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Novio, Novia

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NOVIO, NOVIA

I once had a job at a juice bar, wedged inside a supermarket in the desert. One shift (I'd been working a double) I took one of the 15-minute breaks I was entitled to and sat outside at the iron picnic table. I was thinking about how tired I was of all my smoking cigarettes, all my keeping it in perspective, my not being in love. It was six-forty in the evening. I was trying to drift off into a dewy field of corn somewhere. There were waves of golden sand nearby, but I was in a puddle of asphalt. The sun made me peel and I loved it. After four minutes Izaul, the deli guy, came out and said, Becky. Venga. He had been asking me out on dates for a couple of weeks.

What? I said.

Venga, he said.

I had taken off the white chef's coat I had to wear so I could lay it on the ground and ash my cigarette on it. I had taken off the hat, a brownie beanie fused with a midshipman's cap. I followed Izaul back inside, through the spaceship automatic door. He pointed to a lady in a sun hat and a gray-haired hippie who was tapping his fingers on the counter, clutching his keys, Range Rover keychain thrust out of his fist. They were irate. Goddamn it, not this again, I thought. Every day I'd try to take a break and something would interrupt it.

My supervisor said I could go on a break, I said.

Which wasn't true, there weren't any supervisors, just a triptych of evil bosses.

But we were standing here! he said. His mustache, Mark-Twain-ish, ruffled. We watched you leave while we were waiting to have our order taken. We tried to get your attention.

Very rude, very rude, the sun hat said.

I have a trick knee, I said.

Are you deaf? the man said.

I said, No. Definitely not.

I stood there for a second watching their fuses shorten. This was the moment when the customer yells at me and I take it. I could see Izaul and the dish washer watching me through the ship's portal window of the dishroom door, behind the endless glass case of the deli counter. I could faintly hear the twerping merengue from the dishroom's radio. I had flopped the coat and the hat on the prep counter behind me. Now I stood wearing my ancient softball shirt, and surely that was pissing them off more. I took a step and knocked a wedge of coffee filters onto the floor.

Whoops, I said.

I wasn't very good at working at the juice bar. I'd done all but six credits of a double major in journalism and art history at a prestigious, supposedly important East Coast college. Art nouveau had been my thing. That and running the very good college's very good newspaper. Instead of living in my parents' house and us tolerating each other, I drove across the country, so they wouldn't have to look at me while I angered them. I was sharing a rented casita in town with my one friend, a girl from Israel.

Well, the sun hat said, huffing, her arms folded with her wrists jammed into her elbows. I'd like a large Beta Bunny, she said.

And I'd like an iced soy latte, he said. Today. Preferably.

Beta Bunny. The juice of nine carrots, give or take. \$4.99.

I gave the coffee filters a kick and snapped on a pair of plastic gloves and made their drinks, right there in the softball shirt. They seemed angry. Really angry, angrier than people usually got. I could feel it, almost, a tingling in my stomach like when my father would yell at me for not loading the dishwasher the way he liked it. I tried to think about other things. The man had said *prefer*-ably, but more like, *pruh for*, which got me thinking about how people usually say that word. I decided that the word fluctuates. The juicer made a noise like a weed whacker with something stuck inside it, the espresso machine squealed.

I want you to know this is the last time I shop here, he said.

Seems fair, I said.

I put their plastic cups with round lids on the counter. He took a sip of his drink and the straw seemed to disappear into his mustache. Come on, Laura, he said to her, his hand on her back. I wanted to say, he doesn't love you. They scowled at me as they walked away.

I stood at the prep counter, the bouquet of vegetables lying before me, soon to be decimated. This was a fancy grocery store, a cavernous place air conditioned to meat locker. Bulk carob, sugar substitutes, a vat of shampoo made from hemp that you could siphon into your own container. A place where the price point had been sharpened.

Izaul emerged from the kitchen, pushing open the doors like Clint Eastwood. He leaned next to me, one elbow on the counter.

They don't like you, he said. Que malo.

What? I said. I get a break. You get a break.

