adjust the mirror. We both know that there's more to the routine than innocent coincidence, but Benny and I aren't complaining. Our truck's regular at this time Tuesdays and Fridays. I always figured it would ruin something to ever try to talk to her, to come down from our perches on either side of the truck. If we saw her on the street, she'd probably act like she didn't even know us, but on Tuesdays and Fridays at 6:00am, we are looking, and she knows it.

For ten months it's been the same deal, same players. The sweet thing of it is she doesn't mind. Now there's a few ladies that'll show a thing or two off, but most won't go that far every day for any stranger. Something about her is easy-going enough to let the routine go on, to everybody's benefit.

Today, Benny's acting antsy. Before I can ask what he's up to, the glass doors slide open. When she comes out, white-nurse-uniform and all, she sees us and waves with a sweet little smile of recognition. After that, she's all show-time, a fluid strut she has perfected over the months: walk the candy-swank walk, spin the purse with one hand, tussle hair in the reflection of the window, unlock the door, slide with smooth grace

into the seat, leaving one leg out on the pavement just long enough to give us the 6:05 pay-off. Benny's staring at her all right, but he's got a hint of a smile across his face. When she starts the car and pulls out of the lot, I ask him.

"Where's your mind, Benny? We got cans to move." Frankly, she's easy on the eyes compared to the rest of the day's job, the occupants of the dumpsters we have to roust at times. We hop down, grab some cans, and bang them out into the collecting arm. Benny is still smiling.

When we hop back onto the truck, Benny finally looks at me and says, showing all teeth:

"Why don't you ask her out, Arturo?"

I stare at him until our next stop, shaking my head. "That's what you been thinking? She doesn't even know me."

"Sure she does. She sees you twice a week, always waves, always with a little something extra. I tell you, Arturo, she's the one. Carla's history. You're a free man." He speaks with excitement, like the idea is too great for either of us to pass up.

I pause when he mentions Carla. I came home one night to a half-empty apartment. Three months later and all I really remember is the time on this truck with Benny, picking up trash, rousting drunks. It's the only time of the day I can keep from thinking about Carla. At night, television, t.v. dinners, nothing else until the alarm goes off at 4:00am. I wake, shower, dress, urgent to get out and away from an apartment that feels empty, even when I'm there. I still don't know why she left.

The truck stops and we kick a few dumpsters, checking inside for drunks too gone to wake. We give the all-clear, and Eddie pulls the truck up, begins the slow process of raising, tipping, dumping.

"Arturo."

I've been day-dreaming. Benny nudges me. The truck is waiting, Eddie leaning out the window, looking back at us.

"Arturo, you okay?"

"I'm okay." I swing back up onto the truck.

"Ask her out. It's worth a shot."

I look away, wonder if Benny is right. Missing Carla takes more than I thought from me. I let the hot city breeze blow across my face and wait for the next stop.

I hear the bells from The Sacred Heart Church chime eleven. On television, a brunette sings in dramatic Spanish, face wrenched, fist to chest. Carla had black hair. Shoulder length black hair.

I turn off the television, pick up the cigarettes sitting on the coffee table. Carla never let me smoke inside. I shake one out, put it between my lips, and search for matches under her stacks of *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan*. The cover of one promises an article: "Thinking Woman's Guide to Investments." I thumb to an article, read about market patterns and social developments on the financial horizon for investing women.

When the phone rings, Benny begins speaking before I have a chance to say hello.

"Arturo, what are you doing?"

"Nothing. Reading."

"I checked with Sammy up in records and billing. Guess who lives on 107th?" I think of our route, which takes us by 107th, 3:15pm Mondays and Thursdays.

"Don't keep me in suspense." I know where he's heading.

"She lives in the white house between *El Corazon* and *Casa Verde*. The place with green plastic cans."

I don't know what to say. A busty model looks back at me from the magazine cover. "Benny, forget it. She doesn't want her garbage man calling her."

"How do you think it starts, Arturo?" He sounds irritated by my resistance.

"Look, you have Ginger. Don't worry about me."

" I'm not worried, Arturo, I just think you have a chance." Ginger's voice whispers in from the background, and then the phone is muffled.

"Did you tell Ginger?" Embarrassment begins to heat my face.

Benny hesitates. "No big deal. She wants to see you happy, too."

I hang up, finish the article, finger the unsmoked cigarette. Finally, I walk into the bedroom, open the closet. My clothes are shoved into half the space on the bar, a few empty hangers left on her side. Her shoes are gone from the bottom of the closet, as well as all the boxes of her pictures and albums. This strikes me as something new, even though I have dressed from this closet every day since I found the apartment half-empty. She never said a word.

The fridge is mostly empty: leftover pizza, mayonnaise, mustard, shriveled apples, and two bottles of beer that Benny brought over three weeks ago. I never liked the stuff, but he told me this was a special occasion, a spirit-lifter, now that Carla was gone. Half a beer later, I told him it wasn't special enough for me to finish the rest and

poured it down the sink. He left the last two in the fridge. I have looked at them ever since, but not once have I been tempted by them. Maybe it's time for a second chance.

Back into the living room, I sort through a stack of vinyl records I pulled from some cans after a record store went out of business. They are scratched but still put out good sound. Coltrane, Davis, Marsalis, some I know form my mother, the rest I don't know. I choose Fitzgerald, because it has words. The music begins to play as I turn out the lights. The cigarette rests on the magazine across the curvy hips of the model. She never wanted me to smoke in the apartment.

The matches are in the jar by the door, along with pencils, pens that don't write, paper clips, rubber bands, and stamps. Carla kept all the loose stuff here. Any small thing that didn't seem to have a good place of its own went into the jar. The matchbook is from the *Café de la Luna*, where we ate in the corner booth after Wednesday late shift.

I light the cigarette back on the couch, smoking for the first time inside in five years. The room is quiet, dark except for streetlights shining through the blinds. Four puffs later, I get up and go into the kitchen, take a stool, return to the living room. Setting it by the window, I sit for my first indoor smoke in years; it feels strange enough that I crack the window, try to blow the smoke outside.

On Wednesday, Benny gives me the business all day long. I try to ignore it. By the time work's done, he's pretty much shut up about her. I don't think too much about it until the drive home, when I think about supper. I have three frozen burritos left from the Quick Mart, half a beer I left on the windowsill from last night, not much else. Suddenly,

I am struck with an immense loathing of the apartment, my own home. With each stoplight I pass, I become more convinced I can't go back there.

I pull off the road into the parking lot of a school. I realize I don't know where to go if not home. There's a bowling alley around the corner, but a gang of kids that hangs out there after school. It's too loud. I shuffle through my options, none appealing, and think I have no place for me in the whole city, not one place where I want to be.

Glancing at the school, the front doors open and some girls in cheerleading outfits come out, books hugged to their chests, laughing and talking. Their skirts are cut high on thighs trim and agile. I watch them, thinking how much youth makes them beautiful. I met Carla when she was in high school. We didn't get together then, but she was about the age of the cheerleaders; she was as beautiful. She was so beautiful.

The girls get into cars together, drive away. I watch them until they are out of sight.

Thursday, Benny is quiet. He avoids the subject all day until near the end of the shift. When we roll past the white house on 107th, Benny looks at me, but turns away when I notice him watching. I try not to look too interested, but strangely, I find myself thinking about the nurse moving around inside the house, picking through music to play or wine to drink or loading a washing machine. I think she must live alone, surely. I picture her when no one else is watching, wearing sweats, or shorts, or nothing at all. Vacuuming or cleaning or watching television. Showering or dressing or reading a book, her legs curled under her, hair in a ponytail. Maybe at night she wears glasses that make

her look smart *and* beautiful. Carla used to sit like that when she read a book. She used to wear sweats around the house.

The shift ends and I am still imagining the woman who flashes us her thighs on Tuesdays and Fridays. Just before we get in our cars, I call across the parking lot and wave to Benny. He waves back, slides into his car and is gone.

107th is just far enough outside downtown to attract young singles. Single professionals, probably raised in the city but not enough resources or will power to make a clean break. Most residents living on 107th live in small housing, barely beyond the projects. Fewer still are well kept. Her house stands out, though. The paint peels in places, and the wooden porch is rotting, but it's still the nicest on the block. The grass, not free of weeds, looks to have been tended by someone, unlike the neighbors' on either side. In her refusal to let the house slide with the neighborhood, it seems out of place on her street, strangely resolute not to deteriorate and fall to pieces as fast as those around it.

I sit outside her house across the street, watching to see who this girl we admire really is, beyond the name and the high-profile legs. Her cans are neatly arranged beneath her window air-conditioning unit, lids evenly closed, secure. She's smart. Leaving the cans even a little bit opened invites the kind of rats we have to run off from some areas of collection. Shutting the cans also minimizes what Benny calls the "bum factor." The bums are mostly harmless, but they can make a mess from your trash.

I don't see her car, but I can wait. I am amazed to find myself sitting in my car outside her house, but then again, I didn't really want to go home.

I finished the wrapping of powdered do-nuts and a coke an hour ago, but she still hasn't shown. My watch reads 5:43pm. I wish I had something to read. I look in the back seat, under the driver's seat, but all I can find are grocery receipts and gum wrappers. There's a Minute Mart five blocks away, but I don't want to miss her. Bored, I look over to her trashcans. I imagine she reads magazines like Carla used to, *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, something. I feel the urge to go and at least have a look, maybe find something to read. As I consider it, I have a strange feeling that I might find something more, something telling about the nurse. I push the urge down, embarrassed to have had it at all. Still, something curious rises up inside me. You can tell a lot about a person by her trash. I feel a twinge of excitement at the thought. Besides, what would she do if she drove up and found her trash man rooting through her garbage?

The cans sit tidy and secure, waiting for Thursday.

At 7:05pm, I walk across her lawn and around to her cans. They are tightly shut. Prying one open isn't hard, and the weight tells me it's full. She neatly ties her trash into white bags, twist ties and all. Some of the garbage has spilled out from the sack, despite the caution. I see empty gum packs, an old shirt, moist coffee grounds. Beneath it are paper towels dabbed with what looks to be nail polish, an empty can of hair spray, a broken mirror, and tons of cotton balls. Her trash is very one-sided. She lives alone.

Soon I find myself shifting through the bags. She is more concrete with each article I find, laying her life, habits, diet before me. The more I find, the more fascinated I become, the deeper I dig: TV guides, make-up bottles, cellophane, cigarette butts (lipstick rings), an empty maxi-pad box, wine bottles (white and blush, semi-expensive),

tissue with make-up smears, junk mail, Victoria's Secret catalogs with phone numbers written in the margins.

The proximity of such intimate aspects of her life surround me, excite me. I feel a strange urge to open all her cans, nervous. Trash is my business, but not at this hour of the night, not in reading lives by what they throw away. Tomorrow, 3:15 to 3:30, handling her trash is expected, but now, in the falling night, it's dangerously, over the line. The thrill is intoxicating, I want to go through it all, know her secrets, appetites, find out every detail of the woman who waves to us Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Car lights flash by in the falling darkness. Tomorrow is Thursday.

Benny and I small talk until we get to the hospital. She doesn't come out, but glancing at my watch, I see we are four minutes late. When Mr. and Mrs. Escobar were evicted at the Mandivar tenant, they left behind more than they took. The landlord toted everything that wouldn't sell out to the curb. I tried not to look anxious as we loaded it, but thought of her, of how precious our schedule had become. Four minutes was enough to miss her.

We are all waiting, looking to the steel and glass doors. For the first time, I notice a crack on one of them. Eddie slows the truck, doesn't stop. I feel the engine begin to rev; looks like she's a no-show. Benny looks disappointed, but I want to wait. As the truck begins to roll, I panic, the panic I felt walking into an empty apartment, calling her name long after I was sure it was empty.

I bang on the side of the truck just as it shifts into second. Three thumps on the metal side of the truck is simple code among trash men and drivers: "go" if we're stopped, "stop" if we're moving. It's really all the language we need.

Benny thinks something is wrong, scans the area behind the truck and to the sides. When he doesn't spot anything, his brow wrinkles me a question. I hop off and make a show of tying my shoelace, watching the doors. I will them to open, for the characteristic strut, the show, the smile and wave, anything. I can't understand why it has become so important. I remember sitting and staring when Carla left.

"Arturo?" says Benny, over my shoulder, coming up behind me. "Something wrong?"

"Nothing. Thought I might trip." I feel the red in my face, blushing. I wish he would stop questioning me, stop looking. I feel as if I've been caught at something, like a kid looking at natives in *National Geographic* or smoking weed in the house. Eddie stops the truck, leans out the window, looks over his shoulder. There are only a few instances where three slaps on the side can't say what's needed, and Eddie's face asks the same question as Benny's. Despite the intense urge to look down at my well-tied shoelace, to shrink away from all sight, I look back to the door.

There. It opens, and out she comes, white dress, beautiful, somehow more so now that I ever thought before. The attention shifts to her; Eddie and Benny watch. Rescued, I stand and watch, too. What I know of her floods over me: her weakness for snack cakes, her brand of lipstick, cigarettes, and shampoo. I think of the things I know about her, about how personal, how close they make me to her, even now across the sun-heated

expanse of parking lot. Eddie and Benny can only watch, but I know something about her.

She waves, tussles, opens, drives away. The routine is the same, yet I can't stop thinking of her. Benny looks at me again, a strange look on his face. He gets harder and harder to read, so I shrug, jump back to my position on the truck, slap three times. Benny stares at me until the truck starts to move, then casually slides up to his position opposite me. A minute later I look to him, wanting some casual thing to pass between us, break the tension. The words won't come.

Benny looks straight ahead to the next stop, smiling.

