

## *I*

Years later you would wonder if it hadn't been for your brother would you have done it? You remember how all the other guys had hated on her—how skinny she was, no culo, no titties, como un palito but your brother didn't care. I'd fuck her.

You'd fuck anything, someone jeered.

And he had given that someone the eye. You make that sound like it's a bad thing.

## *2*

Your brother. Dead now a year and sometimes you still feel a fulgurating sadness over it even though he really was a super asshole at the end. He didn't die easy at all. Those last months he just steady kept trying to run away. They would catch him trying to hail a cab outside of Beth Israel or walking down some Newark street in his greens. Once he conned an ex-girlfriend into driving him to California but outside of

Camden he started having convulsions and she called you in a panic. Was it some atavistic impulse to die alone, out of sight? Or was he just trying to fulfill something that had always been inside of him? Why are you doing that? you asked but he just laughed. Doing what?

In those last weeks when he finally became too feeble to run away he refused to talk to you or your mother. Didn't utter a single word until he died. Your mother did not care. She loved him and prayed over him and talked to him like he was still OK. But it wounded you, that stubborn silence. His last fucking days and he wouldn't say a word. You'd ask him something straight up, How are you feeling today, and Rafa would just turn his head. Like you all didn't deserve an answer. Like no one did.

### 3

You were at the age where you could fall in love with a girl over an expression, over a gesture. That's what happened with your girlfriend, Paloma—she stooped to pick up her purse and your heart flew out of you.

That's what happened with Miss Lora, too.

It was 1985. You were sixteen years old and you were messed up and alone like a motherfucker. You also were convinced—like totally utterly convinced—that the world was going to

blow itself to pieces. Almost every night you had nightmares that made the ones the president was having in *Dreamscape* look like pussyplay. In your dreams the bombs were always going off, evaporating you while you walked, while you ate a chicken wing, while you took the bus to school, while you fucked Paloma. You would wake up biting your own tongue in terror, the blood dribbling down your chin.

Someone really should have medicated you.

Paloma thought you were being ridiculous. She didn't want to hear about Mutual Assured Destruction, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, We begin bombing in five minutes, SALT II, *The Day After*, *Threads*, *Red Dawn*, *WarGames*, *Gamma World*, any of it. She called you Mr. Depressing. And she didn't need any more depressing than she had already. She lived in a one-bedroom apartment with four younger siblings and a disabled mom and she was taking care of all of them. That and honors classes. She didn't have time for *anything* and mostly stayed with you, you suspected, because she felt bad for what had happened with your brother. It's not like you ever spent much time together or had sex or anything. Only Puerto Rican girl on the earth who wouldn't give up the ass for any reason. I can't, she said. I can't make *any mistakes*. Why is sex with me a mistake, you demanded, but she just shook her head, pulled your hand out of her pants. Paloma was convinced that if she made *any mistakes* in the next two years, *any mistakes at all*, she would be stuck in that family of hers forever. That was *her*

nightmare. Imagine if I don't get in anywhere, she said. You'd still have me, you tried to reassure her, but Paloma looked at you like the apocalypse would be preferable.

So you talked about Coming Doomsday to whoever would listen—to your history teacher, who claimed he was building a survival cabin in the Poconos, to your boy who was stationed in Panama (in those days you still wrote letters), to your around-the-corner neighbor, Miss Lora. That was what connected you two at first. She listened. Better still, she had read *Alas, Babylon* and had seen part of *The Day After*, and both had scared her monga.

*The Day After* wasn't scary, you complained. It was crap. You can't survive an airburst by ducking under a dashboard.

Maybe it was a miracle, she said, playing.

A miracle? That was just dumbness. What you need to see is *Threads*. Now that is some real shit.

I probably wouldn't be able to stand it, she said. And then she put her hand on your shoulder.

People always touched you. You were used to it. You were an amateur weightlifter, something else you did to keep your mind off the shit of your life. You must have had a mutant gene somewhere in the DNA, because all the lifting had turned you into a goddamn circus freak. Most of the time it didn't bother you, the way girls and sometimes guys felt you up. But with Miss Lora you could tell something was different.

Miss Lora touched you and you suddenly looked up and

noticed how large her eyes were on her thin face, how long her lashes were, how one iris had more bronze in it than the other.

## 4

Of course you knew her; she was your neighbor, taught over at Sayreville HS. But it was only in the past months that she snapped into focus. There were a lot of these middle-aged single types in the neighborhood, shipwrecked by every kind of catastrophe, but she was one of the few who didn't have children, who lived alone, who was still kinda young. Something must have happened, your mother speculated. In her mind a woman with no child could only be explained by vast untrammelled calamity.

