Winning story in the 2005 Nick Adams Short Story Contest

Associated Colleges of the Midwest www.acm.edu/nickadams

The Billie Holiday

On the last rainy afternoon she will have to walk home from Martinez Fashion Clothes where she works as an assistant clerk, Emmanuel's mother finds a discarded Billie Holiday tape on the sidewalk. Holiday…she knows what this means, but what is Billie? The Billie Holiday? What is the Billie Holiday? She tucks the tape inside the pocket of her rain jacket, and when Armando comes home she shows it to him. He doesn't know either, but he knows of a tape player they can borrow. A man he works with just bought one as a Christmas present for his seven-year-old daughter, and already it is scratched and sticky, but supposedly functioning.

So they sit on the sofa, tucked under a rudely knit red-orange blanket after Emmanuel has gone to bed, and stare placidly as nothing but crackled static greets their ears. It's calming, a little, or at least they leave it for a while. Maybe the tape is ruined. Emmanuel's father reaches forward and clicks the volume to 7 then 8 then 9. They can hear something. On 10 they can hear a voice. On 12 they can hear she is singing. On 14 they can hear her celebrating this Billie Holiday. Fast pianos, saxophones, clarinets tap and flitter through the Fisher Price red speakers. And a funny vibrato, very distant, not a word understandable to them, slides from low notes to high ones and back down again. *It's like reaching for the moooon, it's like reaching for the staaaaaars! Reaching for youuuuuuyour so high aboooooove meeeee, how can I get this angel to love me? Though my hopes are slender, in my secret heartyouuuuuu surrender tooooooo, though it's like reaching for the moooon.* They do not know what the Billie Holiday is, but it makes them smile. There's a kind of warmth in the distant crackle of the old record, a kind of comfort in knowing it had miraculously survived. *Did I remember to tell you I adore you? Did I remember to say I'm lost without you, and just how mad about you I've grown?* And soon they are lulled to sleep. When Emmanuel delightedly discovers them the next morning, he pats their knees and crawls into their laps, eagerly demanding where the headphones are that belong to the tape player. He knows there are headphones. Where are they ? It is his favorite thing in kindergarten – the Music Corner.

∞ ∞ ∞

Armando says he likes walking to work – to the factory where he has recently been promoted from an assembler to a supervisor, or to the Boulevard where he recruits new arrivals to do the temporary jobs like unloading new merchandise or cleaning the site. Walking is one of the few parts of the day he has to himself, he says. Maybe this is partly true. Or maybe, she thinks, he likes walking because he does not know how to drive. Why do you need a car? he asks his wife. Where are you going to go?

In this he was right – she didn't have far to go. But where she would *go* was not the question. She was sick of buses and trains and other transports that carried her from one place to another without her having a thing to do with it. She wanted to control how hard she pushed the accelerator, where she would turn, when she would stop. She wanted to press a button and know just how many miles she had traveled.

For the past few months, she had been getting driving lessons from Alice Martinez, the manager of her workplace. Alice would take her to the parking lot beneath the I-35 bridge to practice. They started with simple steps like shifting gears and using the turn signals. Eventually, however, it became clear that Alice was much more interested in confiding (rather too generously) the strife and frustrations with her home life than in helping her employee learn how to drive. On the day of Alejandra's license exam, her instructor had only a few words of advice: "You know how to press the gas, you know how to stop and turn. Already better than my ex-husband, the bastard. I tell you what he did? The bastard.

"Well," she leaned over and patted Alejandra's knee, "don't worry, m'hija, when you fail the parking. Everyone takes that test, they fail parking."

Alejandra first met Alice Martinez when she got lost on the bus system. Number 47. She was eight months pregnant at the time, and employed as a clerk in a drug store where her manager and most of the customers spoke her language. It was a lucky job to have. Almost easy. Which is why she felt maybe she deserved what happened to her that day when she slept steadily through two hours of number 47's route trips. She had awoken to discover she had no

idea where she was going, only realizing she was on the highway (certainly *not* part of the regular route) and suddenly moving too fast for her to even write down the names of the street signs she was passing, except there weren't street signs any longer and she was one of only three people still left on the bus. One was an old man asleep among bundles and bags of suspicious looking bulges. The other, a tired looking middle-aged woman with an abundance of makeup and thick glasses. Beside her on the bus seat, the woman wrapped her arm around a paper grocery bag full of flowers. Although she sat facing the front of the bus, it seemed to Emmanuel's mother she was always smiling – for on frequent occasions when the woman *would* turn around and look at her, she always was. From behind her thick glasses. She looked like she meant to be friendly.