Friday night I drive by her house. Her car is not in the driveway. I circle the block twice, swing by again, but no luck. I decide to drive around, to find some thing to do to pass the time, wait for her, keep me from going home. I imagine how all the pieces work together, fit like a puzzle to show me the picture of who she is. I already know things, maybe things she would be embarrassed for anyone to know. She should be home by now. I pull into an oil-stained parking spot in a run-down parking garage. I decide if I walk around, I can find something to pass the time.

I sit at a stool in a bar I've seen a few times when we've had to run the C shift for another crew. I've made up a few hours that way, but as a general rule, I don't like running any other shift but mine. After a while, the people and places seem to be your own, even if you're working garbage. The overtime is nice, but I make enough to get by decently without it. Besides, there's extra now that Carla's gone.

A woman comes over, sits at the stool next to me. She leaves when I tell her I'm not out for company. I decide on a beer, wonder what Benny would say if he could see me now. He'd probably laugh and smile, proud I did something to get myself on track, in the game.

In the back, some people push pool balls around green felted tables. I decide that's as good a way to pass the time as any. I lose thirty bucks to some kid before I check my watch and think I've spent enough time here. She could be home right now, watching television or cooking supper. I leave the kid counting bills and nodding his head.

She is not at home at 9:56pm. I wait until 10:15, wonder what other places I can explore while I wait, wonder what's keeping her, where she is. I consider the fact that she may have gone out of town, may be at a friend's, a million different things. My knuckles are white on the steering wheel when a pair of headlights turning into the driveway flash through the window. Her car. She gets out, dressed well, purse and strap around her shoulder. She strides to the door, opens it, and disappears inside. I am half way across the lawn when I hear the door bolts clank into place. In for the evening.

I watch for light, and when one comes on, I shrug through the shoulder-high hedges, position myself between the house and the shrubs. I think I'm safe from being seen from the street, and I am close to her. Though the blinds are drawn, I see her where two fit together imperfectly. She sits at a night table, barely within vision, removes her shoes, earrings, then pads out the bedroom door.

The room is simple, decorated in light, matching colors. The bed made, pictures neatly arranged on the dresser, shoes lined up in rows under the bed. I feel strange, guilty, tear my gaze away. I have seen her far more intimately than even if I had seen her undress. I move to the side of her house, where her trash cans wait, taking care to move quietly.

In the darkness, I brush away two cats. They jump down soundlessly, racing away into the shadows of the shrubs one house over. The cans smell lightly of . . . fish? Seafood, undoubtedly. The bags are cleanly tied and placed inside. Glances in both directions show it to be safe; no one around. The day's dying heat is not enough to keep the smells in the tightly wrapped bags from wafting up around me as I unload each with caution. When they are all out, I close the lids so as to make no sound, pull the bags against the house, and slide up to the front of the house. Cars pass now and then, I can hear voices from the open windows nearby, but nothing interrupts me.

Seating myself with my back to the house, I open the first bag, keeping the twist ties at my side. I lean back against her house, feel close, one wall between us. Coffee grounds, empty toothpaste tube (teeth whitening), empty cookie boxes (low-fat), and discarded check carbons. These I flip through, noting where she shops, what she buys, how much she spends. Businesses and services, products and stores, discarded. In the darkness I make out Golding's Kosher Korner: $10.34; Chica's Salon: $30.00; *Café de la Luna*, $7.56. I sort through the bag pushing aside bits and pieces of her life that I will turn to with greater interest later. When I discover two more books of discarded check carbons, I place them in my pocket. It's too dark to read the small writing, and there are at least 4 bags waiting.

I cannot wait for Saturday's shift to end. Benny eyes me all day, but we only exchange small talk. I am anxious for the time everyone leaves. Last night, reading through her checks, I had an idea. When the office manager and the dispatch lock up for the night, I will return. And I will understand her better than I ever have, be closer than I could imagine.

After the office is dark, I use the key I've taken from the dispatcher's desk drawer. Inside the manager's office, I go to a wall-sized map of the city listing businesses, truck routes, buildings, and homes. From my pocket I take the check carbons and a plastic can of small red pins. Starting with the earliest date, I place the first pin. Forty minutes and three checkbooks later, I see where in the city she spends her time and money, a red-pin map of her most recent life.

Sunday I walk the streets where the pins have marked. She gives $20 each Sunday to the Sacred Heart Church. People in Sunday clothes stream out when I walk past. She eats once (sometimes twice) a week at the *Café de la Luna.* People glance up from burgers and fried foods as I pass the glass windows. She stops at the Kosher Korner for no more than $20 worth of whatever they sell. The man and woman behind the counter glance nervously at me as I cruise the aisles. They watch me through the windows even after the door shuts behind me.

I throw all of Carla's things out to the curb, out to where I know the trash men will take them. I spend the second part of the day repainting the rooms in the apartment, rearranging the furniture. The bedroom and living room are finished and drying when evening falls, the place unrecognizable. I sit on the couch, smoke the first of many cigarettes. Hardwood floors shine, newly mopped. Chairs, magazine racks, make-up tables are now strange gaps where I have moved her things out of the apartment. The apartment is larger than I remembered.

Monday night I crouch in the alley two houses down, waiting for her car. I watch the street, but she doesn't come. In the cans, I find the regular items. She tries to eat healthy, with a few weak spots for certain sweet things. She wears expensive perfume. She subscribes to fashion magazines. All of these things reassure me. This is the woman I know. Then, at the bottom of one of the bags, I see the torn pieces of pictures.

I find the picture pieces, have to search through all the bags to gather the images. I scrape coffee grounds off one, pluck dried tissue off another. Piece by piece, I collect most of the parts, and feel a sinking inside as the images come together. I see the nurse and half of some man's face, but have trouble seeing them in the light. I have to walk over to the streetlight to get a good look. Each step closer makes my heart pump and my legs weak.

She poses with a man, handsome, dark colored hair. He sits on a couch and she beside him on the arm, leaning against him. Her arm is draped over his shoulder, her head leaning on top of his. He holds both arms around her waist. There is no writing on the back of the picture. I drop the halves of the picture there, not caring about any of the

others. Then, like in a movie, I see myself wandering through the inside of her house, or what I have imagined it must look like inside, calling her, knowing the house is empty. All around, I see garbage stacked high, the things she used and threw away, and I, pushing through it all, try to find her.

She arrives, carrying a brown bag from the car to porch, unlocks the front door. From the corner of the house, I can make out the elegance of her form, the delicate features, dark hair. Her face, though, is different. It is not as I have ever seen it or remember it. She seems somehow distracted, thoughtful. I wonder what she is thinking. The door bolts shut, the porch light winks silently out.

I make my way to the window, check the street, slip between the bushes. Through the space in the blinds, I see her shoes on the floor, her dress laid across the back of the chair of the night table. The bathroom light is on, the door open. I wait, but she does not emerge. I see a shadow move now and then against the opened door, but she does not return.

In the alley, her cans are half full. I sort through the bags, careful not to make noise or spill the contents. Twenty minutes later, the back door snicks open, a light floods the back yard. I begin cramming the bags back into the cans. When I hear sounds moving closer, I scramble for the bushes, crawl on my hands and knees into the darkness beneath the shrubs. Holding my knees up to my chest, I wait to be discovered. My heart thumps loud in my chest, pounds in my ears, and I feel anger that she would ruin what has grown between us.

The lids sit in plain sight on the ground on either side of the cans. I close my eyes, begin to play scenarios in my head to deal with her the surprise, shock of discovering me crunched beneath her bushes, her garbage ravaged. When she reaches the cans, I consider bolting into the night between the houses. Explanation is out of the question. Waiting for her gasp, the realization, I stare straight ahead into the branches and leaves brushing my face, aflame with humiliation. There is nail polish on my fingertips, and I think it a strange thing to notice moments before I am undone.

As the sound approaches, another sound becomes faintly audible. I hear something hit the hastily crammed cans, then the sound of her begins to fade. I poke my head out from around the corner, see her back in the darkness, walking away. She wears a thin nightgown, no robe. In the low light I can still make out the details of her figure, her shape, alluring, beautiful, fluid. I hear, clearly, muffled sobs. The disturbed cans unnoticed, she returns around the corner, the door opens, closes. The light goes off, and I am alone again with the trash. I wait until stillness returns, my heart slows. Breathing deeply, moving with great care, I ease out from the bushes, look at the newly tied bag she has dumped into the can. The new bag, seconds from her hand, excites more than ever. Gingerly, I remove the bag, the tie, peer inside.

The first thing I see stops me. My heart gathers itself, rouses to a thudding once again in my chest, my ears. I reach in, pull a blue cardboard box from the bag, hoping it's not what it appears to be. In the faint light, I resist the words I make out. "Home test. Maximum privacy and assurance." The bag slides from my hand.

I hold the box, flip it open and shake out the thermometer-looking plastic rod, staring, not wanting to believe. Shaking, I make my way through the shadows out to

where I can use the streetlight better. Two notches are barely discernable in the darkness. One is blank. The other shows a pale "+". I twist it every direction in the night, try to maximize the light and so vanish the thought. When the street light hits it cleanly, there is nothing left.

"No." I say aloud, startling myself in the silence.

At her window, I can see her at the mirror, familiar brand of cotton balls swiping at the make-up. Her eyes are red, eyes changed from what I wanted. Indignant, damaged things stir in me, familiar, and the absence once again of the one I loved the most. The breaking, severing, changing. Her hand trembles and wipes away the mascara, eye shadow. I think that Tuesdays and Fridays will be like every other day. My apartment will feel large and empty again. A new swab brushes off the color from her cheeks. I remember television and warmed up dinners, handling the trash of people I don't care about at all.

With a stroke, she swipes the lipstick from her mouth. She sits in front of the mirror, staring and naked faced.

Paints on Walls

Belino's brush moves across uneven brick, intersects with cracks. The canvas is always rough, but this one has not yet begun to crumble. He can tell more by the feel of his hand if the stroke is right, if it will appear on the wall as in it does in his head before the brush swipes it into being. When he is steady, his hand can sense the picture taking shape long before the work is done.

He stands back, waits for the sun to crest over the building across the street, give the picture light. He wipes his hand across his mouth, smearing white paint under his nose and across his color-flecked face. The light on his work tells the truth; Belino believed this long ago when he first held a brush. He works through the night so he can see first light touch his work, moving in a slow, inspecting creep down the wall as if acceptance were conditional.

People wash around him, going here and there, divide and rejoin, some murmuring to him in passing. His responses are brief. He does not want to miss the dawning of the light on a new work. He sits on the curb with a cup of coffee poured from a near-empty thermos. Before drinking, he inhales the stout aroma of thick coffee laced with rum. The caffeine and alcohol are strange and bitter compliment. His father taught him the mixture when Belino was young, before his father's work-thermos became solely rum. Belino likes the sting of heavy coffee, alcohol, and the occasional grit of escaped

coffee grinds. Chewing the pungent bits, he thinks of what the picture will look like under the light of the sun.

When the light begins to touch the top of the mural, Belino is tired but ready. The anticipation of the moment is something strange and fluid, as if the picture is unknown to him until the test of daylight, when Belino sees his work best, knows best the mixtures to re-create, the strokes to adjust and refine. Like a gradual high, the light spills slowly across the colors, the exaggerated figures and faces of the city within.

The coffee is gone.

The painting is good.

Belino is unscrewing the poles of the scaffold when someone whistles behind him.

"Some picture," a voice says behind him. Wilkey holds a brown paper bag under one arm, a half-eaten breakfast roll in his free hand. Belino turns, brushes his hair from his eyes.

"Thanks." He begins to cram still-wet paintbrushes into a plastic sack.

"How long does it take?" He asks over a mouth of mush.

"Days." Belino tries not to look at Wilkey. "I like to work through the nights."

"Nights are good for lots of things, huh?" He smiles through chewed bread, gestures to Belino in a familiar way. Belino turns away, frowning.

"Yes, lots of things." He holds the metal poles of the scaffold against his body, carries them to the curb.

"Yeah. I used to write my name on that wall. Wilkey and the women he loved. Me and *la ramera de la semana.*" Wilkey begins to laugh, and Belino continues to pack the brushes, canvas, scaffold. When it is packed, Belino sighs, turns back to Wilkey.

Wilkey steps closer to the wall, staring up at the wave and swirl of colors, the glow of color on brick. Belino waits, not wanting to have to answer anything more from him. Wilkey has stopped talking, stands with the half-crust of pastry still clenched in one hand. Belino looks back to the wall where the painting dries in the rising heat.

Finally, Belino breaks the silence between them. "It's a wall that needed painting." Each second he loves it more, feels each stroke more justified, more beautiful than when he had made it. Thousands of individual strokes come to life under the truth-telling sun.

Wilkey turns his head to face the artist. "This is good work. I'm going to tell Jeremiah. Maybe you can do something for him."

"Jeremiah. I saw Belino working today. Beautiful. Paints the city, people, like no one. He works the walls downtown. You should see the paintings. Paints on walls. He's good. Murals. Great big painting that cover the whole wall, see for blocks. You really should check it out, *hermano*. Absolutely beautiful."

"Your delivery?" Jeremiah scoops white-yellow rocks into small glass vials.

"Done. Saw him on the way back. Paints on a scaffold, high up, fifty different brushes."

"Paints on the wall?"

"Yeah. But you ought to see what he can do with them."

Belino sugars his coffee, one cream, stirs with a dented spoon. *The Café de la Luna* lazes into the morning hours with a few people looking out the windows, some blinking sleep away or red-eyed from not yet having slept. The two waitresses move slow patterns from booth to booth, pouring coffee, grunting responses, scribbling small pads.

Belino likes the *Café* at this time best. Watching people sip orange juice and push eggs around cracked plates wakes him, prepares him to work. The people in his paintings are these people. There is sad resolution in the chewing faces, the tired eyes. The people in the *Café de la Luna* drift into the café, into colorless breakfasts and stale coffee, into new light of each day on split vinyl seats. Somewhere in the back, a radio plays salsa music while Belino watches all of it with careful silence. He thinks of the walls he's changed, the pictures he's painted, facades his brush has changed forever.