Maybe she just doesn't like children.

Nobody likes children, your mother assured you. That doesn't mean you don't have them.

Miss Lora wasn't nothing exciting. There were about a thousand viejas in the neighborhood way hotter, like Mrs. del Orbe, whom your brother had fucked silly until her husband found out and moved the whole family away. Miss Lora was too skinny. Had no hips whatsoever. No breasts, either, no ass, even her hair failed to make the grade. She had her eyes, sure, but what she was most famous for in the neighborhood were her

muscles. Not that she had huge ones like you—chick was just wiry like a motherfucker, every single fiber standing out in outlandish definition. Bitch made Iggy Pop look chub, and every summer she caused a serious commotion at the pool. Always a bikini despite her curvelessness, the top stretching over these corded pectorals and the bottom cupping a rippling fan of haunch muscles. Always swimming underwater, the black waves of her hair flowing behind her like a school of eel. Always tanning herself (which none of the other women did) into the deep lacquered walnut of an old shoe. That woman needs to keep her clothes on, the mothers complained. She's like a plastic bag full of worms. But who could take their eyes off her? Not you or your brother. The kids would ask her, Are you a bodybuilder, Miss Lora? and she would shake her head behind her paperback. Sorry, guys, I was just born this way.

After your brother died she came over to the apartment a couple of times. She and your mother shared a common place, La Vega, where Miss Lora had been born and where your mother had recuperated after the Guerra Civil. One full year living just behind the Casa Amarilla had made a vegana out of your mother. I still hear the Río Camú in my dreams, your mother said. Miss Lora nodded. I saw Juan Bosch once on our street when I was very young. They sat and talked about it to death. Every now and then she stopped you in the parking lot. How are you doing? How is your mother? And you never

knew what to say. Your tongue was always swollen, raw, from being blown to atoms in your sleep.

## 5

Today you come back from a run to find her on the stoop, talking to la Doña. Your mother calls you. Say hello to the profesora.

I'm sweaty, you protest.

Your mother flares. Who in carajo do you think you're talking to? Say hello, coño, to la profesora.

Hello, profesora.

Hello, student.

She laughs and turns back to your mother's conversation.

You don't know why you're so furious all of a sudden.

I could curl you, you say to her, flexing your arm.

And Miss Lora looks at you with a ridiculous grin. What in the world are you talking about? I'm the one who could pick *you* up.

She puts her hands on your waist and pretends to make the effort.

Your mother laughs thinly. But you can feel her watching the both of you.

## 6

When your mother had confronted your brother about Mrs. del Orbe he didn't deny it. What do you want, Ma? Se metió por mis ojos.

Por mis ojos my ass, she had said. Tu te metiste por su culo.

That's true, your brother admitted cheerily. Y por su boca.

And then your mother punched him, helpless with shame and fury, which only made him laugh.

## 7

It is the first time any girl ever wanted you. And so you sit with it. Let it roll around in the channels of your mind. This is nuts, you say to yourself. And later, absently, to Paloma. She doesn't hear you. You don't really know what to do with the knowledge. You ain't your brother, who would have run right over and put a rabo in Miss Lora. Even though you know, you're scared you're wrong. You're scared she'd laugh at you.

So you try to keep your mind off her and the memory of her bikinis. You figure the bombs will fall before you get a chance to do shit. When they don't fall, you bring her up to Paloma in



a last-ditch effort, tell her la profesora has been after you. It feels very convincing, that lie.

That old fucking hag? That's *disgusting*.

You're telling me, you say in a forlorn tone.

That would be like fucking a stick, she says.

It would be, you confirm.

You better not fuck her, Paloma warns you after a pause.

What are you talking about?

I'm just telling you. Don't fuck her. You know I'll find out. You're a terrible liar.

Don't be a crazy person, you say, glaring. I'm not fucking anyone. Clearly.

That night you are allowed to touch Paloma's clit with the tip of your tongue but that's it. She holds your head back with the force of her whole life and eventually you give up, demoralized.

It tasted, you write your boy in Panama, like beer.

You add an extra run to your workout, hoping it will cool your granos, but it doesn't work. You have a couple dreams where you are about to touch her but then the bomb blows NYC to kingdom come and you watch the shock wave roll up and then you wake, your tongue clamped firmly between your teeth.

And then you are coming back from Chicken Holiday with a four-piece meal, a drumstick in your mouth, and there she is

walking out of Pathmark, wrestling a pair of plastic bags. You consider bolting but your brother's law holds you in place. *Never run*. A law he ultimately abrogated but which you right now cannot. You ask meekly: You want help with that, Miss Lora?