No break, he said. I could see several faces peering through the window in the dishroom door. You don't take a break? You should, you get a paid break. That's part of the deal.

Izaul shrugged, grinning. One of his eye teeth was capped in silver, and his skin was the color of cinnamon sticks. He said, You lazy.

Fine, fine. Skip your mandated, paid, break, I said. See if I care.

I bent to get the fallen coffee filters. He kept standing there, smiling down at me, which he tended to do, and I kind of liked it, even though I never smiled back, and every time he would ask me to do something or go someplace I acted like I had no idea what was going on. He was laughing through his teeth, going, stee, stee, stee!

What are you looking at?

Nada, nada.

I reached into the refrigerator under the counter for a bundle of spinach, tied like a bale of alfalfa. The juice bar was a lot of going up and down the stairs to the frightening industrial refrigerator to get bags of vegetables, frozen bananas, the flats of wheatgrass. I would watch the customers deplete the stacks of napkins and straws like ants, then I would replenish them. It was a farm.

Frankie, one of the bosses, came up and put her fists on the counter. She was a bulbous woman with a row of earrings trailing up the side of her ear and a pompadour. She always talked to me like I was stupid, and I always talked to her like she was stupid.

Did you piss those people off just now? she asked. Her voice had a hint of bullfrog in it. I looked behind her and I could see the sun hat and the man nursing their drinks. The man shook his head.

What people? I said.

She looked at Izaul. You need something? she snapped, and he skittered back to the deli.

I had to apologize, she said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. I had to comp their drinks.

I didn't do anything to them, I said. We got to do something about this break situation.

What situation is that?

I get 15 minute break every 4 hours. I'm entitled to it.

So, take it.

I can't take it. There's never a 15 minute break in the customers. And there's no one to cover for me. I know my rights, I said.

Frankie looked distressed. But then her face flattened and she said, calmly, You know you're the only one who has this problem?

She started nodding at me. I thought about the other employees. There was the kid working his way through acupuncture school. The morning girl who worked in a horse barn and tended bar at the Hotel St Francis. The old guy who ran a garden and sometimes carried the bags of vegetable shavings home in his truck.

I can't keep apologizing for your behavior, she said.

But, I get a break, I said.

If there's no one to cover your break you could just teach one of these guys to do it.

Why do I have to do that? I said.

It's about solving problems. Questioning things.

I see, I said. But maybe you could provide me with a diagram.

Would you just watch it? You know, you could really do with a little more positivity. We don't have any room here for problem people and what you're turning into is a problem person.

Sure, okay, fine, right, but I'm not going to work through the break I'm entitled to take. I'm not going to do that, no matter how much you people keep on goading the other guys to do that and they keep doing it, because they're afraid of getting fired.

Oh, is that so? You seem to know a lot about it, don't you? she said. That's a great attitude, a real great attitude.

Right, well, I guess it's the attitude of a problem person, I said.

Okay, well, we'll have to see. You definitely need a major attitude shift, my dear. Put your uniform back on, she said, pointing at the hat with a wrinkly pink finger. I'm keeping an eye on you, she said, and walked away, her ring of keys jangling.

I could see Izaul and the other guys looking at me. No te gustan! he called to me. They don't like you!

Shut it!

I stood there feeling satisfied with myself. I was right. But also I wasn't. I turned around and went back to the spinach. I chopped the ends off. The guys were talking in Spanish. I had college sophomore Spanish, so I could understand them sometimes. They thought I was teasing them, but I wasn't. My only brother never teased me, he was far older than I was and treated me like a foreign exchange student. They were cleaning out one of the deli cases, getting ready to close. Izaul and another guy opened up the back of the case and took wads of paper towels and scrubbed. I thought about Frankie squeezing her hands together and comping their drinks. She's very difficult, she must have said, she's very troubled.

I plugged the drain in the sink and filled it with water. I dumped in the spinach leaves and they all floated on the surface. I stood there and watched them sink. One leaf at a time. That's it, I thought. I'm having a cigarette.