"*Que quieres*? What do you want?" She stands, pen poised to write on the pad.

"Eggs." He waits while her pen moves. "Sausage. Toast. Juice." An afterthought: "Hot sauce on the side."

She walks away, pen still moving, eyes already set on the next booth.

The corner booth has a view of the intersection of 117th and *El Montivo* Street. He sees people he knows going off to work, coming home from work, squinting against new light. The sun makes a slow show over the apartments across the street, illuminating

clothes draped across fire escapes, clotheslines strung together like indiscriminate spider webs. Staring, sipping, Belino watches.

Across the street, two teenage boys sit on wobbly trashcans, kicking at beer bottles scattered around the base. When a cat wanders out from the shadows and too close, it pays the price. Mothers drag their young children behind them, trying to get them off to somewhere before having to face another day in the city. Men buy papers from a newsstand down the block, stumble over curbs while trying to read. There are forms lying on the sidewalk, still covered, sleeping off perpetual hangovers, waiting for their next fix, or not wanting to face the city in the light of day.

When his breakfast arrives, he lets it sit untouched, watching a couple fighting through the open window of the building across the street. Each day, the light shows him pictures. His brush is faithful in a way he's never known people to be. The breakfast is half-cold when he finally tastes the food. He savors it, eyeing the city beyond the glass.

Beneath the colors of the mural, the two pace back and forth, staring, standing away, coming close. They don't speak, but one looks to the other every few seconds, waiting for something to say or be said. Their two cigarettes burn to ashes, drop to the cracked sidewalk in front of the painted wall.

People gather to smoke cigarettes, drink beer, talk and laugh across the street. They look at the painting, pointing, speaking. One of the boys notices Jeremiah and weaves across the street through traffic.

"Jeremiah. I need some rock, *hermano*." He waves a twenty between two fingers. Jeremiah motions to Wilkey, and Wilkey takes the twenty, palms him a vial in one motion.

"What do you think?" Jeremiah shrugs over his left shoulder, indicating the mural.

The boy looks into the vial, shakes it to see how many rocks, then up at the expanse of color. "*Muy bien*. He should paint over the whole city." He runs back across the street. Jeremiah watches him rejoin the group of boys. They all gather around to see what he holds. He sets his eyes on the wall again.

"Jeremiah, what do you think? This is good work. What do you think?"

Jeremiah looks at the neighborhood, the streets, buildings. None are beautiful. Nothing. In his pocket, he feels three vials, their caps grooved for easy-twist opening. They have been opened a thousand times, emptied, filled, emptied again. He listens to the voices of boys calling to one another on a nearby basketball court. The curses, accolades drift over the sounds of traffic swell.

Nothing, until now.

Belino walks through the alley, kicking at piles of trash. His left hand pushed deep in his pocket, his thumb flicking through the bristles of the small brush he carries with him always. In his mind, he begins to move shapes and colors around the wall of his mind, blank canvas waiting. The work is short an image, and Belino knows that if he walks long enough, all the blanks get filled.

Streetlights buzz. Against a wall, an black man plays a worn slide guitar, managing sad tones from a wounded instrument. He holds it carefully, examines it with exhausted eyes, a toothless mouth working carefully on silent words, over each note. Belino stops to listen, to watch the skeletal hands slide back and forth in slow and meaningful gestures, a tune sung quietly into the echo of the alley.

He watches hands moving, hands that know the instrument. Belino's thumb flicks the bristles in his pocket. The wall in his mind shudders, contracts. His eyes fasten onto the old man, who plays and sings alone.

Hands moving, lips whispering. Bristles on his thumb, faster. The music, sad drawling echo, on the brick walls.

Colors begin to appear. The grayed shades of the man's hand. The yellow of his downcast eyes. The pink of his gums where teeth should be. The lacquered black and brown of the worn instrument. The glint of silvered strings vibrating in the streetlight. In an instant, the colors come, the shapes move, the man is alive and wonderful and glistening in the dark, motion and shape and form. The wall in his mind twitches against the rhythm in his ears, eyes, shudders upon an idea.

On the wall, a picture moves slow into life.

Wilkey stands with his body close to Mr. Alejandro, who adjusts his glasses constantly, nervously, sniffs repeatedly. Jeremiah steps close to him.

"Mr. Alejandro. I want to buy the wall outside from you."

The little man looks confused. He cinches his glasses back up on his nose, tries to understand. "I'm sorry, I don't get you. What do you mean?"

"I know the man who paints murals. Paint the walls beautiful and colorful. I spend a considerable amount of time outside your building." Mr. Alejandro looks down. "Wouldn't you like to have something beautiful outside this place?"

Mr. Alejandro looks to Wilkey, then back at Jeremiah. "I think that would be fine." He speaks quietly into the hallway outside the apartment door. It opens and Mrs. Alejandro pokes he head outside. She pauses, her face drops noticeably when she sees Wilkey and Jeremiah standing close to her husband.

"It's okay, Marta. I'll be a minute. We are talking business. Keep dinner ready." He looks at her until she draws her head back inside, clicks the door shut. Mr. Alejandro sighs, speaks with resignation.

"I think a painting would look wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. Whatever you decide will be fine."

Belino carries five cans of paint in the crooks of his arms. The wire-thin handles cut into his arms, but he has learned to take the pain with anticipation. The cans knock against each other as he fumbles outside the padlocked door. When the tumblers fall into place, Belino pulls the sliding metal door open, shuffles inside.

The large expanse of warehouse is big enough to work in, big enough to let him move canvas and paint and scaffold as he needs. Three fans slow-turn into life when Belino throws a switch on the wall. Electric lights stutter out of the darkness. As light

floods the room, Belino's work appears and surrounds him, welcomes him with color, size, and shape. There are paintings everywhere. Belino's walls record the city and people, caught in paints and lines.

Belino hands his shirt on the low rail of a wheeled scaffold he uses to paint the walls. He lights low-watt lamps, angles them just right. A thin layer of sweat, despite the efforts of the fans, forms on his body before he finishes lining up cans and tubes of paint needed for the night's work. The picture in his mind is whole and ready. On a far wall, he sketches ovals and lines with charcoal. Some time hours later, he makes coffee, laces it with rum. The electric lights hum over his solitary form, measuring out coffee grounds into a metal coffeepot.

The wall of Belino's place slides on hinges, a remnant from the days when the building received shipping from the docks, loaded with cranes. After a night's work, Belino unlatches the fasteners and slides the wall back, sets up a folding chair, waits for the sun on his face, waits for the time when sleep will come. Over pieces of bread and lukewarm coffee, he stares at his work. Shirtless, he watches, chews unconsciously, blues, reds, blacks, whites flecked across his bare chest and arms, speckle his torn-faded jeans. There is nothing else to compare to the exhaustion on these mornings, when he watches the sun rise from a bent lawn chair, feeling the hollowness where an idea has vacated to occupy a city wall or other canvas of opportunity. The coffee in his belly rumbles, but he is used to such a reaction after working. When he is exhausted, Belino feels himself spread across the city, overseeing its days and nights. The day will soon be

hot. The fans churn morning-cool air around him. The sun peeks over buildings in the distance. Ship horns sound and the air smells of salt and sea.

In the light of a rising sun, Belino closes his eyes.

Pounding on the metal door wakes him. He answers on the eighth knock. Two figures stand at the door. Belino wipes the grog from his eyes, recognizes Wilkey and his boss Jeremiah. He looks Belino over, the paint, the jeans, the eyes. His voice almost disappears in the vast empty space.

"You are the painter on the streets."

Belino blinks several times, checking the face behind the baseball cap and sunglasses. When he is sure it is the dealer from Red City, he shakes his head, waits for more. Behind Jeremiah, Wilkey speaks.

"I told him about *su pinturas*, Belino. They are good. Jeremiah wants to see more."

Belino squints at them, runs his hand through his hair. "My paintings?"

Jeremiah speaks. "I want to see your paintings. Wilkey says you made those murals across the walls downtown. I have seen some of them. I didn't know it was you."

Belino rubs his hand across his eyes. "I mostly paint at night."

"I see," Jeremiah looks past Belino to the expanse of warehouse turned studio, the work from the night, uncovered, unfinished, the warehouse shipping door pulled wide to the morning. Jeremiah walks past him, into the room, studying each piece of work.

Belino picks up a can of large head brushes, begins stirring the solvent inside the can. Jeremiah smiles.

"Belino, I want you to paint the wall of the Alejandro tenant building. Alejandro has agreed. We spend time there, and your paintings are beautiful things. I want you to do for that place what I have seen you do for others. Show them my city, but make it beautiful. Will you?"

Belino shakes his head. "My paintings are good because I wait on them. If I try to force it, they aren't good." Inside Belino feels an expanding panic. He wants no part of the dealer, no affiliation with his sellers and drugs.

Jeremiah looks at the paintings on the walls. "You stay awake at night waiting for inspiration. I stay awake at night, as well. We are the same." He picks up a brush, flicks through the bristles. Wilkey stands in front of a wall Belino has turned into a colorburst of blacks, blues, and swirling whites over a silhouetted city skyline. Wilkey moves his head back and forth, from the scene outside to the painting on the wall.

"Jeremiah. Look at this. It's the skyline. Exactly like the skyline." He points to the horizon, head flicking back and forth between the two. "It's the same, all right. But he makes it look good."

Jeremiah looks, turns back to Belino. "You are the one I want to do this for me. Paint my picture. Paint this for me, and I will pay you more than you have ever made. Money for your art."

Belino looks at them both, tries to imagine what the city looks like through the eyes of a dealer. The panic inside him is full and churning, using the hollow stomach to

make audible sounds. Belino ignores them, tries to speak above the sound. "How much?"

Jeremiah looks at Belino's night of work. "Ten thousand. Ever painted for that much? I'll make it more if it's good."

Belino looks to Wilkey, back to Jeremiah. Wilkey is tracing the line of a nude woman's figure on the wall with his finger. Jeremiah removes his glasses, waits. His dark eyes are clear, deep, steady.

"What do you want me to paint?"

Jeremiah smiles. "Paint my world. Paint the way I see the city. Make me large."

Belino sighs. "I'll have to watch you, to stay with you. I'll have to see what you see and wait for it to be just right before I begin." Inside, Belino's guts churn, the alarms in his head swallowed and crushed by the idea of more money than he has ever known.

"One thing more."

A momentary flinch in Jeremiah's joy, brow contracting.

"Fifteen."

Jeremiah smiles, eyes Belino differently. He leans in close. "Make it good."

The people move out of the darkness into the electric light. Their hands grip bills, tens and twenties mostly, trading for tiny bottles. Jeremiah doesn't make the transactions, Satch and Wilkey and others of Jeremiah's crew dispense the product. Between deals, the crew gambles with dice and cards, cranks competing radios that look too heavy to carry. Jeremiah sits in his car. Inside he adjusts a compact disc player,

plays one thing and another. The corner has been claimed, thinks Belino. No one will interfere. They are carefree, indifferent. He thinks he has not seen a cop even come close to the place.

Belino drinks cola from a bottle, waiting for the right images, the right moment. Inside, he feels pressing urgency: leave the money, Jeremiah, the crew. Kicking his heels against the side of the steps where he sits on the front steps of Mr. Alejandro's tenant building, Belino quietly watches the group to which he does not belong.

Belino recognizes some of the buyers. Kids from area schools. Day and night workers. Mrs. Chavez, Rodriguez, Cantares. Mr. Blanco, Aluces, Travilla. Girls and boys. Men and women. Hispanics, Jews, blacks. The city addicted to this corner, this dealer, his careful plan to keep each coming back. Belino feels nauseous, chokes back the bile in his throat with a swallow of bubbles and sweet. He looks at Jeremiah, holding two discs, glinting in the reflecting streetlight. He presents them to Belino.

"What do you want to hear?"

Belino watches buyers, sees them disappear into the night. They come and go. Jeremiah pays little attention, talks to Belino, but he doesn't hear the words, shuts them out. In his mind, Belino waits for an image to form. Against the rush of revulsion he feels growing inside him, he searches for that image his mind will construct to paint on the wall behind him. The empty bottle in his hand weighs heavy. Fifteen thousand dollars. His shoes kick against the concrete wall, and Belino waits.

Two nights later, Belino scribbles drawings in a sketch pad, hoping that somewhere in one of them will be the germ of a thought to give Jeremiah his fifteen thousand worth. Each drawing is something less than beautiful, but true. Children with exaggerated features inhaling pipes of flame and glass, smoke drifting in lazy circles around them; faces peering out of the smoke, faces of agony, pain, loss; faces cut by a knife edged loneliness, gazing down at livened faces drawing hard on a fix, oblivious to the gazes around them, waiting. Belino stares at the paper, sees the people around him in the night, paying Jeremiah's way. The dealer leans against a wall, laughing and talking with two women dressed in short skirts, black hose, make-up beyond their minimal faces. They are not beautiful, but they will pretend for customers. Jeremiah knows them well. He puts his hand on one of their shoulders, draws her near, whispers something to make her smile. The other fumbles inside a leopard stripe bag, pulls a pipe from it and shakes into it the contents of a small bottle. The flicker of the orange flame on her face as she inhales strikes Belino as pitiful, full, and tragic. Something in his mind contracts, expands, contracts again against the birth of an idea. The absent, hard-lined face of a woman, lit by the cruel orange of addiction in the night, the man who kills her draping one hand across her thin waist. Belino stares hard, feels the shifting in his head of something momentous. He watches, his pencil begins to strike across the page as if alive in the darkness. This is the start. He watches closely.