They drove on for at least ten minutes more until Emmanuel's mother had the nerve to stand up and speak to the woman. She had tried all during this time, but never got further than staring with concentration at the empty bus seat next to the woman with the flowers. Staring at the metallic barrettes plunged deep into full but wispy, faded-orange hair. Staring back at the seat again. She leaned forward as if to stand, then back, then forward and finally stood and resolved that at the end of three very long seconds, she would approach the woman with the bags. *One* (she stepped to the pole just behind the woman), *two* (she gathered her words together), *three*… "Excuse me," and then it was over, her acc! ent, she was known, "Where we are going?"

The woman looked at her, rubbed her eyes behind the glasses and smiled. "That's the question, isn't it?" She laughed heartily, allowing her head to loll over on one shoulder, her enormous arms and thighs quivering. "Frank, where to, huh?" Frank, turning his head to one side and revealing a massive tobacco pouch tucked tightly into his right cheek, called back, "Ohhh take a wild guess, *Miz* Martinez" – he stressed each syllable of her name with satisfaction - "Just where do you think?" "You got a extra passenger back here wants to know." "You tell him his stop is a boot out the door just as soon as he opens his eyes." "Noo, Frank," winking at Alejandra, "not Carver. A young lady would appreciate it if you would bring her to – where now, honey?"

The worst moment. When the talking stopped. No warning, just the eyes, turned expectantly to her, watching and waiting. She clutched the metal bar beside her seat, searching frantically, trying to repeat over and over the sounds she had just heard, trying to process them. She knew some of the words, but they were so close, so fast, so indistinguishable! Just one, if she could just recognize one word – but she couldn't. So she began to smile, nodding, had to say *something*… "Yes."

Whatever was it that she had just agreed to? Had she insulted the woman? Was she mocking her? She could feel her face and arms warming, and began to pretend she had said nothing at all. Had not even been listening to the large woman with the grocery bag full of flowers or the short driver with the pouch in his cheek and large, insect-like sunglasses. She had not said yes to anything, she had merely muttered something faintly agreeable and sympathetic, as weren't people always looking for sympathy? And yet "yes" could have been the worst thing possible to have said, not sympathetic at all. She decided she must not say anything more, and instead turned to the woman, smiled apologetically, and returned to her seat, where she clutched her bags and did not remove her eyes from the window.

"Frank, turn us around, we missed a stop."

"What stop?"

"Just turn us around and we'll see if we can find it. Got a lost little girl back here, doesn't speak English. I mean a few words," she turned around again and smiled tentatively at Alejandra, who could feel her eyes beginning to ache and a wave of nausea from the jolting lurches and vibrations of the bus and the acridity of the brown leather seats. "Just turn us around, Frank."

The woman then propped her grocery bag in the corner of the seat, and teetered across the aisle to where Alejandra was sitting. "Well, I'm glad to have some company. My name is Alice Martinez," she said and sat down.

Alice Martinez knew she was lost, knew she did not understand the language, but had talked to her anyway in a steady stream of unintelligible English (*here is the post office, there's a good restaurant, see the store where my daughter works, where I work, this is a dangerous intersection, now that's a decent market, never trust those political billboards, is any of this*

looking familiar?) until she began to recognize the broken phone booth and one-pump gas station and other such familiarities. It was the first time since she had arrived, the first time the language had begun to acquire some kind of beauty. Some kind of soothing in the sharp and definite edges of its syllables.

When they finally reached her stop, Alejandra turned to smile at this stranger, to find someway to express how thankful she was for such kindness, but was interrupted by Alice Martinez who leaned forward and spoke for the first time in Alejandra's language, accented but clear. I know it's hard, m'hija, she whispered. But you can't come all the way here to let some ugly language get the best of you. I have a store on the Boulevard. You come see me.

∞ ∞ ∞

At 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Emmanuel's mother pulls up to the blue section of the curb where the Osos Pequeños wait for their rides. It is the first day Emmanuel has not ridden the van home, driven by Mrs. Karena's teaching assistant Chela. By the curb he waits now, looking very much like the other four- and five-year-olds in baggy cartooned apparel and backpacks reaching to their knees. The only difference between him and his classmates is that Emmanuel Dresca is the tallest five-year-old in Mrs Karena's Osos Pequeños section. He is oso grande. Oso enorme His mother imagined he must slightly intimidate Mrs. Karena and her seventeen-year-old teaching assistant, Chela. For they could not whisk him away from the Block Area and plant him in Housekeeping. Couldn't hold him on their laps or hug him to their thighs. He was too big for most of the baby-orange chairs and too tall to have a turn at the tricycle come recess. Yet in spite of his size, he was usually well behaved, and did not threaten his teachers with disrespect or restlessness.