Hey, I called across the deli counter. I could see Izaul lurking at the pizza station, dealing with what we like to call The Camper. The late evening shopper. She was bent at the waist, pointing inside the case at the last few lingering things on display, probably saying, no, that one, that one. I waved at him, he nodded back. When the shopper had her pizza, Izaul walked over, a specter floating behind the counter, carrying a stack of pizza pans. He went into the dishroom and came out, busting through the swinging door, leaving it wavering on its hinge, his squirrel eyes blinking.

Que necesitas?

As he said it he was wringing his hand in a bar towel and I could see him being somebody's father. I couldn't keep myself from smiling.

What's your problem, eh? he said. You get fire? He made a slicing motion across his neck.

Can you cover for me for a second? So I can go have a smoke?

He looked at me blankly.

I blundered for the word. Fumar, I said. Quedar aqui, y voy a fumar. I pointed at the floor, then I held two fingers to my lips.

Good spanish. Porque? You peresoza? Boss lady don't like you.

No, no. Just so I can go have a smoke. Diez minutos.

He flopped the bar towel from hand to hand. You just smoke, he said.

Come on, I said. I'll give you some of the tips.

He stroked the fuzz that grew in the place of a mustache. Okay, he said. For some tips, deal.

I headed for the automatic doors. Frankie could bite it if she saw me leaving. The music faded as I stepped outside. Night was approaching and the air was papery. There was a wistful wind blowing and one streetlight and some cars. I lit a cigarette and went to my car, a cheap black thing with tweed seats, and fished around in the back seat. I found the paperback I'd been reading, stiffened by a rainstorm that had blown in through the window one day. I sat in the front seat with the door open. I read eight pages. Then I went back inside.

Izaul was standing at the counter and seemed to be looking at something far away. Thanks, I said. Es todo.

But he just stood there with his arms dangling.

What? I said, and started walking away, around the salad bar to the counter where the napkins and straws and lids were. There weren't any more straws. I opened the cabinet underneath the counter. I could at least put some more out for whoever was opening tomorrow.

I heard Izaul say, Becky.

What? I said. Then I stood up and saw Frankie jangling toward me.

Did you just go outside again? she said. Now she was looking at me like I was lying. Which I hadn't yet. I considered what it would be like to lie. She would know. Inevitably, she would know. I have some experience with this and I can say that usually when people look at me they assume that I will lie because, quite often, I will. But right then, I did not.

Yeah? I said.

News flash, she said, her jowls shaking a little. That's it, we're letting you go.

I looked back at the deli counter. Izaul was gone. I turned back and my arm hit the box of straws.

Damn, I said. Seriously?

Seriously.

You're firing me?

Yeah, she said.

I just worked a double, I said. I've been here since 6 am.

Right, that's when the shift starts.

I was on time, I said.

Well, good, she said. Now you can sleep in.

Oh for Christ's sake.

Are you surprised? This is a gift.

What's that supposed to mean?

She was standing there, the jangling keys now still. She said, Go off and do whatever you want. Since you don't want to work here, don't.

How could anybody want to work here? I said.

Okay, fine, consider it a gift to me and everyone else who works here then. You can clean up and go home.

Clean up now?

Yeah, now.

But what about the rest of the hours in my shift? I need those hours.

Maybe I'm not making myself clear, she said, folding her arms across her chest, and stood there waiting, staring at me with this almost fascinated look on her face, like I was a diorama in the natural history museum, and then she walked away. And there was even some lightness in her step.

I had to fight the urge to run out of the place, like I had been discovered sleeping overnight in the natural history museum diorama and the guards had found me out. But that's not what I did. I left the box of straws on the floor and went back behind the bar. I broke down the espresso machine and I went to the kitchen and found the blade to the wheatgrass juicer and left it right where the day girl could find it, resting on the blender, right on its red, rubbery start button.