Three nights later and Belino has the hope of inspiration. In the notepad are instants from the week before, the people, the moments, the shapes and colors and visions of something weaving a slow tapestry. The picture works itself out in life splashes caught inside a second, a glance, a moment of perfect light and darkness. The time passes, and Belino realizes the ache in his brain comes from the wrench of idea coming to life. It comes with pain and slow-growing light. He feels the urgency and escapability of life in the seed in his mind. There are lives pulsing out from the product Jeremiah sells, and each searches for a feeling that the city can't give its residents. Each comes to find a moment where the city changes its facade for a few hours, that peace their lives are empty of. The weight of being born here. The street where children fight with knives, guns instead of fists. The tenant buildings where children cry all night. The hydrants spewing tepid water upon streets, running in dirty streams to places where the sewers open to the streets. Children playing on fire escapes of sun-heated buildings, shirtless, screaming, ignorant of the quiet eyes of the city upon their pale backs. Amid the gutter current around the people stands the man who makes the flow continuous. His teeth white, hands around smiling and faceless women, other shadowed figures swarming around in a black human miasma.

Page after page, the notebook fills.

Belino's mind works. The coffee-rum mixture runs warm in his veins, the pit of his empty stomach. Cellophane wrappers from vending machines litter the ground at his feet. Two notepads sit on the concrete at his side. Slightly, Belino waits for the picture,

awakening, gaining form. It is like none other he has imagined, beautiful in its harshness, the hard edges of the city. It is something brutal and true, something alive each night in the darkness beside Belino, watching Satch and Wilkey, hovering out of sight, eyes ever on Jeremiah. Shivering yellow in the darkness, beneath the lids of eyes blackened with time and the wear of no-sleep and hunger, for food, another fix, endless highs and drone of days.

"Belino. You got to eat something other than junk. If you want, I can hook you up with some food made by somebody's mother." He looks around him, sees Satch sitting on the ground by the car, drunk, staring. "You got a mother, Satch?"

Satch doesn't look up, stares straight ahead, nods.

Jeremiah calls to Wilkey, who calls back from Miranda Eliando that he hasn't seen his mother, wouldn't know her if he saw her.

Jeremiah looks back to Belino. "Somebody got to have a mother around here."

Café de la Luna. 2:37am. Coffee and eggs and bacon and toast. Salsa on the side. Jeremiah stares back at Belino. Neon lights on rain-slicked streets. Jeremiah speaks in a voice thickened by cigarette smoke.

"Selling is easy in Red City. Once you know the business."

"What does that mean?" Belino waits, stirs his coffee.

Jeremiah looks out the window, sips at the steaming cup of coffee in front of him. When Belino finally thinks he hasn't heard the question, Jeremiah speaks.

"Do you know how many times I've been in jail?" His eyes fix hard on Belino.

Belino shakes his head.

"Guess." The word stabs out.

Belino shakes his head, thinks. Jeremiah stares. Belino shifts in the seat, feels the soft stuffing of the padding under one sweating hand, pulls at the foam. "Five?" He sips quickly from the cup, hoping that Jeremiah doesn't see the tremble that has begun to ripple the coffee.

Jeremiah waits until the silence is uncomfortable, staring. Then, at that moment, Belino realizes what about the street dealer generates uncertainty, fear, hesitation. His mind lands on the thought like a brush on new canvas, staining it with the revelation. Jeremiah's power comes from it. Thrives on it. Inside, Belino's mind responds, moves with the new thought created from the moment, marks it for use. He feels a timid excitement at the layer uncovered in the moment, feels his fear recede with the knowing.

"I have *never* been in jail. The cops have never gotten their blue hands on me. Do you want to know why? Do you want to know how I can work these streets into a fortune in my pocket?"

Belino nods yes, returning the gaze that, moments before, made him squirm. He thinks he sees something in Jeremiah's face, an unasked question. Belino knows. He feels the fear inside him creeping away. The understanding makes him see clearly. Jeremiah's black and bald head reflects the electric light. Belino watches him.

"You have to know the rhythm of this place. You know what that's like, don't you? I've seen your paintings."

"I know what that's like. In a way."

"Our ways are different. But we both depend on what we see." Jeremiah gestures to the world beyond the window.

"I can't paint unless I feel something."

"That's funny, Belino. I don't feel a thing. Nothing at all. You understand, of course." Jeremiah gazes steady, almost as if he sees right into Belino's head, searching. Belino sips from his spoon. Jeremiah watches him, draws from the cigarette he holds between two fingers. Smoke swirls as the waitress passes, carafe of coffee sloshing as she goes. A moment of silence settles again between them, but it somehow lacks the power it had before. Belino stares back at Jeremiah for the first time. The dealer tries to place the change that has taken place between them. Somewhere in their conversation, he tries to discover the new way the painter looks at him, studying him, curious and unafraid. Jeremiah doesn't like the change.

"Belino."

The painter looks up into eyes frightening black and city-wise. Belino detects the glint of neon against the black circles, reflecting.

"You got to learn what to do, what's wanted, what's right. These streets are largely Spics. They made me welcome, welcomed what I brought, made me what I am. After all, what's it to us if they dope themselves to death?" He leans in close, across plates growing cold.

"Eddie Nuñez died two weeks ago. He tanked while strung out on snort. Died in the street with his friends inhaling pipe and laughing all around him. Tell me, Belino. Is that for us? Can you see either of us dying that way? That's *their* way. Let them have it." He leans back against the torn vinyl, draws deep from the cigarette. Nearly

forgotten, it flares into life again, glowing angry. "But it was something else that made me understand this place well enough to build a business and keep it running. It's like a gift. An art. I am an artist, too. We have that in common. We both depend upon the world out there."

Belino looks back at him, smiles a small-bitter smile at the comparison. The waitress swishes by and is gone, both cups filled with fresh coffee in her passing. Jeremiah reaches into his pocket and produces a flask, pours a generous amount into his coffee, offers Belino the small metallic bottle.

"Whiskey?"

Belino shakes his head.

"I take rum."

Jeremiah laughs with those who see him as a symbol of success on the streets. The rain has stopped this night, and the people come from out of dry places to hear the music, to dance, to laugh, to smoke, to shoot up, to drink, to smoke some more. Belino sketches, traces faces he wants to preserve, figures, moments. The picture in Belino's mind is nearly complete; the time is close. His mind moves constantly, and he has not slept in three nights under the power of the thought. Rum and caffeine hum slightly in his veins, but Belino feels alert, wakeful, conscious in the way he always is before he takes up a brush to paint. He doesn't know if it is hours or moments away, but he is ready.

The scaffolding is loaded into the old truck he uses to move from place to place. The paints and colors and brushes and finishes and thinners all sit in tight little circles beneath the drop canvas and ropes and tools he uses to construct the scaffold. When the picture finalizes itself in his mind, he will drive the truck to the great empty wall where Jeremiah works and paint something magnificent and true.

Belino walks away from the sound and the spectacle of Jeremiah's corner. In an alley closer to the main flow of traffic through Red City, Belino finds two drunken teenagers sharing a bottle of wine. They trade the bottle, back and forth, swig for swig, collapsing against a wall full of graffiti. Further down a man rummages through a dumpster, throwing things out into the alley. As Belino approaches, the man sticks his dirty head out and watches him pass. "House cleaning," the dirty man says with a laugh, disappears again, banging, throwing, talking to himself.

Belino walks through alleys, listening and watching. He pauses under an open window where a woman screeches in Spanish to the occasional male grunt. He listens to sirens wail down and away, somewhere near the docks. Rats running in and out of an abandoned building. Kids playing with a street cat. The Jews installing locks on their store front. Kids throwing empty cans at an open window. The images flow through Belino's mind like a steady stream of images on canvas, ripe to pluck, to paint, to capture elegant and beautiful in the pitiful path of empty lives. Belino feels his mind twinge and jump with thought, feeling, expression. Somewhere in the rush of all things is the final image, the last piece, the final stroke. When he finds it, he will paint a beautiful picture, magnificent and true.

Belino's mind flies through the streets, glides and absorbs. Something about Jeremiah and his people and his corner changes Belino, makes him able and ready and sharp. He walks alley to alley, sees the people wasting away. When he sees the mother and child, he knows it is finished. He knows they will be the ones to complete the picture, to finish the idea. He slows as he approaches, but they, unaware, don't look up as he nears.

In an alley blowing with shredded newspapers and trash, she cradles the baby in her arms. She stares hard and fearful at a wall, not seeing, and Belino realizes that she couldn't hear him if she wanted to. Her eyes are bleary with tears, dark circles puff beneath unwashed cheeks. Her shaking arms have the red tracks of needles. She kneels in quiet, trembling silence, grasping tight the shifting, agitated bundle in her arms. Her eyes do not move when Belino stoops to uncover the face of a baby, exhausted, thin, pale. At first, Belino thinks the baby dead, but then a slight movement tells otherwise, and the baby opens crusted eyes against the new light. Soundlessly, it searches for shape and form. Its eyes close, and it returns to its restless, dazed slumber.

In the small light of the alley, Belino looks closely at the woman's arms, scabbed, veined in blue. Blotches of red and black and blue alternate up into the folds of her unwashed shirt. Belino, moved and inspired, sighs at the end he sees before him, wonders how long it will be.

"Jeremiah is here." It sounds empty, echoes off walls. He stands to leave, and the woman, eyes locked on the wall, lurches into a whisper, so quiet that Belino is unsure it the sound is real.

"Someone." Her blue lips quiver.

He waits for more, but her gaze remains locked on the wall. In his mind, this image completes the work of his mind. Beautiful and whole and complete. It is a greater creation than any he has done. He is ready. Strange that such a scene would tip the final scales, the wilting lives before him, extinguishing themselves slowly from a world hardly aware of them.

"Someone." A croaking whisper. "Someone. Someone." She falls silent.

Belino waits for more, waits for something else to be said, a request for money, for help, for anything. Her eyes wide open and empty, staring at brick and spray painted art.

Belino senses something beautiful and large, something that has everything to do with Jeremiah and the city and the people and the night. She is the point at which all comes together and makes itself clear to Belino. The master of the streets. The painting completes and settles in his mind, and his heart beats, quickened with the moment of anticipation. The woman's form grows faint in the light, fuses with the colors and tones around her, part of it, the essence of something missing and finally found.

Thankful, Belino leaves her.

Jeremiah watches as Belino constructs the scaffolding, drops a tarp down over the scaffolding, making a tent-like place to privately create his art.

"I guess he's finally ready." Wilkey whistles at the structure. "What's he gonna paint?"

"Don't know. He's ready though. Came back last night and said it was time." They wait in silence. "Better be good," he says to himself. He remembers the *Café de la Luna*, the night when Belino's eyes changed, when something in how he looked at Jeremiah changed. Something Jeremiah didn't like. Nobody looked at him that way in the city, on even terms, not with that sense of understanding.

Belino drops the line holding the tarp, and it falls down, around the wall, covering the wall and scaffolding completely. Jeremiah watches, curious at the private space Belino creates for his work. Wilkey looks silently to the dealer.

Jeremiah turns away, walks to his car, starts the engine.

"Better be good."

Feverish and tired, Belino gulps rum-coffee from a thermos. It burns as it goes down. Belino feels the heat in his throat and stomach. His sweat wets his shirt to his skin, drips from his chin in the tented workspace. The tarp cuts off any breeze, but he is used to sweating.

On the brick before him, Belino paints a collage of images around a shape in dark glasses, dark clothes, arms outstretched, encompassing. The shapes, skull-like and thin, waif-spirits holding darkened indefinite items, sharp, narrow, long, cylindrical. Shadows appear as shaded figures, moving in and around in swirls, insubstantial, faceless. Belino thinks to himself, mixing paint and thinners. Five more days. Then the world can see what Jeremiah's city is all about. He swirls the brush in the paint, carefully lays it to brick.

Something dangerous outside the tarp waits for the painting to be finished. Belino feels it and paints. There is nothing for him to do but paint. His aching muscles move. His exhaustion pulls him downward. The picture.

The picture.

On the curb and trembling, Belino pours the dregs of cold coffee and grounds into the thermos cup, holds it with both hands. Beside him a bottle of rum sits half full against the curb. He pours a great amount into the thick black, swirls it, sips it with shaking hands. He has slept little, painted for hours on end. Dawn is an hour away. His body nods with exhaustion, dips toward the ground, but he will not let himself sleep, so close to the dawn. The light on the picture, the faces of those who see it. He will wait.

The paint cans are sealed, brushes soak in pails of thinner. The drop canvas is rolled close to the building. The truck sits next to the dismantled scaffold, loaded and tied. The painting dries under the shroud of canvas. Soon the sun will light it. Belino drinks the rum-coffee, chews the grounds.

The lights of Jeremiah's car sweep across the form of Belino, shrouded in a tattered jacket draped over his shoulders. He sits on a curb, gripping a near-empty bottle of rum. The thermos cup sits beside him, empty. The growing roar of busier streets in the distance and a barking dog break Belino's near-sleep reverie.

Jeremiah swings the door open, walks to Belino, looks down. Belino watches him come and stand over him, looks him in the face, and wonders for the first time what he will think.

"Is it done?" His voice is thick, sounds loud on the street.

Belino nods. Jeremiah reaches a hand down, grips the painter by the arm, pulls him to his feet. Belino staggers, stiff and unsteady. Jeremiah's hand steadies him, holds him up. One arm drapes around his narrow shoulders, helps him walk to the cord attaching to the release points at the top of the building.

"You look like you been to hell." Jeremiah's eyes contain a hint of strange recognition, something he's seen before, now in Belino. Belino doesn't like the feeling, the look. He steps out of Jeremiah's grip, goes to the cord, turns.

"This is it. This is what you asked for." He pulls the cord.

The tarp releases at points on top of the building, falling under its own weight to the ground. Light begins to appear over the rooftops, lighting the darkness with morning-gray. The work does not need the light of morning, Belino thinks. Jeremiah steps closer.