The others, used to the luxury of their own private vehicles, do not find it unusual when Emmanuel! 's mother pulls next to the curb. In fact, only his closest friend, Alan, pays attention when Emmanuel notices his mother driving the car. Emmanuel leans back and points with all the dramatic surprise and glee only a person of five years can muster. He grabs and shakes Alan's arm, points, and shouts to the others in a sputtering stutter he has begun to

develop, "M-m-mira! Mira! Es mi coche! Es *mi* coche!" Alan joins him in his high-pitched bellows, raising his hands in the air and waving his arms in celebration, "Ohhhh!" They begin to jump up and down, still shouting and pointing and waving their arms in the air. Emmanuel then stops and bears his tiny biceps, adopting several superhero poses he has apparently acquired at some point in his kindergarten career. "Hasta la vistaaaa," he lowers both his brows and his voice as low as they will go, speaking through a puckered, oval shaped mouth. "Ehhhhh!" They both lean back and laugh, clutching their bellies until Mrs. Karena finally manages to grasp one of Emmanuel's flighty hands, whereupon she awkwardly leads him, jumping and waving goodbye, to the door of his car. "Ok, Emmanuel, let's go, babe. Ooo look at that new car! Is that your car, Manuelito?" She says all while smiling at Emmanuel's mother watching from inside the car. He nods, wrenches his hand from her grasp, and jumps to the side, performing several karate punches and kicks to the wild acclaim of Alan.

"Ohhhkay come on, now, Emmanuel, tu mamá is waiting for you. See her? You better go quick, or else she might drive away with her new car all by herself. She'll say 'I'm so happy I have this new car all to myself.'" He stops jumping and raises his eyeb! rows, shaking his head vigorously in concern. "No! No! D-d-dees ees my carrr, dees ees mine!" "Well you better go hop in quick, then!"

From inside the car, Emmanuel's mother is smiling back at Mrs. Karena talking, or negotiating, with her son. Sofia Karena is in her mid-sixties and looks more or less her age – excluding the reddish-brown hair dyed regularly, clean to the roots. A widow, she lives with her father who must have been well into his eighties by then. "Be nice to your mami and papi, children," she'd often tell her class, "because you may be stuck with them for a long time."

On the first day of school, Emmanuel's mother was relieved to find her son's teacher was Spanish-speaking, and approached her enthusiastically. But when she began to greet her, Mrs. Karena didn't understand a word. She knew only as much Spanish as Emmanuel's mother could claim to know English. Or less. Sometimes, Emmanuel's mother learned, she would insert a few Spanish words here and there while speaking to the children, and when a child had trouble understanding English, her assistant Chela was there to translate. She could also manage a few convenient commands (*¡Siéntense, Roberto! ¡Aquí, Hector! ¡Cálmate, Alicia!*

¡Cállase, clase!) but could not by any means carry on a conversation. Her stocky figure and raspy voice sometimes intimidated Alejandra, who was always taken aback by the resemblance to her own mother. How frightening to know a woman whose leather-wrinkled skin and broad crescent smile reminded her so exactly of Mamá, and yet who spoke her language only with a thick accent if at all.

Now Mrs. Karena opens the car door for Emmanuel and reaches around his head for the seatbelt. "Okaaaay, Emmanuel, let's see, we *always* ride with our seatbelts, right? Remember how we always ride with our seatbelts on whenever we go on a fieldtrip?" She has to stretch the chest strap behind his head and fit the bottom strap around his tucked knees. "You tell your Mama if she forgets," she winks at Emmanuel's mother, "you tell her how we always ride with our seatbelts *on* for our *safety*, because *safety* is very important. Remember what we learned today about safety?" He nods and stares up at her, his mouth turned down in tight, serious slopes. She pats his head, looks up, and smiles broadly. "Ok, *buenas tardes, Señora.*" She gestures vaguely with one hand, the other clutching the car door as she leans down. "*Su coche es muy bonito,*" she whispers loudly. "*Oh!*" Emmanuel's mother is always nervous when she is spoken to by Mrs. Karena in Spanish. She is slow to recognize the thick pronunciation and yet anxious to show she appreciates the effort. She has trouble thinking. "*Gracias*," she smiles, turns the collar down on Emmanuel's shirt, fumbling, nodding. "*Muchas gracias.*" She has more to say. The car is not beautiful at all! It is ugly, old, rusted, loud – astonishingly, thoroughly used. She smiles more, and laughs too loudly at everything she cannot say about the car. Mrs. Karena laughs with her while Emmanuel begins to look under her arm for Alan who is chasing Devon Andrews all the way over to the Chapulines pickup. Emmanuel's mother takes a breath and holds it, brushes her hair behind her ears, and wipes her mouth. What was it, what was it, what was it… "We see you tomorrow, Mrs. Karena." She laughs a little, fingers fluttering down her throat as if it were to blame. "Sí, adiós, Emmanuel! Adiós, Señora Dresca!" Comes the raspy reply, with a slam of the door and a quick wave from outside the window.