As I walked to the back past the natural peanut butter, the shampoos, the frozen meats, the flower section, I thought, okay, no job. No job. No job. Jobless. I could maybe go work with my friend at the Blue Corn Cafe. I could get a shift at the El Navajon, the town bar. But right now I get to leave. I was going to get in the car and later my friend and I were going to sit in a bar and get slowly drunk. Yet again I had proved myself to be incapable. I had done a string of

terrible things in college and really long before that—I lied to one of my professors. I made up a story at the college newspaper. Complete fiction. I dropped out of college and then blamed my parents for letting me drop out. I had rolled up my life into a tight wad, thrown it into my station wagon, and driven here.

I went to punch out in the back where all the walk-in refrigerators were. Izaul came in.

Where did you go? I said. He looked me blankly.

When? he said.

Didn't you see? I just got fired.

Oh no, he said. But then he started laughing. I told you, they don't like you.

Shut it, I said.

Why you always say that? he said. I had the punch card in my hand.

I don't know. You're always teasing me. It's what you say when someone teases you, and if you're me, and you can't think of anything to say back. What am I gonna say? They don't like you either? They love you. You're fantastic.

You leaving now? he said. He was leaning his arm against the time clock, grinning at me. I was still holding the card, about to punch it.

Yeah! I'm leaving now! I got fired. I'm done. I'm leaving!

Becky, he said.

What!

I noticed the shirt peeking out of the top of his chef coat. It was a soccer goalie's shirt. Are you going to play soccer at this hour? I said. Football?

He shook his head. The clock buzzed and ticked. One more minute.

Quieres comer? he said.

The couple of other times he'd asked me to go somewhere I'd been able to wear the face of a stupid girl, pretend I thought he meant a friendly co-worker chat, which I didn't have time for, or feign that I didn't understand, because that was kind of true. I couldn't really flirt. There was this guy who always made me gasp when I saw him from the deck at Navajon. He might not have been 21, he always stood on the sidewalk holding a bike. I wanted him to look at me. I would sit up there with a beer and my friend and will him to look. We would sit there for hours after our shifts, both smelling incredibly bad. She would say, quit fooling yourself.

Izaul said it like it was not a question. He smelled like we all smelled when we left, like cheese roasting on the bottom of an oven, lawn clippings.

Quieres comer. Con mi.

Now?

Si. He said something else I couldn't understand.

Huh?

Comer?

He made a gesture like lifting a fork, eating, then another, miming holding a drink, taking a sip. He was a good mime.

There was a fluttering in my limbs. I blurted, I can't right now.

But he just stood there. Right then he reminded me right then of the boys I went to high school with, spastic but steady as the mooring of a dock, with some superhuman awareness of their bodies. Throw something at them and they would catch. But those boys had never wanted anything to do with me.

He started to whistle. Then he said: Lady, I would like. To eat. With you.

I threw up my hands. I should have said no.

Fine, I said. Fine. You can take me out somewhere.

He stood there looking sort of stunned for a second and then he said, Ok? Ok, we go. Come outside when you finish, ok? I drive.

I'm already finished! I just said. I'm done! I got fired!

Ok, ok, he said. Just wait. Five minute. Then he backed out of the door. I stared at the time clock, buzzing quietly, card still in my hand. I could have stuck the card in the slot and it would have returned, skewered. But I didn't. I slid it back into its holder, and the clock continued on with its ticks, its buzzes.

I walked out behind him and saw him jogging back up toward the dishroom, far ahead of me at the end of an aisle. I was going to go out with this guy. The night ahead changed. Some old feeling returned, that feeling of screwing up a calculus test. You are useless, those tests seemed to say. In my head was a small war. As I passed an end cap on one of the aisles full of little things people grabbed as they headed to the checkout lines—lip balm, travel sized lotions, organic candy—I knelt, to seemingly straighten a box of tissues, and slipped into my palm, a cigarette lighter with a tree on it, from among many standing up in a small cardboard display box. How strange they were for sale there. All those things they make you sit through at employee orientation, all those strange loss-reduction training videos.

What knowledge. To know where they aim the cameras.

Then I was out of there, box of straws still littering the floor.