He studies it silently, eyes scan back and forth. Pictures within pictures, shapes upon shapes, forms merging, separating. Without sound, Jeremiah absorbs the work, the details of each moment captured there. Belino waits, watches for a reaction. His legs feel weak, he stumbles from the weight of the work, the effort, the anticipation. He walks from under the painting when Jeremiah doesn't speak, goes and sits on the curb, legs protesting each step.

Belino watches the light of the sun come up from the gray and begin to touch the mural, shine on its colors. His shoulders drop, head falls to his chest. Somehow, Belino doesn't feel the need for the light for this painting. Belino sleeps.

Behind him, Jeremiah looks up, sees himself made large.

"Belino."

The artist struggles into consciousness, feels the hardness of the curb against him. The daylight shines around him. Jeremiah stands above him, looking down, smiling.

"You did it. It's perfect. Beautiful." With glasses removed, his eyes smile, the first time Belino has seen them do such a thing. Belino nods, hold a feeble hand up against the morning sun in his eyes. Jeremiah squats, sees eye to eye with the painter, looks hard at him.

"You've got nothing left."

Belino looks at him, too tired to respond. Drained and half-aware, he hears voices of people around him exclaiming surprise and pleasure. He is aware of other people moving nearby, coming to see the painting. They are blurs of sound, dimly present against the image of the black man hanging close to his face.

"Poor Belino. Eaten by his art, just like a good artist should be."

Belino feels himself slipping away, into unconsciousness, feels the empty place where an idea rested before paint and effort placed it up for all to see. Vast, empty spaces open inside him. He longs to fill them again, knows that, as he slides out of awareness,

he will not feel complete until the space is filled again. Jeremiah's voice sweeps in on the last wisps of consciousness.

"Just like a junkie."

FIXER

"It's simple. All you have to do is watch him till I get back tonight." She holds on to the doorjamb, peering into the apartment. Mama talks to the television in the next room. Mrs. Despallo shuffles her feet, awkward. "Please, I haven't been out in a week. I wouldn't ask, except you know how I helped your Mama with the light bill? Remember that? I helped her with the check."

I look back over my shoulder to Mama sitting in the armchair. One hand holds the remote, the other fumbles for a bottle next to her. Angelita cries in the next room, but Mama doesn't move. Mrs. Despallo tilts her head, waits expectantly.

"Is something wrong with Paco? Is he sick?" Paco is fourteen. Mrs. Despallo has never asked for my help with him before, though we have known each other in the building for as long as we've been here.

Mrs. Despallo leans in, begins to whisper. "He needs someone to watch him, Jesus. He's been in trouble lately with *la policia*; he has been warned. He can't be caught on the street anymore past eleven or they will take him." She looks down the hall as if her whispers weren't enough to keep the secret.

Paco runs with *Los Borrachos*. I don't know if she knows. He steals from Kosher Korner and smokes with the boys from 112th. Still, I remember how she helped Mama with the check. "How long will you be gone, Mrs. Despallo?"

"Juan will come for me at 6:00. Will you do it? I'll try to be back before 1:00 *de la manana*, at the latest. Please, Jesús, for me, *su vecina*?"

Mama calls from the other room. "Jesús, who's at the door? Who are you talking to?"

"It's Mrs. Despallo down the hall, Mama."

"Tell her I'll pay her when the check comes." She strains over the volume of the television.

"No, Mama. She wants me to help her with Paco tonight."

"Paco? You help her, Jesús. You help her."

Mrs. Despallo looks at me, tiny satisfaction in her eyes. "I'll leave the keys with you before I leave, *bien*? Thank you, Jesús. Juan thanks you." I watch her go all the way to her door. She opens the door, light floods across her face, and she looks back up the hall to me.

"5:45, please."

Fire-escape metal burns through our jeans as we sit and smoke. On the street below, kids come home from school on 108th, screaming and running, their voices echoing off the brick and iron like canyon walls. Chuy spits between the metal slats as I tell him that I can't go to Rosa's with him. He watches the spit fall five floors to the pavement.

"Can't go to Rosa's? Why?" He pulls his shirt over his head, wipes his sweat before hanging it on the rail beside us.

"Mrs. Despallo asked me to watch Paco tonight. She says he's in trouble with the cops."

Chuy whistles. "The cops are the least of the little *cabron's* worries. He's in with *Los Borrachos*, but he's not smart enough to stay out of trouble. Bingo Ortiz told me he was in for a nickel with Jeremiah. Jeremiah gave him some rock to sell at school, but Bingo says that he sold less than he smoked." Chuy thumps another cigarette out of the collapsing pack, holds out his hand. I hand him my smoke; he lights his from the end, hands it back.

The sun begins to settle above the roof of the Mandivar apartment building across the street, lights the struts and bars around us. "Paco in for a nickel. How will he pay?"

"Probably won't."

Sounds of traffic and people strain through the grates of the escape. When the cigarettes are gone, Chuy pulls his shirt form the rail and stands. He crushes out the butt and flips it out into the street.

"You can't go to Rosa's tonight because you have to baby-sit a fourteen year old addict. Take some advice." Chuy spit through the slats.

"Leave your wallet at home."

I eat beans from a can alone at the table while Mama watches t.v. Angelita has stopped crying, exhausted from the heat. Through the window, I see the Villareals arguing in their apartment across the street. I can make out some of what they say, but it's hard because of the traffic below. She screams and pulls her hair, her thin cotton-print dress heaving with her effort. He waves his arms, hits her across the face. Sweat

stains his work shirt, half-unbuttoned down his chest. He lumbers out of view while she holds the side of her face, then she follows after him, face red, eyes dry. Three years after taking it, Mrs. Villareal has learned to hit back.

I scrape the insides of the can. Mama solves the *Wheel of Fortune* puzzles out loud, to no one in particular. I run my finger around the inside of the can, suck off the sauce. I look out the window to see if it's clear, then launch the can out to the street below. I hear a clatter, brakes, muffled curses.

"Mama, I'm through with supper. I have to go to Mrs. Despallo's now."

There is a moment where the only sound in the house is game show banter dubbed into Spanish. Then Angelita begins to cry from the next room. Mama calls back, "Don't wake the baby."

At 5:50 pm, I knock on the door. Mrs Despallo opens it, still pinning an earring, dangling gold against her black hair. I am struck by her appearance, smell some hint of perfume as she leads me in. Her dress is black, low-cut, revealing. The lower hem comes to mid-thigh, her makeup exaggerated. She pads over to the middle of the room in black stockings, straightens her dress. She sits on the coffee table to pull on black heels.

"Paco is in his bed. He may sleep the entire time, so you may have no work to do at all, but if he wakes up, don't let him leave. He'll listen to you; you're older than he is. He respects you." She stands, peers into a floor-length mirror attached to the bedroom door, tussles her hair. "He shouldn't be any problem. He has been sleeping since he came home, but he won't know you're here. If he wakes up, tell him you came over

because I asked." She slashes lipstick onto her lips, caps the tube, and throws it into her purse as she heads for the door. She stops in front of me, puts her hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you, Jesús. I will remember the favor."

I have no idea what to say. She is beautiful. I try to look away, down, at the blank screen of the television. I feel her hand on my chin, a burning in my chest. She lifts my head. "Are you well, Jesús?" She looks pleased, tries to hide it.

I lurch into words, afraid. "I'll take care of him, Mrs. Despallo. I won't let him leave." The words tumble out.

She hesitates, narrows her eyes. For a moment I look at her and wonder how she can keep from knowing what I am thinking. I am suddenly ashamed, blushing, trapped by the light touch on my chin. The touch vanishes. She smiles as she walks to the door, and I try not to follow her with my eyes. As she steps through the door, she says, "One o'clock." I see her teeth in a smile too knowing, and I turn before she can shut the door.

Paco is sleeping when I look in. The night is warm and the window is open. Covers are twisted around him, rings of sweat on the sheets. I walk into the kitchen. There are a few dishes left undone, the remains of a hasty dinner. There is little food in the cabinets; at the table I force down stale pretzels. One of Mrs. Despallo's malt liquors I find crammed in the back of the fridge helps me to wash it down.

The television is channel after channel of the same thing. I turn it off after running through them all twice. Paco rolls over in the next room. Through the window, the light vanishes against the brick exterior of the Mandivar building. In the closet I find and take a pack of Mrs. Despallo's cigarettes from a half full carton on the top shelf,

climb through the window, and sit on the still-hot escape. The heat-burn through my clothes feels good.

Across the street Eddie Dillon sits with a few members of *Los Borrachos*. He hands around a bottle of whiskey. Because of the falling dark, I cannot make out the label, but I bet it's Bull Pen Whiskey, the kind Mr. Vecini sells at the Eight Stop a block away. I know Mr. Vecini is a *Los Borrachos* target. He threw out three members from his store once, with the help of the cops, and has paid the price ever since.

The street below is busy. I see many familiar faces, content to look down on it all and watch from the wide-open privacy of the escape. Soon, I see Franco Marvella weaving with his arm around someone. He hollers up to me as he passes. "Jesús, you going to Rosa's? What are you doing?" I recognize Benita Garcia with him, the two holding each other up. She waves a dizzy wave to me five floors up, too drunk to speak.

"I can't go." I point in through the window, but don't want to tell him I am watching Paco for Mrs. Despallo. Everyone on these streets knows Paco. Everyone knows me too. Fourteen year-olds are adults by all accounts of the neighborhood, if not by law. I try to wave Franco on.

"You can't go? Who do you have up there?" His voice is louder than I want, even with the sounds of traffic and the growing crowd that comes out after the heat and light of the day passes. A few people from the Mandivar tenant look out.

"Go without me." I feel the heat of embarrassment on my cheeks, the second time tonight. Too many people are paying attention to the loud conversation, and I think Franco is buzzing too much to realize it.

"You got someone up there? That's the Despallo place, no?" He begins a sly and knowing laugh. Benita sways in his arm.

I panic with the question, feel that all those below are turning to Franco's too-loud voice, looking up. I recognize Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez, the Vesalis boys, Macie DeLeon, and others. I feel they are all looking up to me, waiting the answers to Franco's questions. I think this a good opportunity to let his misunderstanding save me and nod. Eddie Dillon and the *Borrachos* are already looking up.

"*Bueno, beuno!*" he calls up, laughing. Who is it?"

I try to think of any safe answer, anyone not going to Rosa's tonight, anyone who they will not see or think to speak to. There is a pause too long, the street seems to stop beneath me, and the cigarette in my hand has been crushed, the ash burning my hand. I try to answer with a soft voice.

"Mrs. Despallo asked me to come here tonight." I want to say more, to tell the truth even if it's embarrassing, but at the same time can't. My face is burning when I hear myself let the words be the whole of my explanation.

Franco's face shifts into amazement. The alcohol makes his understanding more visible, and I can see the suggestion dawn into something more. He smiles a slow-building smile in the light of the electric lamps that have begun to flick on all around us, down the street in both directions. Eddie and the *Borrachos* are laughing and giving each other five. Mrs. Ramirez shakes her head and walks away with Mr. Ramirez in tow, still looking over his shoulder at me. The Vesalis boys are nowhere to be seen.

"*Bien, bien. Esta muy bravo, amigo!*" he whistles up to me. "I will tell Chuy not to expect you." He flashes thumbs-up admiration with his free hand, waves. Franco and Benita move on. Bits of paper and ash cling to the sweat of my hand.

The faces across the street have disappeared back into their windows. Mr. Villareal stares at me from across the street, sweat stains under his arms and chest still visible. He smiles and gives me a half-hearted salute before pulling his head back in. I feel my stomach clench tight, the creep of panic, as the street's attention turns away from me. I think of what Chuy might say by accident when Franco brings it up; news like this travels fast.

I climb back through the window and go to the phone, dial Chuy's house.

"*Bueno*, Mrs. Chavez. Is Chuy there?" Chuy has left long ago. She thinks he went to a party and wants to know if I will see Chuy there, why I haven't gone too. I mumble an answer, hang up. I dial Rosa's. A strange voice answers, music pounds through the receiver. Chuy is somewhere, but no one can find him now, the voice says. Many voices very close to the phone are singing in loud, drunken Spanish. The music is turned louder.

"Tell Chuy to call Jesús at the Despallo's."

"What?" Voices, laughter, singing.

"Tell Chuy to call the Despallo's." I raise my voice to be heard in the quiet apartment. I think of Paco asleep in the next room. *Don't wake the baby,* Mama said.

"*Lo siento.* What?"

"Tell Chuy to call Jesús!" I hear the bed creak in the next room.

"*Lo siento*, friend, I'm sorry. I can't hear you."

The line clicks dead.

I still hold the phone when Paco comes into the kitchen. He is trembling, red-eyed, barefoot, dressed only in rumpled blue jeans. He looks at me strangely, holding the door-frame, wordless.

I hang up, look back to the table. "Sorry to wake you. There was a lot of noise on the line." He looks to the phone, behind him to the living room, to the hallway and the door. He is pale, looks to be freezing in the warm apartment. "Are you okay?" I look more closely.

"Where is my mother?" His voice cracks, trembles.

"She's gone. Went to see Juan, I think. She was dressed up." I don't want to tell him what she asked me to do, sparing us both. "She asked me to check on you because she thought you might be sick. Are you?"

He looks to the floor. " I don't feel good." He goes back to the living room, lies on the couch. I follow him, sit in the torn recliner, pick through a magazine. I wonder where Chuy is. Paco lies shivering on the couch. I read a short article about a baseball player coming from the Dominican Republic to the grandeur of Major League Baseball. I am wondering what Franco is doing and what he's said, who was listening. I don't know why Chuy doesn't call. A moan from Paco makes me look to the couch. He is sweating again. I go to him, put my hand on his shoulder. The evening is warm, but his skin feels cold to the touch.

"Paco. What?"