During the drive home, Emmanuel is tirelessly fascinated with his new transport. He rolls the automatic windows up and down, rearranges the air vents, pulls the levers that push his seat forward, backward, and reclining. When his mother asks him if he would like to hear more of the new music tape she found yesterday, he asks her if she can press the horn so he knows what it sounds like. She puts the tape in anyway, lets him roll all the windows down, and doesn't seem to mind that he frowns at the Billie Holiday, sticks his fingers in his ears, and groans when it tells him, *Maybe you would call a true confession, an indiscretion on someone's part…but if I'm to say how madly I adore you, let's call a heart a heart.*

∞ ∞ ∞

Emmanuel's mother rode in a car for the first time when they paid the Coyote to take them across the border. She was only nineteen years old and just married when Armando decided they would move to the United States. Beto Jiménez, her husband's cousin, had written a letter smudged with oily fingerprints and stained blurry in the middle. He wrote of his new job he had found in the city where he was staying, somewhere in America. Emmanuel's mother and father didn't know at first exactly which city it was, because of the stain and because there was no return address. But the rest they could read. He had gotten a job working on the railroad, loading the railroad cars. It is not difficult to find work, Beto told them. There is a Boulevard, he told them. So one week later, they left.

Of the journey, she remembers only how very barren and endless the passing landscape was, like the rambling improvising attempts of an amateur musician. No style or direction. No provocation. Holding your breath for no good reason. The Coyote who smuggled them across had been a very thick, leathery man. Water-eyed and sunken-faced. From underneath his wide-brimmed cowboy hat, he had inhaled and exhaled a cigarette without ever removing it from his mouth except to replace it when it had dwindled to only the smallest of stubs.

They arrived at the city in the very dead of the night – when the light of the street lamps and store signs shone eerily over the still silence of the Boulevard. Armando's cousin had arranged to meet them in the parking lot across from a strip of restaurants, next to a liquor store. So they stood there, huddled, nervous, anticipating every infrequent, passing car, waiting

for him to come. They stood beneath the rafters of the I-35 bridge over the parking lot, listened to the gentle rumble of highway traffic. They stood as the liquor sign flashed its discount wine specials and a small stone church down the street offered them its glowing cross of Christmas lights. They stood as a train passed over another bridge at the end of the Boulevard, tearing its way through the night, sending the sparrows shrieking to the rafters, sending a sudden roar of sound into the darkness.

After Emmanuel was born, they went for walks down the restaurant and shop district along the Boulevard, where the sidewalks were wide and tiled in different colors of cement. They would go past the liquor store, with bright flashing lights chasing each other around the advertisements. She would take him down beneath the rail tracks and highway bridges, in the parking lot with grafitti and scattered bits of broken glass. She would talk to him. *Here is where I work*. She'd say a loud. *Here is where your father works. Here is the street where you must never walk, the glass which you must never step on.* Sometimes he looked interested, squinting up at the rafters under the bridge, or peeking around the straps of his carrier to see inside the bars. As if he had come from another world and was quietly comparing the two. Other times he would sleep. His head would drop forward, and his drool would soak through the canvas of the carrier. Still she kept talking. Still she kept explaining, as if through his dreams he might still accept her explanations.

He had always been a quiet baby, easy, and it had often been excruciating. She would wake in the middle of the night, poised and ready with her mother-ears. Waiting for a scream or a cry or a gurgle, however distant. When it wouldn't come, she would rise anyway, tiptoe across the hall - then wooden and cold without the cushion of carpet - and slip through his door. There in the doorway, feet from where he lay, she could hear the soft baby snores lifting and lowering the darkness.