I waited for him in the parking lot, sitting on the trunk of my car, daylight almost gone, the tail end of the day's rapturous sunset. He came out after a while wearing the soccer shirt, three bright colors—red, blue, gold—soft Adidas on his feet. I had never seen him without the stupid hat. His head was round as a volleyball, shorn to number two at the barber shop.

I said, I can't spend one more minute in this place.

You wait, he said, and ran off behind the store to where the dumpsters were.

The breeze blew with the smell of road tar and he drove up a minute later, music rattling the rims of the car. It was low to the ground, two-toned gray, a gleaming dent on one fender. A giant H was painted on the hood. A hundred little flags hung from the rear view mirror. He leaned over and popped open the door for me. Inside it smelled impeccably clean. I thought of a nice hotel. I must have smelled like compost. We drove off down Matches Road.

Something about right then made the slide of freedom I always felt when leaving that place even better, like jumping into a perfectly warm pool.

Nice car, I said.

Thank you, he said.

So, Adonde va?

See, you speak good espanish.

On the road in front of us, two guys in a sporty pickup jumped on their brakes. We fell forward against the seat belts.

Izaul said something I couldn't understand. I wished I could understand someone swearing at traffic in another language. That would be a thing to know. He shouted over the music, Club Alegria. Tu conoces?

No, never been there. What's this music?

Merengue. Me gusta la merengue muy rapido. Very fast.

Horns slid over three notes, a sound like a stick clattered across a fence. The car had a loud engine, I liked it. We passed St. Francis, where I would have turned to go back to my casita.

Where you from? Izaul said.

I'm from Delaware.

Delaware? he said.

It's wet there. Not like this. Not dry. Where are you from?

Guatemala, he said.

How long have you been here?

Cuatro meses. Four months.

You been working at the market this whole time?

Si, he said.

We stopped at a light and I heard car radios, someone's sugary country music. It hadn't cooled down yet, and in the car I felt like I was being broiled.

You miss it? *Quieres regresar?* You wanna go back?

He glanced at me as he drove. We were turning onto *Agua Fria*, a road that eventually turned to dirt. Up ahead I saw a building I'd passed before, a shabby-looking warehouse.

No, he said, shaking his head. No *regresa*.

He turned into the parking lot, a dusty clearing filled with a herd of cars parked in crooked lines. A concrete block of a building sat ahead, flood lights shining off its roof. We could have been going to the county fair. I opened my door and yanked myself up on the doorframe. I stood a little ways away from him. He took a step toward me, but didn't come any closer. We shuffled through the dirt to the entrance, a dented metal door. A man leaned against a stool, taking five dollar bills from the couple ahead of us, a guy in a pressed basketball jersey and a woman with a bushy ponytail. As they went in I heard the music from inside, the hollow beat of drums. I could see colored lights flipping through darkness.

I reached for my wallet as we stepped up to the man, but Izaul put his hand out.

Esta bien, he said, and took out a roll of cash the size of a double-A battery, peeled a bill off. The man taking our cash didn't look at us, just opened the door.

Inside the place was full and a band played on a stage. A balcony overlooked the dance floor, the railings lined with people, dangling their drinks, nodding their heads. There was a bar against the far wall, a cloudy mirror hanging above, tipped forward, covered in red Christmas lights, reflecting a million bottles, the crowns of people's heads, hands holding out cash. It was the music I heard blasting from car windows, from the dishroom. On the stage the singer had a head of wavy black hair and sang, his vibrato a wave in a pool, holding something silver, like a cocktail shaker. He was desperate for something. It was the loudest sound. The musicians—all of them—moved left, right, and a ripple inbetween, each slightly different. And on the dance floor they were doing the same, only with twists, spins. One couple in the center ruled the show, their arms together forming a diamond. Her hips moved sharply, but there was something soft—the back of a horse's neck. The horns played a melody under the singer's voice, moving upward, upward. They swayed again and the trumpet player dabbed at the hollow near his throat.

It was the best thing I had ever seen.

You wanna eat? Izaul said.

I looked around for cowboys, *gringos*. There were none. No, I said. I want to drink.

He leaned his ear to my face and held my elbow. I shouted over the music. *Una cerveza. Quieres una cerveza?* he said.