He rolls over and stares at me with sick eyes. Purple shades under his red eyes makes him look like he has stolen some of his mother's make-up. Although he's been sleeping, he appears as if he hasn't slept for a long time.

"I need to see Jeremiah."

I wait, but that's all he says. "You can't see Jeremiah. Not like this."

"You don't understand, Jesus. I *need* to see Jeremiah." His voice is shaky, urgent.

"You need a fix?"

He stares, finally nods.

"I told your mother I wouldn't let you leave this way."

"I have to have something, Jesús. Something," he groans, turning his face back to cushion. I begin to search the house, but find only a little gin and more malt liquor in the fridge. I bring them to him on the couch. He turns, looks at them, at me, takes the cold malt liquor can and presses it to his head.

At 10:30 pm, Paco begins to moan out loud. Mrs. Thomason in 513 knocks on the door and asks who's making the noise. I tell her Paco is sick and Mrs. Despallo is out, but that I'll try to keep him quiet. Paco is twisting and turning on the couch, the cushions long since pushed to the floor. Three minutes after the door shuts, Mrs. Thomason knocks again with a bottle of children's aspirin. I thank her as she reminds me that Mr. Thomason has to go to work at midnight and is still sleeping. I promise to keep it down and shut the door.

Paco's skin is pale, his teeth are clenched and he murmurs to himself. His eyes are squeezed shut so tight I think it must hurt. I think about calling the hospital or a doctor. While I decide, Paco begins to throw up.

There is nothing in the apartment that will help Paco. No money, nothing. I have six dollars in my pocket, not enough. Looking through all of the drawers in his room, I find sports magazines, a glass crack pipe, nickels, quarters, shirts and other clothes, but no money. Paco gasps in the next room.

"Paco, where's some money. I don't have any." He rolls over shakes his head manages to shrug his shoulders before closing his eyes and gritting his teeth against the pain. I look up to the closed door of Mrs. Despallo's room. I think she would keep the money in her room if anywhere.

At the door I hesitate, caught by my reflection in the mirror where earlier she had primped. I hold the handle, looking at my own reflection. *No baby-sitter here*. I stand there a moment, thinking of Franco and the conversation shared with the whole street. She was beautiful tonight. Paco's mother was beautiful, and maybe for the first time she wasn't just Mrs. Despallo, *una vecina*, but a *woman* I had never seen.

I wonder if she thought, even for a moment, that I was good-looking. *A kid, sure, but was she thinking it?* I try to remember the moment, feel the touch on my chin, brush my fingers across the place where her hand was. Everyone knew that Paco's mom has had boyfriends over the years. I turn the knob.

Her room is dark when the door swings open, lit only from the light of the street. I wait a moment, standing there on the thresh-hold of her room, feeling a tremble from

the idea that I might get caught, that she could open the door, having come home just for a minute to check on Paco or pick something up. I feel strange excitement stepping into the dark detail of her room, one I'd never seen or cared about until now. Strangely powerful in the dark, I don't want to turn on the lights, but a moan from the next room causes me to flick the switch.

The light makes the details of her bedroom less mysterious. A dresser, closet half open, bed big enough for two, night table. A small cross and pictures of family above the hastily made bed. I sit on it, feel the covers with one hand. On the night table there are pills inside a brown prescription bottle. I don't understand the name of the drug, but the pills are large white ovals, the bottle half-empty. A picture of Juan, a dark haired man smiling white teeth, perhaps caught in a laugh, sits next to the bottle. Turning the picture over, I slide the cheap black cardboard backing off the picture. Beneath is the back of the picture, and writing. "Cheli, a la mujer bonita, Juan." *Cheli? Her name is Cheli?* I slide the picture back together before placing it back by the bed. There are women's magazines, nail polish, and tweezers in the night stand drawer, nothing interesting. I turn to the dresser against the wall.

The handles are old and worn, two broken. I start at the top. 1st drawer: socks. 2nd drawer: flower print blouses, black sleeveless tops, soft shirts, cotton dresses. 3rd drawer: underwear. Cheli's secret wear. I push aside the plain and practical white underwear. I feel nervous thrills at the danger of being discovered, but my shaking hands dig deeper. At the bottom are red silk bras, black silk panties, lace things that unnerve me. They smell faintly of a perfume, sweet, like fruit and fresh flowers. There is a slight hint of sweat as well, the smell of clothes worn many times. The phone rings, startling

me. I try to shut the drawer quickly, stumbling back, feeling caught. It rings again; I get up, run through the living room where Paco cries into his hands. He does not act as if he hears the phone. I lunge into the kitchen, swipe up the phone. Nothing but a dial tone. I slam the phone back into its cradle. Paco whimpers to himself.

"Paco." I stand over him.

No answer. He shakes uncontrollably, and I don't know if he can even hear me anymore. My eyes search the room, settle on the television. I think nothing else will work. I unplug the set, carry it to the door.

Two alleys away I find cash with some of the *Borrachos*, who have a guy on 111th who helps them deal stolen goods. I get forty bucks for the set, tuck it into my pocket, and turn away.

"Hey, man, nice going. Mrs. Despallo, eh? Don't let Juan find out," a voice says. I don't turn around. They laugh as I walk away, toward the corner of *Los Azules* and *Santo Marco*.

Jeremiah, a black dealer who has worked these streets long enough to be a kind of legend, sits in a long gray car, stereo pounding out steady rhythms as I approach. He watches me come from across the street, looking curious, amused. Some boys sit on the steps of the building across from where he's parked, speaking in low voices to girls I don't recognize. They look up as I approach Jeremiah's car.

He smiles when I stop before him.

I reach into my pocket, dig out the forty bucks. "This time only." I want to keep it short.

His smile creeps slowly wider across his face. "That's what they say." His eyes search me. "This stuff is bad for you. You know what you're doing?" He motions barely with two fingers to the guys on the steps, who have been watching us steadily. One comes over, studies me up and down. The exchange is quick. Before I know it, I am holding two vials of white rock and he's back on the steps, attention returned to the girls. Jeremiah's gaze is steady. I don't know what to say, so I make a half-gesture with my hand and turn, walking back to the curb. From behind me I hear Jeremiah's voice.

"See you again."

Paco is in the bathroom on the floor when I come in. I don't know if he's conscious.

"Paco."

Nothing but the shakes.

"Paco, I have it."

His head raises, eyes bleary with tears. I hold out the glass containers filled with white pebbles. He stares a moment, either from weakness or disbelief, I can't tell. He struggles to sit up, supporting himself on the side of the bowl. He looks up, relief and pain on his face.

The couch is wet and sticky-warm with sweat. His eyes have life in them for the first real time tonight as he feebly holds the two vials in one claw-like fist, staring into

them at the yellow-white chunks of drug inside. Leaving him, I dig the pipe out from his dresser, carry it back to where he sits. He looks at me a long time when I sit down beside him, offer the pipe. His hands, unsteady, have trouble gripping it, bobble it to the ground.

Picking it up, I squeeze his hand around it. His breath reeks in my face, and I smell his soured sweat clogging my nose in the heat. I try to ignore it as I hold his hand until it steadies. When I take it away, he does not drop it. He stares at the device in his hand, then at the vials in the other.

I wish I could leave now, leave him here in his own putrid, sour, sweaty stink and go to Rosa's, to Chuy's, anywhere. I grow more amazed at myself with each moment, each gesture.

Unscrewing the cap of one of the vials, I put the rocks into the shallow bowl of the pipe, help put it in his mouth. I think of my grandmother weeks before she died, how I helped her just the same with spoonfuls of soup and medicine. But she wasn't fourteen, and she hadn't made a wreck of herself. She was old. I decide that I hate Paco for this, for everything he has made me do tonight. I am disgusted at the kid, the smell, the hot night rising up from the streets below. In spite of my loathing, I sit, gripping the pipe.

He puts his lips around it. I hold a lighter up so that the flame burns above the rocks. He begins to puff as best he can, feebly at first, then stronger. I watch as the flame sucks down and around, melting the bits. I stay like that, waiting for the next of the night's sweaty-hot decisions to rise up against me.

COFFEE, AND AN ORANGE

The view was why he came back, but the coffee wasn't bad either. The old man chose the same table every day. It was close to the street, but the view of the trees in the park is what made him come back. He screeched the chair over the concrete until it was positioned to suit him, till he could see the trees and the old fountain that bubbled on in spite of weathered neglect. The café/convenience store, a few tables crammed amid news and magazine racks, eaked out a slim survival from its short menu, gum, candy, and cigarette sales.

She came to his table with a coffeepot and cup, sat in the chair across from him. She poured the cup full, added two sugars and a dollop of cream from the carton. He didn't like the powdered stuff because it tasted like chalk, which he knew from his time in the classroom for thirty-eight years. "Give me the real stuff," he'd warn when she taunted him with the packets they kept on the table. "If I ain't dead by now, that stuff can't hurt me."

"Mr. Eichenberg, you're the only customer who sits out here on the sidewalk. Did you know that? It's too hot for everyone else."

He stirred the coffee with the dented spoon. "What's not to like? It's the best seat you got. The rest just don't like the idea of sweating a little. But the view. The view you can't get anywhere in this town, not if you want to sit and have your coffee.

Now and again, I like to see me some trees." He sipped the coffee, the cup trembling as he raised it. He managed it without burning himself.

She leaned back, held a hand up to the sun. "Later in the day, even you might not be able to take the heat." She tapped a cigarette out from a pack, tapped it on her wrist. He made a face. Without asking, she slid the cigarette back into the pack.

"Nah. This is the place. Inside, you can't see the trees. What time is it?"

"Eight twenty. You got somewhere to be?" She wanted that cigarette, but she wanted his story more.

"Got to take my pills at nine. I have seven pills at nine o'clock."

She fell silent while he fumbled the brown medicine bottle out of his pocket. His hand shook as he tried to open it. "It's not time, anyway." He sat the bottle on the table, knocking it over. The medicine bottle rolled in a sweeping semi-circle, back and forth, until it was still. Eichenberg looked away.

"Yeah, this heat drives "em indoors or into the shade. The heat's the only thing that can clear the streets of riff-raff." He began the shaky process of unwrapping the fruit sack he carried from Golding's. With trembling hands, he pulled two oranges out from the bag, one at a time.

"Oranges good at Golding's?" She had a different question in mind, but was building the courage to ask.

"Want one? I got you one. Here." He rolled it across the table, past the medicine bottle. She caught it easily in her hand as it dropped over the edge.

"Good catch." He laughed as he began to move his fingers over the surface, searching for a place to set his fingers, break the skin. She rolled the orange back and

forth between her hands, looked down at the fruit as it moved side to side, tried to form the question in her mind. He rotated the orange in his hand, dug a bit with the ends of his fingers, began to spin it again. When he noticed her looking, he stopped, looked toward the park.

"Who keeps that fountain? The water's turned dark, filled with leaves."

She shrugged, rolled the orange on the table. He saw her face and looked back to the fountain.

"I'd like to see that fountain spout fresh water again." The orange rested in one palm, skin unbroken.

"Mr. Eichenberg, what exactly happened up there? I hope it's not wrong to ask, but you haven't been seen around here lately. What exactly did the boy do?" She would not look at him. She took her orange, dug her nails into the peel, pulled.

Mr. Eichenberg sighed, looked away.

She sensed his uneasiness. "Don't tell me. It's none of my business. I'm sorry I asked."

"It's none of that. I'll tell you. It's just hard to think of. I didn't have a good time up there."

She broke her orange into parts, slid some of the wedges across to him on the raft of the largest piece. She made sure none of the slices touched the table. He took them, began to feed them to his mouth, biting them in the middle. Some of the juice dribbled down his chin, but he didn't notice. Neither did he notice that his unpeeled orange, when he placed it on the table, rolled off the table and into an open storm drain. She saw it, but didn't say anything. Tasting a slice, she was pleasantly surprised at its sweetness.

"Lots of Vitamin C here." He said it through a wet smile.

"Yes, lots." She waited.

"What time is it?" His fingers were sticky with pulp.

"Eight twenty-eight."

He sucked the juice from one of the slices until it was a deflated husk, then he shoved the whole thing in his mouth. "Okay," he said over the orange. "I'll tell you, but I'm okay now. The doctors cleared me almost completely. I'm as good as I was before.

"This is the whole story, at least as much as I can remember."

"My daughter, my grandson James, and I lived together when she died."

She nodded.

He ate a slice of orange, went on talking over the juice. "It's important to the story."

She nodded him on, tried to remember what she had heard from Mrs. Ortiz about the Jewish man abused by his family. She did not want him to know that his story had already traveled the streets, long before he was released from the hospital.

"We lived together. And she was sick."

"Sick with what?"

"The doctors said she had cancer of the lung. She smoked a lot, see." She looked at the pack on the table.

He choked on a seed, hacked to the side of the table until it came up. "Sorry about that. I love oranges." She waited for him to go on.

"So we lived together in the apartment, and she had cancer, and he began to hang out with that gang of boys that runs on these streets, call themselves 'The Drunks.' Can you imagine? The Drunks. When I was a kid, they picked tough names. Now they're proud of being drunks. I don't get it."

She knew the street gang *Los Borrachos*, saw them outside Golding's Kosher Korner. The Goldings stayed inside most of the time because 'The Drunks' were every bit as punk as they tried to be. Most of them graduated from the *Borrachos* and went to work for one of red City's two drug dealers.

"She was going downhill fast. Each day was tougher and tougher. The hospital released her, said there was nothing they could do except make her trip there a little more comfortable. She said she'd rather die in her home than in any hospital. Who can blame her? The problem is that none of the three of us had the same idea about how to prepare for her going."

The coffee cup trembled, he sipped loudly. Spilling some, he wiped it over with a wrinkled hand. She went to the counter and brought back a paper cup, filled it with coffee.