She would only stand there a little while, she'd tell herself. Now go back to bed. But she never would. Never did. She would creep to his bedside, needed to touch him, rub his round and warm baby back and belly. And then that wouldn't be enough either. She'd have to uncurl his tiny fingers from the folds of the cotton Yankee Baseball blanket they had picked up

at Goodwill for fifty cents. She'd have to cradle one hand underneath his heavy, damp head and the other around his back and bottom. She would have to. And then, because there was no other furniture besides the crib back then, she'd stand in the middle of the room, cradling her baby, swaying back and forth, back and forth. When she tired, she would sit on the floor, finally, lean against the cold wall, her back chilled but her chest and belly warm and glowing. Pulling her arms close around the soft-smelling skin, curling every part of her body in towards where he lay, tucked against her breasts. And she wouldn't sleep. No not even then. She would hold and hold and hold some more. Wonder at the whiteness of his small fleshy fingers and toes, the smoothness of the skin. She'd look at the lines in her own palms and knuckles and trace the baby's fingertips along the creases. *This is where I have been*, she wanted to tell him. *Do you know me now?* Until her palms and arms were damp with the heat and her nerves began to tingle. And not then, but when she felt she finally could, she would cradle him in the crook of one arm, stand slowly, try to do without the support of the wall to steady her, test the strength of her calves and thighs. And snoring still, he would be lowered into the crib again, tucked safely underneath the fuzzed and frayed heap of blanket. But not before being kissed on the forehead, on the cheeks, on the nose, on the mouth, on the ears, on the eyes, on the belly, on the head. Delicate. He never awoke. Not even a sigh.

∞ ∞ ∞

On the sidewalk outside their house, somebody long ago had carved "Jesus Loves You" into the once wet cement. 'Loves' represented by a heart apostrophe s. It is written in large loopy handwriting, as if by an elementary student practicing letters, or a drunk man getting sentimental. The left side of the heart arches significantly higher than the right. When they step from the car, Alejandra is careful to avoid this somewhat out-of-place inscription, but pauses a moment to touch the tip of the Y with her toe, tentatively, as if testing ocean water or prodding some fragile, unknown specimen.

In the front yard, two of Beto's sons are kicking a soccer ball while their sister rides her tricycle obliviously through and around their game. The obstacle of uneven ground, roots,

rocks, and tall weeds don't seem to bother her. There are no adults outside – Beto or Eva or any of the neighbors – and this worries Emmanuel's mother. But she doesn't like to say anything about it. She knows she worries too much. She lets Emmanuel play with the others and restrains the urge to warn them to keep the game out of the street. When they tire of the game, she lets them sit inside the car and press the button controls and turn the wheel and honk the horn. They simulate the whine of acceleration with their high-pitched voices. They lean to each side and tumble under the seat for habitual crashes. Beto's sons teach Emmanuel how to make big explosion noises by puffing his cheeks and hissing through his teeth. Even when they have left the car and resumed the ball game, Emmanuel continues to show off his new trick. Every few minutes, when the ball hits him, he will dramatically explode and look to see if his mother is watching. Though such an action probably should not ease her worry, it does. He is skinnier than the others, paler, and looks all the more comical as his tiny body convulses with each explosion and his arms billow out from his body.

With the ground still damp from rain, the children slip and fall frequently, but don't seem to mind. They make it a kind of game: who has the muddiest hands, arms, and legs. Who has the most battle wounds. The younger sister continues to push her bicycle around their game and across every last square inch of the small, sloping yard.

Across the street, a couple comes out to sit on their porch. They settle in opposite rocking chairs and the woman props her feet in the man's lap. In the yard a few houses down, someone lets a small, indignant dog out to pace expectantly back and forth in front of the chain-linked fence. When a car drives by and gives two short honks, the dog races to the corner of its fence and tries to yip menacingly. Emmanuel's mother feels relieved by the activity, as if, through these noises, they are protected.

A wind has picked up since they've been home, rustling through the leaves of the oak tree next door, and sending small creaks of resistance through the frame of their house. Emmanuel's mother leans back and rests her head against the porch siding. Perhaps unconsciously, she closes her eyes to the steady waves of wind that wash across her face and hair. The shouts of the children are distant. Strangely rhythmic. Comforting.

Emmanuel's mother wakes to find the children still playing as they had been. She calls to Beto's oldest son, asking him if anyone else is home to look after him. He peers up at her, having just caught the ball to his chest, clutching it fiercely with mud-caked fingers. "Luíz," he tells her and hurls the ball at his younger brother, resuming the frenzy of the game. At the sound of his name, Beto's younger brother appears in the doorway with an open carton of orange juice hanging at his side. He squints towards the children, then notices Emmanuel's mother on the other side of the porch. "Hola, Ali," he nods and leans against the door frame, raising the carton to his mouth. He is seventeen, but not a school boy. He has been working with his older brother for two years at the rail yards. Sure, Ali, he tells her. I'll take care of them.