Yes, I said. Yeah. Cerveza.

He motioned with his head and we made our way up a staircase. There was a miniature bar, the same as downstairs, a bartender in a halter top with silver rings on all her fingers. She stuck her ear in our direction, Izaul ordered, and she cracked two cans of Tecate. She looked at me and didn't smile. I felt flustered. I let him pay, held the drink, and it cooled my hand.

The music changed and the crowd stopped and clapped lightly. Everyone was sweating, wiping their brows. Izaul nodded his head and swayed.

This is Merengue. Es muy facil. Easy.

Oh yeah? I said.

Izaul looked right in this place, in his shirt with the sleeves that dangled past his elbows, the way he slouched on the railing. I felt sloppy, in my softball shirt that read *Spadaro's Plumbing*, covered in scum. Some men passed on the other side of me. Six eyes looking not at my face. Izaul seemed glued to my elbow.

We watched the dance floor for a while from the balcony. Next to the stage was a plate glass window overlooking the pine trees outside, now black, turning the window into a mirror. In the reflection the room was doubled as though through a kaleidoscope, those pine trees glowing, and I could see hands placing glasses on the bar, one after another, seedlings planted in rows. We were nodding our heads.

Quieres bailar? he said. You want dance?

No, no, I don't think so.

Come on, he said. Venga. Es facil.

No, no.

He reached for my hand. I pulled it away. Then he took a step and set his Tecate down on a table. He grabbed my hand and held it, my fingers felt like a paw, the can of beer still in my other hand. He took another step and put one arm around my waist so I felt the warmth of his arm on my back. Then his face was right next to mine, and it was covered in fine black stubble, and I thought, he could be younger than I was. I could feel him sweating. I put my hand on his shoulder and it was hot. I felt a shiver in my arm and I shoved him away. He let go.

Certainly the entire room was staring at me. I must have had a fluorescent light shining over my head. I must have had rhinoceros horns.

Izaul turned around to face me, his back to the railing. I looked at the carpet, a galaxy of red and black shag, crumbs, the tab of a beer can, and felt him looking at me. He didn't move away. After a long second I glanced up and he was still standing, watching me. He had this look on his face, like a frustrated soccer coach. I could barely meet his eyes.

I should have wanted to dance. I should have been that girl who jumped right in and shaken my flat ass with all those curvy women. But I wasn't. I wasn't ever young and free. It's the kind of thing I dream about doing. But there was no chance. I had nothing of these people in me.

I looked down at the dance floor for a long time. Izaul just stood there. I saw his arm move, like a gentle swimming stroke, picking up his beer, and he let me stand there. Like we were just two people taking a break from the dance floor. Like that's all it was. I could hear myself breathing. The band played a few more songs.

Then Izaul said, *Wha? he said. You can't dance?*

No! I said. I was crushing the beer can a millimeter at a time, squeezing, squeezing. I can't!

He was looking at me with that about-to-crack-up smirk on his face. Laughing through his teeth like he did. Like he was laughing at me hunting in the dishroom for a box lid. The radiator came back on inside my chest. I started to laugh but maybe I didn't want him to see me laugh. I scratched my nose, I tipped the rest of my beer into my mouth.

Look, I show you. *Es facil.*

Then he took my hand again and pulled and we were walking down the stairs to where the music was even louder and then we were on the edge of the dance floor, the crush of people. I couldn't move. What if somebody from around town was here and saw me, the day I got fired, failing miserably at having fun. Izaul started dancing, he held my hand as though I were descending from a horse-drawn carriage and he was moving it, moving me, back and forth. Then he put his hand on his stomach and did a thing with his hips, an unrepeatable thing, a ripple, the hidden wave between beats of a drum. He wasn't tall. But it was as though the people around him would remember him, his short lithe arms bent like the crook of an anchor. He let go of my hand and placed it against my stomach.

You know, he shouted, like this.

Then I tried to do what he was showing me, a couple people stepped onto the floor and bumped me and I thought I would have to stop.

No, no, he said.