"She didn't exactly go smoothly. Sitting in her room in an old bathrobe, coughing up things in a pail, taking bottles of pills, dragging around the house, coughing wet and loud. Coughing, always coughing. The boy was put on edge by it. He took off."

"Took off?" She poured cream, stirred it using his dented spoon.

"Couldn't take it. Too much for him. So he was trying so hard to be cool and unaffected. His mother worried, and I'd sit up with her, into the night, holding the pail for her.

"While the boy's gone, the landlord comes up, hand delivers a note says something about city restrictions and owner obligations. He wants us to move out so he can sell the place, but the city won't let him because of he broke some kind of owner-landlord obligations with his tenants. The notice says he can only close the building if everybody moves out on their own, voluntary. I tell him I don't have time for this right then, that my daughter's dying of cancer in the back room. Guess what he said then?"

She shook her head, shrugged her shoulders.

"He said 'Will you be leaving after she dies?' That's exactly what he said. This guy was a piece of work. To tell the truth, his complex was terrible. Bugs, brown water, bad wiring. Kids running free on the upper floors long after midnight. I was up with her about that time every night. Otherwise, I like to get to bed around 10:00 or so. I would have been glad to go, but we were staying put. We weren't going anywhere."

"So what did you say to him?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't say anything to him after that?"

"Slammed the door in his face. Felt good, too."

"Oh. That's even better."

"I couldn't believe he would ask. But he wasn't interested in us. We had our own problems. She began to get worse. It was killing me to see her in so much pain. I didn't know what to do. Finally I did something I was not proud of. I took the money from my checks and went to talk to a boy I taught in school a long time ago. I bet you know who he is."

She wrinkled her brow, shook her head.

The old man leaned over the table. "Willis Diggs."

Her face registered surprise. "The dealer? One two big time dealers in Red City?"

He nodded. "I'm not so proud of the fact. He was good in math. I told him he should go to college."

"Willis Diggs." She said it again to make it seem real. "You went to a drug dealer for help? What kind of help?" She twisted orange peel between her fingers.

"I had an idea that nobody else could help me with. She wanted to die at home, but the pills couldn't kill the pain. My heart broke every second I sat there by her bed, every time I held the pail while she coughed up stuff that would eventually kill her. I decided there was one real chance to help her, but I needed something that, legally, I couldn't get on my own."

"Drugs?"

He shook his head. "Not that way. Not that kind. I wanted the machine they use in hospitals to let patients give themselves their own dose of painkiller. The strong stuff. You feel bad, push a button. The machine dopes you up."

"Diggs could get that?"

The man shrugged. "I had to try. So I went to see him. He couldn't believe it was me. The strangest look came in his eye when I told him I needed his help. He smiled and told me I was hard on him in school. I didn't know what to say, because he was right. Not cruel hard, but hard. I wanted him to get out of here. Instead, he became the heart and soul of the city. So when he asks me why I was hard on him, I tell him

straight: 'You could have gotten out of this place. You were good in math.' I waited, nervous. But Willis just smiled, asked how he could help his old teacher."

"You told him?"

"He actually understood, said it was perfectly reasonable to want to help someone like that. Said he was sorry I had to face that kind of thing, but that he had some connections in the hospital and would see what he could do. That was that."

"You got the machine?" She filled her cup again. The pile of torn orange peel began to stack up in a loose pile on the table.

"I got the machine. When it was delivered, he sent a note with it."

He fumbled in his pocket, brought out a piece of paper, meticulously folded. The writing was neat, precise, contained script. He passed it over the table to her. She took it carefully, like it was an artifact worthy of preserving. She read:

Eichenberg:

> My friends at the hospital can manage without this for as long as you need it. Here's to hoping your girl goes quick and easy. The same should be hoped of us all. I am sorry. For what it's worth to you, I am quite good at math. I use it every day.
>
> Willis D.
>
> P.S. You should know that my friends at the hospital disabled the dosage limit mechanism. It's there if you need it. Use as much as you need to stop the pain.

Her insides clenched when she read it. The meaning was clear. She looked to Eichenberg, stirring his coffee.

"At first I was horrified. I wasn't prepared for those kinds of decisions. My girl was right there, in the bed, her son out with punks, letting his mother disappear without even caring. It was enough to make anyone crazy. I didn't do so well for the next few days."

She stared, a quiet tension building in her at how she thought the story might end.

"But for three days afterward, the drug flowing smooth and easy, she was quiet, still. It was beautiful seeing her that way. She looked like a cancer patient all right, but she wasn't acting like one, for the first time since it began to get bad. Her eyes were filled with a weary content. I don't think she knew me. It didn't matter. No pain, barely any coughing. I was thankful. For both of us. The days moved slow. Hours in a quiet apartment was not what I was used to. She lay there. I bathed her, took care of her bathroom, fed her. She barely noticed. There was enough of the drug to keep her that way till the end. Whenever that was decided to be. After three days, I was thankful. The machine there, beside her bed like a good friend." His eyes misted briefly. He did not stop to honor them.

"I am eternally grateful for what he did for me. No matter what he does, he will always have my thanks. Her pain went away."

She stared at the harmless old man, sitting there, fingering orange peels, staring at seeds.

He continued. "Two families on that floor moved out that day, just before she passed. I could hear them in the hall, saw the trucks downstairs through the window.

The floor was silent. Just me and her. The same night that she passed, the power went out."

She was amazed. She tried to make her mind cope with what she was hearing, tried to understand the slight old man across the table.

"She had passed an hour before everything quit. The lights, the icebox, everything. I couldn't bring myself to go and get someone. For an hour I sat by her bed, held her hand, thinking this way my girl. She was easy now. I unplugged the drug line, sat in silence with her. The phone didn't work, hadn't for weeks. I think it was part of the landlord's plan. He could blame it on anything. But the phones didn't work. I was going to have to go and get someone. Her boy didn't even know.

"I hid the machine. Put it in the closet. While I was moving through the darkness, I heard the voices of boys, feet running in the hallway. Outside, things broke and people were yelling. I had to go and get someone, power failure or not. My girl was waiting to be buried. But the feet came down the hall and stopped in front of the door. I heard banging, and I thought they were trying to get in. But they weren't."

"What were they doing?" The story was growing large, almost too large for her to contain. Eichenberg went on.

"They were trapping me inside."

She was dumbfounded.

"They wedged me in. When I tried the door, it was stuck fast. I couldn't think of much to do. Outside, I could hear the sounds of people moving. I stood at the door in the dark, not knowing what to do. But then I thought about my grandson. The voices in the hall were laughing quietly among themselves. It sounded like three or four voices,

whispering, but not trying that hard to be quiet. I didn't know if he was out there, so I called his name once, as loud as I could. The feet were running away. The door wouldn't budge. The tenant floor was empty. I tried once more.

"I heard one set of footsteps come down the hall. Just one. I didn't know if it was him. I called his name. 'James!' The feet stopped outside the door.

" 'Is that you?' I asked. There wasn't an answer. 'James, she's gone. Your mother. If that's you, your mother's gone,' I said. There was no sound from the other side of the door. I don't know who was out there. The feet waited. Then I heard them run away. The floor was silent, and there was no power. Outside, I could still hear looting and cursing and chaos, but distant, far away. No one knew we were up here. No one that hadn't locked us in."

She felt coffee on her hand, realized she had been slowly crushing the cup. The coffee, lukewarm by then, puddled on the glass tabletop, touching orange peel, spreading. Soon the raft of orange peel was adrift in a sea of coffee. He looked at the mess, laughed.

"Look what you did." He pointed to the spill.

She waved her hand, went to the counter and came back with paper towels. She told him to go on as she cleaned the mess, her hands collecting the scattered bits of peel, swiping through the coffee.

" I waited. No one came back. I was alone with her. I tried the window, but we were too far up. The building was mostly empty, and my voice couldn't be heard over the noise below. City noise. It was loud enough to keep me from being heard. I tried until my voice was hoarse."

The table was clean, but her hand still moved in mechanical circles. She was leaning toward him, hearing every word. When he stopped speaking, she asked, "How long were you up there?"

He looked down, face dampening. He wiped it dry on his sleeve.

"Six days. Six days. The power came back on the next day, but there was no one on the floor but us. And she, waiting to be buried."

His voice broke. "And she began to stink."

His shoulders heaved, head dropped to his chest. He brought his sleeve up to wipe the wet from his face. She watched him, growing more amazed every second. Such a slight, unassuming old man, she thought.

"I had to open the windows."

She nodded, horrified. "How were you found?"

"The landlord. He came back up to deliver another notice, try and get the last few residents out. He thought we had already gone, because the floor was silent. I had given up calling out the window. I was perpetually hoarse, my throat strained. I was living on brown water, food rotting in the fridge. I was throwing most of it up. It was bad, and I was losing weight. He had to break in through the wedge that someone had driven into the door. Had to use a crowbar to get in, track down the incredible stink that was reaching the other floors. The few residents left were calling the police, the fire department, everybody. The landlord got there first. When he came in, I thought I was going to die there as well. He called the hospital. They took me, kept me awhile. She was cremated. Her body was too far gone for anything else. I couldn't even be there when they buried her.

"And no one heard from the boy."

She stared, didn't know what to say. He wiped his face against his other sleeve.

He stood up. "What time is it?"

She shook herself enough to check her watch, answered in a daze. "Nine twenty."

He smiled down at her. "See what you made me do? Get me to talking, and I forget my pills. Thanks for the coffee." He began to pull his wallet out, sort through bills.

"No charge, Mr. Eichenberg. Thanks for the company. And the orange."

He smiled again, eyes red. As he moved away, he called over his shoulder.

"No charge."

Two days later she called her friend, a nurse in the hospital. They talked about who the nurse was dating, a new guy. Her friend was excited.

In the middle of the conversation, she asked her about Mr. Eichenberg.

"Did you hear that story? It was terrible. *Dios Mio!* He was trapped in there with a rotting body."

"It's a disgusting story. He loved his daughter."

"He has to have counseling, you know. I didn't get to work the case, but the nurse who did told me about it."

"Who wouldn't? I can't believe it. It seems like too much for anyone."

"He has to check in once a day with her. Suicide watch. No one knows how he got the machine, and no one knows how it was disabled for that amount of dosage. Fatal, you know."

"He did it because he loved her." She was shaking her head, still unable to grasp the magnitude of such bad luck.

"No, he had the machine hooked up to himself when he was found."

She froze.

"He was hooked up and fading. That's why the hospital had to hold him for so long. How did you find out?"

Stunned, she thought to herself. A frail, unassuming old man.

"He told me."

Two days later, she walked to work. Across the street she saw him, moving in small, fragile steps around the fruit bin at Golding's. He was inspecting the oranges with both hands, holding, feeling each, before placing it back, choosing another. He looked content to stand there, fruit spread out before him, bright and clean and colorful.

He raised one to his nose, smelling the aroma of fresh orange.

BY THE NUMBERS

They walk through the unlit alleys, the streetlights having long since fallen prey to stones flung from the hands of children. It is just as well. Darkness suits them. They need it tonight, of all nights. Diggs calls it absolution. The job is not one that can be carried out in the light of day. This is an act of totality. There will be no undoing once it's done.

Nine of them leave together on foot. They are dressed alike, dark clothes, stocking caps on the backs of their heads. They are convinced by Diggs that this will be decisive. He says that once Jeremiah is out, all his corners will be opened. They believe him. Like a financial prophet. On foot, they can sweep the streets and corners Jeremiah works for most of his profit. It will have to be a fluid strike. Diggs says the time for stalemates is over. If word leaks out, Jeremiah will be warned, the plan will vanish, his sellers will scurry; the stalemate will continue. But only if this doesn't work, which they rest assured it will, because Diggs has sold them.

The Corner at Los Azules and 108th, 11:21 p.m.

Jeremiah's boy sits on the steps of the used bookstore, bobbing his head to the sounds of his head stereo set. His private groove amuses them as they approach. Jeremiah's boys are too comfortable, too content, they think. He is proof. The seller has

no other company, another sign that Jeremiah's operation has forgotten the sharpness of the city. Diggs says it is a slow blade, cutting everyone, whittling down every life. Tonight, the edge is turned against Jeremiah. The boy—maybe 17, maybe a schoolboy, maybe a brother, son, father, boyfriend—works for Jeremiah. They come upon him, he looks startled, begins to crawl backwards up the steps, pulling the headphones down and stuttering a question that none of them answers. They advance. He retreats. When his back hits the door, his eyes say he knows why they're there. The bats connect 31 times, and the boy at least, to his credit, goes down without a sound. He slips once and for all into the shadows. One of them recovers any drugs the boy has not sold on this hot summer night, tucks it into a bag he carries slung around his waist. They think that the first went well, quiet. Some put their hands on the grips of the automatics they carry tucked into their shirts or pants, taking comfort in their closeness, knowing that all of the stops won't be so easy.

They leave, disappearing into the first alley, each step taking them further from the body growing cold on the slick steps. Overhead, eyes peer out at them through curtains. When number Three looks up, the drapes fall back into place.

The Corner at 109th and Los Azules, 11: 32 p.m.

Four of them sit together on a bench by the park, across from the café. The fountain behind them burbles beneath their joking and laughter. There is more light on this corner, so they pull their black stocking caps over their faces. Some people pass by, and when they see the group, pretend not to have seen, increase their pace, darting into storefronts or into alleys. The four on the bench are not so wise. They laugh out loud in

the night. They trade hits from a rolled cigarette. Diggs would never allow one of his own to use anything, they think, gripping their bats, they remember how Diggs told them that a dealer who lets his seller use is asking to be ripped off by his own. Jeremiah knows that, but doesn't watch his own closely enough. The nine feel superior, reassured. Diggs has a better vision. This is an absolution.