She decides she can afford the fifteen minutes it will take to pick Armando up from the factory. Surprise him. She tells the children to listen to Luíz while she is gone, that she will be back soon. Inside the car, she rolls all the windows up, checks both mirrors, clicks her turn signal on, and shifts the car into drive. All very slowly and precisely. Only then does she replace the Billie Holiday tape in the deck and listen attentively as it tells her: *No regrets, Sweetheart, no matter what! you say or do…I know our love will linger when the other love forgets, so I say goodbye with no regrets.* She wishes she could understand what the singer was celebrating.

She pulls into the parking lot behind the factory and feels there is something unordinary and wrong about the stillness of the place. On any other day, she would have expected to see the activity inside the factory spilling outside – men lifting crates of materials in and out of the building, delivery trucks pulling up, potential workers pacing, laughing, smoking cigarettes, hoping for a job not yet offered them. But not now. Not today. Today no one carries equipment back and forth, unloads supplies, loiters near the wall facing the parking lot. No one whistles or shouts at her as she gets out of the car, no one calls through the door to tell Armando she is here. And no one warns her not to go inside. So she does.

The first thing she sees is a man in a white collared shirt and dark pants, some kind of security belt fastened around his waste, a badge of identifaction on his breast pocket. He opens the door to let her in and nods awkwardly when she enters. He looks uncomfortable in his uniform – his dark hair is damp near the ends, around the temples and the back of his neck. After he closes the door behind her, he clasps his hands in front of him and appears to be intensely concentrating on the conversation taking place.

Standing opposite the desk, palms pressed down on the surface of it, is another man she has never seen before. He wears a uniform similar to the one of the man who opened the door, and leans over a haphazard arrangement of papers. Sitting at the desk is a third man, not uniformed, whom Alejandra recognizes as one of the factory's two commissioners. She enters to hear the commissioner speaking words she had long since learned to dread, "proof of citizenship," and becomes instantly wary. Armando had told her once about the unannounced raids th! rough factories and production plants and other businesses known to employ people who came from other countries.

Neither of them look up immediately when she enters. They seem reluctant to acknowledge her at all. The commissioner gathers the papers into a tidier stack before he glances in her direction. "Be with you shortly."

Alejandra turns back to the man standing guard next to the door to see him straighten with a sharp intake of breath and relax again with a small, inaudible sigh. Maybe she is mistaken, but she thinks he is relieved, if only very slightly, by her presence. Feeling her glance, the man turns to her. "Excuse me, miss, I think if you are waiting for someone, you'd better come back another time." She opens her mouth to reply, I am here for my husband, Armando Dresca, but then thinks better of mentioning his name. She nods and turns toward the door, reaching for the handle, when the commissioner calls to her, "Oh, Mrs. Dresca? I'm sorry I didn't recognize you." Her hand rests on the door handle and she stares at the commissioner blankly. "Looking for Armando?" They know her name, they know his name. She cannot think of how to answer. "He went on a supply run to the warehouse." The warehouse! The man on the other side of the commissioners desk turns his head to face Alejandra. His face and neck are thick; she sees no sympathy in his features. Why did he turn? She wonders, does he expect

her to take him to the warehouse? She takes a step back and pushes the door open. "I don't expect him back here," the commissioner calls, "I expect he'll be home – " he is interrupted by the sound of shouting through the door in the entrance room that leads to the rest of the factory, and the rest of his sentence is lost. *No talking! No hablen!* She hears before she pulls her coat tight across her chest and step! s out the door.

In the parking lot, she stops before she reaches the car. Her heart beats and her stomach turns with the thought, *I should not have left*. The guilt that crept into her mind from the commissioner's words has continued to take root and expand grossly within her. She faces the factory, but does not move. Above the sound of the traffic on the bridge overhead, the music playing from the speakers in the window of the car shop across the street, the silence she thought so strange when she arrived, she strains her ears and listens for more shouts, or for some signal that would let her know what to do.

Suddenly, in one of the second story windows on the side of the building where men lingered and waited for work, she sees someone cutting through the screen. The slashes make quick, nervous tears in the wire mesh, until two hands grope for loose edges and begin to pull away at the tears. When the opening is large enough, the hands disappear and two boots emerge through the torn, jagged screen edges, knees on the window sill, and the body remains there, balanced for a moment before the legs swing down and a man hangs by both hands from the brick sill outside the window. He looks down, doesn't see her, and lets go of the sill. He lands on his feet, crouches and rolls to absorb the impact of the fall, but springs to his feet and begins running in the same fluent motion. He is tall and thin, and Alejandra doesn't see his face or recognize him.