Then he took my hand and pressed it against his stomach, and he was dancing, and for one second, I felt it, I felt what everyone in the room felt, and I was out there, dancing. I could feel it. Here. You step here. Underneath it all was something throbbing. It lasted for just a moment, then the music changed. And I still again, a pole in a cornfield.

Okay, I said. That's enough.

You wanna go outside?

I nodded.

Back upstairs around the balcony was a door leading to a deck, perched above the parking

lot. The music was piped out of some speakers. We pushed our way to the edge. Izaul reached into the stretched-out pocket of his jeans and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

You smoke? I said.

Algunas veces, he said. The light was gone, all that remained was a strip of cloudy gray along the horizon. He stood against the railing, the beam of a floodlight illuminating a group of people all hunched over a table. They were all perfectly still. He tapped the pack and shook out two cigarettes. He fished around in his pockets.

Hang on, I said. I reached into my pocket for the stolen lighter. That familiar sound, a knife blade hitting a stone. Its flame gleamed on his skin. We stood there, exhaling, inhaling.

Good night, he said.

That's true, I said. Lot of good nights here.

I thought about saying something about how I got fired. But I couldn't bring it up again.

I quiet the store, he said.

You what?

I quiet.

What do you mean you quit? You went to work today.

They tell me stay for one week.

You mean you leave after one week? This week or next week?

Que?

Is this week your last or is next week your last?

He shook his head. We stood there squinting at each other.

Well, damn, I said. Good for you. Fuck them. Now neither of us work there.

I fix cars. With my cousin.

I saw him hunched over the engine of a Honda, wrench in hand.

Too bad for the store.

He snorted. They say nada. Se odian, he said.

It was a word I somehow knew. They hate us. He was laughing, as though it was nothing, looking upwards, cigarette between his fingers, inches from his mouth. I got the sense that he was thinking about someplace else all together, not here, not me.

My cousin fix cars, he said. Good hands. Buenos manos. Mas trabajo alla.

I nodded my head at him. I could feel my neck sinking into my shoulders. He looked at me a long time and I heard his cigarette crackle. I was looking at my shoes. My dirty tennis shoes. Then he said, You have very good skin.

I stopped and looked at the end of my cigarette. Then at him. He seemed to be nodding at me, through the corner of one eye, nodding.

Thank you, I said.

He nodded at me. Is the color of a seashell, he said.

I felt a flutter behind my nose. An unfamiliar feeling had crept into my bones. Back then. I recalled it suddenly and for a moment I had an awareness of where I was, as though seeing my own self portrait. Izaul seemed to disappear. Back then I had appropriate clothes. I behaved appropriately. I had organized study habits. I was standing on a deck with an unfamiliar person in an unfamiliar place. I was a person who had asked to be admitted to the National Honor Society. But had not been. I wished I could have said my parents were disappointed in me. But they were not, for I was invisible to them. I could sit all day in the cupola of the library watching people drop off their books in a rhombus of sunlight and dust. I could pack up all my useless possessions and follow a truck to Alaska. I could see my own peculiar species of dishonesty. I no longer resembled myself. I was no longer me. I wanted to tell. But I couldn't. I couldn't leave him with that, that broken wing. I could not even say thank you, I could only lift my hand, take a drag.

Izaul stood, leaning against the railing.

You wanna go in? he said.

I smelled beer and spice. The air had grown harsh as it tended to do at night, and I rubbed the skin around my elbow, grains of salt flaking away. The throb of bass from inside changed to something slower. I looked up and there was one cloud in the sky, like a haystack in a dark field.

No, I said. I like it out here.

Okay, he said. He was nodding. He looked like he was moving the players on a soccer field around, hatching a plan. I thought of him checking the expiration date on a jar of pickles, or politely packing a pint of curry chicken salad for some woman at the deli.

He dropped his cigarette on the deck, and I saw glints of orange pass through the space between the planks, watched it fall like a seed.

I thought about how I was going to quit smoking. I was going to quit tomorrow. I looked down at the filter between my fingers, to see what little was left.