The group waits until there are no more customers. The nine shadows wait in the alley, black figures gripping bats tight with gloved hands, some resting the free hand on the comforting grip of a gun. Two minutes they wait silently. When the four are again interested in their own group, the figure at the front points to two locations on the street, then to Two and Six. No words are spoken, silent nods confirm the command. The figure at the front waves the nine forward, two slipping away, heading to their positions away from the fountains. The others approach from behind, thinking that if they can close the distance enough, the guns will not have to be used. From the cover of the fountain, seven of nine advance, ready for bat or gun, whichever is called for, whichever is needed. The lead figure waits until they have assembled, then signals two groups around either side, pointing with both hands. A series of hand motions, the last pointing to the gun in his waistband, and the seven nod, move toward the four.

The first of the four boys checks out without even knowing, as a bat connects with his head and he crumples off the bench. From the other side, four other swings drops the second of four, and by this time the two remaining have leapt up and away from the bench, away from the dark clothed figures. Three of the seven press the recognition away in their minds, as Diggs said they would have to if the night were to be a success.

The thoughts are clear, but the three try not to hesitate—*I played ball with that guy, I fought that guy, that guy's sister is beautiful*—because Diggs warned against hesitation.

As the two stumble away, two more swings with the fat parts of the bats connect and break the arm of one of the two. He cries out, drops to the ground clutching a shattered wrist. The other gets a gun from his waist, retreats, eyes taking in the number advancing toward him. From behind him, one of the two arrives with his bat. The last drops to the ground, soundless.

The seven gather around the one on the ground, a look they have seen before that evening contorting his face. He attempts words. Diggs said they would.

"Hey. I'm out. It's over. I'll leave. Please. I want to work for Diggs." His lips quiver. The bats hail down on him seventeen times. Eight gather around one of the places marked by the lead figure before the assault. When they are all together, the one who stood watch points to the body of a woman on the ground. The lead figure looks to the guard, who makes the thumb and fingers of his hand open and shut rapidly. *Squealer*. The lead understands, as do the rest. It was necessary for success. She would have told, raised the alarm. Unfortunate, but necessary.

The nine funnel down into the black alley. All think how Diggs' careful wisdom has made One and Two go down without a shot. Diggs said silence would work in their favor. He was right.

One by one, they disappear from the scene, as people begin to creep closer to the bench where before, so much laughter was heard. Some of the bodies are looted before anyone makes any calls. The business owners look out from their barred windows and think a service has been done, that those boys would not have left any other way.

The Alley beside the Café de la Luna, 11:54 p.m.

She works with a boy who, everyone knows, is her occasional boyfriend, especially when funds for highs are low. She keeps the money, while he makes the transactions. There are no customers when the nine find them, huddled around a small fire of paper garbage and bits of splintered crate, two small melting tins hovering in the flames. In each, drugs bubble in anticipation of the needles clutched in their other hands. The alley turns hide them from direct street exposure, but everyone who cares knows they're back here, dealing and dispensing, sending the profits to Jeremiah.

The lead figure points to two of the nine, then to the front of the alley, where two dumpsters can serve as cover. The two station themselves. Seven follow the alley to the glow of the flames. When they round the corner, she panics, and he begins to back-peddle, dropping the tin into the garbage fire. They decide quickly that the time for guns has come. They are pointed quickly, fired in rapid succession. The two thrash in the deluge of bullets. Their screams stop, each having growing patches of red blossoming from beneath their clothes.

The lead figure points to a ladder, the roof of a building, then to the figure closest to the alley's street access. The single figure vanishes. The other six climb the ladder in quick succession. When the three round the corner from the dumpsters, the night shift short-order cook, apron dirty with smears of ketchup, coffee, and food, stands looking at the two bodies and the thick-smoking fire, look of amazement and fear on his face. The door to the rear kitchen of the café streams white electric light into the alley. He looks up

at the three moving swiftly to the ladder. They act together, pulling guns, firing as they walk quick to the ladder.

The cook appears never to comprehend what he sees or what happens next. New red stains across his apron consume the others, and he drops into the trash of the alley. The three climb the ladder. Two waitresses come out and begin to scream. One will later tell police what she saw, including a statement that just as she arrived at the scene, she saw a man in dark clothes vanish over the corner of the roof.

Between Tasks Three and Four, Rooftops of the Abalañez Warehouse, 12:08 a.m.

The lead figure moves among the nine, speaks quiet with each, assuring them that One, Two and Three were beautifully done, works of art. He whispers that Diggs has chosen his people well, that it shows in the smoothness of operation, the difference between them and those they have left on the ground behind them. Each nods, thinks about the simplicity with which the each step in the plan has come and gone. A half moon silver-lights the line of dark figures, marching, silent.

They walk across the roof carefully, looking in the darkness for obstacles, stepping around them and moving on. The low sounds of the city beneath them are strangely muted. A few of the nine look to the sky. Some reload their guns, filling them completely. The news of tasks One, Two, and Three is surely moving through the town. In the distance, the rotating flash of red lights can be seen against the sides of buildings, but the nine feel distanced, safe. Diggs' plan has been flawless. They have no losses, no injuries, and Four is coming closer with each step of the silent procession. They can't help but believe.

The 10200 block of 110th, 12: 20p.m.

They make the move from one roof to another with the use of construction material Diggs had placed there sometime before the plan commenced. The lumber is thick, and three boards placed side by side form a makeshift bridge. The lead motions for Six to hold one end, motions Two over the boards. Two moves carefully, drops to the other side and seizes the boards. With Six and Two on either end, the lead sweeps his hand forward, and the seven begin to cross. When they have all passed over the lumber bridge, the lead motions Six over. He scuttles across, and the boards are pulled, placed inside the wall. The Nine make their way to the fire escape ladder, descend from the roof in single file.

10276 110th Avenue, An Abandoned Building, 12: 23 a.m.

They pry the boards off a window away from the street front. The wood is rotten and the nails barely hold the board in place, removing it is easy. They place the boards in a neat stack beside the building, and the lead motions Four inside. Two drops his laced hands to provide a step, and Four disappears into the darkness. The rest wait. Two minutes later, Four pokes his masked head out motions all clear. One by one, the Nine hump over the windowsill into the darkness. The lead motions Six to guard the window, then folds himself quietly in.

They move low and quiet. Four soft steps through the empty rooms, motions around the corner. The lead peeks around, sees a man tossing on a dirty pallet, making rough sleeping sounds, gripping an empty bottle. The leader motions to Two, who

positions himself beside the sleeping form, flashes them a thumbs up. The group moves on.

Down a hallway faint light spills out into the hallway. Music and the sounds of girl-laughter emit from the room. The lead makes some motions with his hands, and the Seven draws their guns, clench their bats.

When the door bursts open, there's too many to target at once. They dive in, drop to the floor, begin to fire from around the door. They flood in, filling the room with blasting reports. Two of Jeremiah's die before they realize what's going on, three more because they are stoned. Bullets shatter glass, puncture furniture, rip through plaster. Screams resonate against the gunfire. The lead sees return fire, aims for the stumbling boy.

Two girls, streetwalkers, are shot down in the hall, screaming "No! No!" as they jerk with the impact of bullets. Six men in the room, and two that appear to be customers, are sprawled across the furniture in the room or lying on the floor. In the strange silence that follows, they hear gasps, gurgles, then silence.

Two and Six arrive. Two whispers to the lead, drawing a raised thumb across his throat. The lead circles his finger in the air, and they crowd together in the room. The leader looks at the watch on his arm, guesses at how much time they have. He motions, and the Nine spread out, quickly collecting the bagged powders, needles, white-yellow rocks divided into smaller glass bottles. They cram things into the pouches around their waists, into pockets, wherever they have room. They speak in quiet, sharp voices, pointing things out, gathering like harvesters. They notice Eight limps, holds his arm, draws away his hand to see it covered with red. The lead sees the injuries, ties cloth

around both patches of sticky dampness. Eight nods his head, assures the lead that he can make it. He speaks in a low voice, tells the group to close it down. They file out, silent again.

As they seek the nearest alley, they reload.

Between Four and Five, the 11000 Block of 111th, 12: 38 a.m.

The Nine dart through the shadows, hearing the whine of sirens, close and far. When the cars stream by, they merge with shadows. Eight limps more noticeably, Three helping him. The lead whispers to three about the blood trail, and three cinches the bandages tighter. Eight recoils in pain, groans quietly. The lead shakes his head, whispers to Three. Three nods, whispers to Eight. They shoulder themselves under his arms, carry him to a dumpster.

Once he is inside, the lead whispers for him to wait. Eight cringes into the garbage and shadows, slowly signals a thumbs-up. The group collects around him, the lead whispers a few brief words to them, then they move on. They think Eight will not survive until they return. His blood loss is too great, but the plan cannot be stopped now, so close to goal Five, so close to the end of it, just as Diggs promised. Who knows? Maybe Eight will stick it out, surprise them all.

As they walk through an alley, number Five points quickly at two boys smoking cigarettes, staring at them from an escape three floor up. Guns raise, point, but the lead signals them off. He thinks what to do, thinks how close they are to Five, thinks what Five will do if he hears these shots. The surprise, the planning, Diggs' carefully considered plan. All will be lost. The stalemate of the streets.

The lead points to the boys with his bat as they hurry past.

"We know who you are. You didn't see anything."

The boys, wide-eyed, stand frozen under the hard gaze of the Eight. They watch as the dark group hurries through the alley, out of sight of the fascinated boys.

The Corner of 112th and Los Noches, The Alejandro Tenant House, 12:45 a.m.

Jeremiah sits in his car, music spreading over the street in a steady stream. Behind him, a grand wall painting spreads over the activity on the corner. The mural, dimly lit, barely perceptible in the low glow of electric light, hovers over all, suspended. Jeremiah speaks to a group of his sellers, standing in a loose circle. The leader watches from the cover of the alley, counts heads, looks for tell-tale signs telling him who the biggest threat is, who to kill first.

Behind him, the seven members of the group pant through their masks. The excitement of the night, the adrenaline of their business courses through them. They are glad this is the last stop, the last in a long night where every second raises their fear that much higher, wondering if everything was going to be the way Diggs said it would. Jeremiah waits as his corner. His sellers and bodyguards mill around him in the darkness beneath the massive painting on the wall, where Jeremiah looks out large over the city.

They watch them, see how they act. They do not know how close the end is. The Eight ready themselves. The lead makes gestures to the eight in pairs—two here, two there, watch here, strike there. Each member confirms, steps closer to the partner with which he will face this last task of the night. The masks are wet with the exhalation of their breath, sweat of high tension, danger, and fear.

The lead whispers. "This is it." They accept the words, silent, soundless but for the ragged pants of expectation.

When it ends, bodies are scattered. The moans of wounded croak out of the darkness for someone, anyone to help them, ease the pain. Three of the Eight remain, but Jeremiah's boys are more numerous among the dead. Their bodies are crumpled across the hood of the car, tumbled down the steps of the tenant, or out in the open of the street where they stood and laughed moments before.

The lead, Three, and Seven, cover behind a low concrete wall, gasping, reloading. The first hail of bullets hit the dealer, sent him spinning to the ground, but the threat of his bodyguards rose quickly out of the night. From inside the dark interior of his car, his voice calls out to the Three.

"It's harder to change things than this. Tell Diggs it's not over. It's never over. These streets can't do without it. Or us. Tell Diggs I said so, if you see him."

The lead peeks out from around the wall, sees the headlights of two cars careening up the street. There are no sirens. They are not cops. The lead speaks to Three and Seven. For the first time tonight, his voice sounds loud and clear.

"They're coming. Jeremiah's are coming. Go."

The lead leans around, squeezes the trigger, sends a spray of bullet across the distance between them. Three and Seven sprint for the covering darkness of the alley. Seconds later, they send covering fire, and the lead scuttles into the alley with them.

"Go!"

They run. Through the alleys, turning. Behind them they hear the sounds of feet on pavement. Shots. Three drops, crying out for them to save him, take him with them. They run. Their feet moving with the electricity of fear, fast and agile. Three's voice calls to them, fades as distance grows between them. More shots.

They run.

Between Five and Home, The 11000 block of 111th, 1:31 a.m.

The lead stops, gasping, his legs trembling with exertion, exhaustion. They begin to cramp, and he hobble-hops along, unwilling, unable to stop. He doesn't know where Seven is, lost him somewhere along the way. Three of Nine, he thinks. Maybe Two. Maybe One.

The sounds of pursuit are gone. The leader realizes he's not safe. He hobbles along. As he rounds the corner in the alley, he spies the dumpster. Eight.

Inside, Eight is cold and gray. The leader shakes his head. It was so beautiful, unraveled so fast. The streets are the same. The stalemate the same. Diggs. How could he have been wrong? Limping along, he stops to rest in the darkness. The alley smells of alcohol, gutter water, filth. Counting his bullets, he's down to one. He chambers it.

Planning a way back through the streets, he tries to think of a way he can keep from re-traveling their path. Jeremiah and Diggs, he thinks. Nothing changes. Exhausted and weary, the leader thinks of hours before, when their plans were perfect, smooth, flowing like a rhythm through their night.

When there were Nine.

VITA

Grant Andrew Holt

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Dissertation: RED CITY: A SHORT STORY CYCLE WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Major Field: English

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Ft. Worth, Texas, On October 18, 1967, the son of Amos and Carolyn Holt.

Education: Graduated from Heritage High School, Lynchburg, Virginia, in May 1986; received Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas in May 1991; received Master of Arts degree in English from Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas in May 1994. Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree with a major in English at Oklahoma State University in May, 2000.

Experience: Taught writing at Texas A&M University from 1991 to 1994; president of the Creative Writer's Association at Oklahoma State University for the 1997-98 academic year; fiction editor on the *Cimarron Review* at Oklahoma State University from 1995 to 1999; graduate teaching assistant at Oklahoma State University from 1994 to 1999; secondary education instructor at Kempner High School at Sugar Land, Texas from August 1999 to present.