Without realizing it, she starts walking, running towards him. She stops when she reaches the end of the lot, and wants to call that he should jump in the car with her, that she would speed him off to safety faster than his own legs could carry him, but he was already too far for her voice to reach him. She runs back to the car, jerks the door open, struggles into the seat and presses both palms on the fleshy part of the steering wheel rapidly. Wait! *Wait!* But the man doesn't understand her signal, thinks that she means to capture him instead of rescue

him, and runs faster. Still, she doesn't stop until he has turned the corner several blocks down the street and is out of sight.

Inside the car, the silence feels heavy against the blares of her car horn that seem to still be reverberating in the space around her. She stares through the windshield and tries to remember how to drive a car, but all she can think of is Mrs. Martinez with a shopping bag of flowers, and the thick, unmerciful face of the man standing next to the commissioner's desk.

The commissioner was lying, but Armando was safe. He and four other people were getting ready to leave for the warehouse when the officers arrived. They were outside the factory when the officers came around to all the back entrances and locked the doors, moving too quickly to notice them.

Armando laughs when he tells her about the men outside, the unemployed ones who worked from one extra job to the next, who took one good look at the uniformed officers emerging from their cars, and ran all the way four blocks down to the post office before they had slammed the car doors shut. Four blocks! He runs his fingers through his hair and shakes his head and laughs. Some important letters! But she was there. She knows. And she can see the terror in his gestures, in his memory of the man who scrambled his way up to the window, looking for a portal to freedom, looking for the welcome of a two-story fall, escaping – absurdly – from the place that had once rescued him.

∞ ∞ ∞

That night Armando wants to take her out with some of his friends from work and their wives or girlfriends. Who will take care of Emmanuel? she asks. He is asleep, he answers, and besides, he thinks Luíz will not be going out. What do you mean he's not going out? He's always out. I don't want him taking care of the baby. He's only a boy. What if those officers came? What could *Luíz* do? He's not out, Alejandra.

All of his friends have children at home, too, she thinks. Emmanuel's little friend Alan is the son of Julian, who, Armando tells her, will drive them tonight. Tomás has short, fat little

Roberto whose hair has grown too long and who always has a cold. Mario has Emily, his wide-eyed, ears-pierced little girl with the American name, who quietly refuses to speak English and cries big beautiful teardrops when her father leaves her at daycare every morning…

Where are they going? El Azulejo. The small corner restaurant with the plastic wooden booths, skinny teenaged waitresses, and year-round Christmas decorations. I'm tired, she tells him. We won't stay long, he says, getting her coat, just a while. Just a little while.

Armando disappears for a moment into Emmanuel's bedroom, leaving her by the door. When he returns, he holds the tape player and is trailed by a protesting Emmanuel, who claims the toy is his. Setting the player on the small living room table, he looks over his shoulder at Emmanuel's mother, then clicks the green triangle "play" button. It is the tape Emmanuel has checked out from the Music Corner at Osos Pequeños. They wait motionless for a few seconds until a few short dissonant chords sound through the speakers and "Let the Good Times Roll" begins. *Come on, baby, let the good times roll. Come on, baby let me thrill your soul*… Emmanuel puts his hands on his hips and swivels them back and forth in an odd, awkward kind of dance. His face is serious, his eyes lowered in concentration.

He hums the syllables as he hears them and tugs on his parents' hands that they join him. So Armando squats down and begins twisting, his arms stretched out on either side for balance, and Alejandra claps to the music, to a rhythm different from the one her husband hears or her son, or the one the musicians heard when they were recording the track.

Feels so good, when you're home. Come on, baby – rock me all night lo-ho-ho-hohooong! Emmanuel takes his hands off his waist and waves them in the air, stretching his shoulders and lifting his arms high. Manuelito. Que guapo! "He's gonna break hearts, this boy," Mrs. Karena had said.

Mario and Daniela, Armando and Alejandra, and Julian and Tomás who have come alone enter the restaurant huddled together in a tight knot against the cold. Once inside, they stand for a few moments, stamp their feet, rub their upper arms. Mario shakes his body in one tremendous, shuddering shiver, giving a horse-snort through his mouth and jerking his head.

He wraps his arms around Daniela and leans his chin down in the curve between her head and shoulder.

The waitress finishes scribbling something behind the counter and steps around to greet them. She wears tight jeans and a blouse, and a small, one-pocket apron. Big crowd for a Tuesday, she says over her shoulder, leading them to a booth. What's the big celebration?

After their plates have been cleared and they are waiting for more drinks, Emmanuel's mother unfolds her hand from underneath her chin and, with one elbow resting on the table, dangles her fingers above the candle flame. It is a sharp and abrupt heat – very small and powerful. She takes her hand away, but not so far that she cannot feel its warmth. With her palm, she cups the light to the side of the candle, quickly passes first one, then all of her fingers through the flame, making it dance towards her fingertips. In the light of the small piece of fire set on their table and all the others, shadows around the room, silhouettes of the people, quiver and lurch, rise and fall, grow big and shrink fast. While the bodies remain – talking, laughing, eating, staring, smiling – perfectly, perfectly still. Two very different lives they are living, she thinks, these shadows and these faces.

Armando has been telling a story and now the table erupts in all the different laughter of the company. Julian slaps the table with his palm and throws his head back. Mario grins and shakes his head from side to side. Tomás leans forward and howls, raising his brows and rolling into a thick deep laugh, rocking back and forth. And Daniela's usually low and soft laugh raises in both volume and pitch with the number of drinks they have all had. She shrieks and calls to Emmanuel's mother from across the table – much louder than the distance between them deems necessary. Several times she begins to address her – Ali! Alejandra, he, you found – and then her voice is drowned in the currents of laughter she cannot seem to stop from bubbling up in her throat. And Emmanuel's mother finds she cannot stop the laughter either. She has missed the story entirely, and yet the absurd hilarity of it runs through her throat, waters her eyes. She doesn't try to resist it, this something pouring from her, uncontrollably, caught in the exhilarating relief of it. Yet for minutes they continue – long after the elation of laughing has passed her, when among their shrieks, through the tears puddling in the corners of

their eyes, she hears Armando's voice. In a high, shaky vibrato it dips and rises so abruptly – she almost doesn't recognize it for the complete gracelessness. For the absurdity of the sound. "*What a night, what a moon, what a boy!*" he cries in a sloping, slurred, jagged English, then turns towards her and clutches both of her shoulders, "*Someday when I'm awfully low, when the world is cold,"* his face is just inches from hers, his stubbled chin and upper lip, some residue of oil and exhaust still lacing his hair and skin, "*I will feel a glow just thinking of you and the waaaay you look tonight.*" Then his hands drop suddenly, almost pushing her away, and a new wave of elation drowns them again, tightening knots in their stomachs and throats, making them weep, making them helpless to anything else. Through her tears, Emmanuel's mother can see the flame of the candle. Blurred into a round, contained circle of light like the watercolor pictures in a children's book. Was it tonight she had read that Christmas story to Emmanuel? Christmas For Buddy Bear. How ridiculous to read a Christmas story in early March! She laughs harder.

On the far side of the room, the waitress stoops over on the counter, resting her elbows and cradling her chin in her palm. She runs her fingers through her hair, leans her head down, and twists a few strands through her fingers. She freezes for a moment, looking out the window at the empty street and sallow greenish lights. She glances towards their table quickly, then turns her back, and begins to smooth the countertop with the backs and palms of her hands. The Christmas lights wound around the doorway project colliding pools of color onto her thick black hair. Sometime, Emmanuel's mother does not know when, her laughing and weeping has become weeping alone. Or has it? Is she crying? Is she laughing? Could there be no difference? That girl is too young for here, she thinks. *Where did you come from!* She shouts at the girl in her head. *Why are you here! What are you doing here! You answer me!* But the girl does not turn around and the blinking lights continue to play themselves across the back of her head.

Through the glass of the door, framed by the orange and blue and yellow and red bulbs, Emmanuel's mother can see the houses across the street, dark and asleep. Above the frost collecting on the glass of the door she can see them. And in this secret frame they do not know they are in, they seem to glow. There is no fence, she notices, just a walk to the door. Maybe

steps. She could push through the frosted, lighted door. Walk across the street. Climb the steps. Knock on the door of a house with blue shingling and shuttered windows and no fence. She could. "I'm here!" She would shout in their faces as they would open the door for her. "*I'm here*!" Opening her arms wide. And they might just smile, laugh, throw their heads back, cry. "You!" they would shout back, "You! Alejandra! You are here!" She could.

"Ali?" Something tugs at her arm. "Alejandra?" Armando questions her again and again. They have to go, they are going, they have to leave now. Now, Alejandra. Until finally, she has withdrawn from the house across the street, climbed back down the steps, pushed back through the restaurant doors, sits down at this table, turns to him – and nods.

And as they step through the faintly orange and red and green doorway, into the dark cold of the night, she wonders if the teenaged boy remembered to give Emmanuel his picture books before bed. If he remembered to tuck him in.