She shakes her head. It's my exercise for the day. You walk back together in silence and then she says: When are you going to come by to show me that movie?

What movie?

The one you said is the real one. The nuclear war movie.

Maybe if you were someone else you would have the discipline to duck the whole thing but you are your father's son and your brother's brother. Two days later you are home and the silence in there is terrible and it seems like the same commercial for fixing tears in your car upholstery is on. You shower, shave, dress.

I'll be back.

Your mom is looking at your dress shoes. Where are you going?

Out.

It's ten o'clock, she says, but you're already out the door.

You knock on the door once, twice, and then she opens up. She is wearing sweats and a Howard T-shirt and she tenses her forehead worriedly. Her eyes look like they belong on a giant's face.

You don't bother with the small talk. You just push up and kiss. She reaches around and shuts the door behind you.

Do you have a condom?

You are a worrier like that.

Nope, she says and you try to keep control but you come in her anyway.

I'm really sorry, you say.

It's OK, she whispers, her hands on your back, keeping you from pulling out. Stay.

## 8

Her apartment is about the neatest place you've ever seen and for its lack of Caribbean craziness could be inhabited by a white person. On her walls she has a lot of pictures of her travels and her siblings and they all seem incredibly happy and square. So you're the rebel? you ask her and she laughs. Something like that.

There are also pictures of some guys. A few you recognize from when you were younger and about them you say nothing.

She is very quiet, very reserved while she fixes you a cheeseburger. Actually, I hate my family, she says, squashing the patty down with a spatula until the grease starts popping.

You wonder if she feels like you do. Like it might be love. You put on *Threads* for her. Get ready for some real shit, you say.

Get ready for me to hide, she responds, but you two only last an hour before she reaches over and takes off your glasses and kisses you. This time your wits are back so you try to find the strength to fight her off.

I can't, you say.

And just before she pops your rabo in her mouth she says: Really?

You try to think of Paloma, so exhausted that every morning she falls asleep on the ride to school. Paloma, who still found the energy to help you study for your SAT. Paloma, who didn't give you any ass because she was terrified that if she got pregnant she wouldn't abort it out of love for you and then her life would be over. You're trying to think of her but what you're doing is holding Miss Lora's tresses like reins and urging her head to keep its wonderful rhythm.

You really do have an excellent body, you say after you blow your load.

Why, thank you. She motions with her head. You want to go into the bedroom?

Even more fotos. None of them will survive the nuclear blast, you are sure. Nor will this bedroom, whose window faces toward New York City. You tell her that. Well, we'll just have to make do, she says. She gets naked like a pro and once you start she closes her eyes and rolls her head around like it's on a broken hinge. She clasps your shoulders with a nailed grip as

strong as shit and you know that after, your back is going to look like it's been whipped.

Then she kisses your chin.

## 9

Both your father and your brother were sucios. Shit, your father used to take you on his pussy runs, leave you in the car while he ran up into cribs to bone his girlfriends. Your brother was no better, boning girls in the bed next to yours. Sucios of the worst kind and now it's official: you are one, too. You had hoped the gene missed you, skipped a generation, but clearly you were kidding yourself. The blood always shows, you say to Paloma on the ride to school next day. Yuniior, she stirs from her doze, I don't have time for your craziness, OK?

## 10

You figure you can keep it to a one-time thing. But the next day you go right back. You sit gloomily in her kitchen while she fixes you another cheeseburger.

Are you going to be OK? she asks.

I don't know.

It's just supposed to be fun.

I have a girlfriend.

You told me, remember?

She puts the plate on your lap, regards you critically. You know, you look like your brother. I'm sure people tell you that all the time.

Some people.

I couldn't believe how good-looking he was. He knew it, too. It was like he never heard of a shirt.

This time you don't even ask about the condom. You just come inside her. You are surprised at how pissed you are. But she kisses your face over and over and it moves you. No one has ever done that. The girls you boned, they were always ashamed afterward. And there was always panic. Someone heard. Fix the bed up. Open the windows. Here there is none of that.

Afterward, she sits up, her chest as unadorned as yours. So what else do you want to eat?

## *II*

You try to be reasonable. You try to control yourself, to be smooth. But you're at her apartment every fucking day. The

one time you try to skip, you recant and end up slipping out of your apartment at three in the morning and knocking furtively on her door until she lets you in. You know I work, right? I know, you say, but I dreamed that something happened to you. That's sweet of you to lie, she sighs and even though she is falling asleep she lets you bone her straight in the ass. Fucking amazing, you keep saying for all four seconds it takes you to come. You have to pull my hair while you do it, she confides. That makes me shoot like a rocket.

It should be the greatest thing, so why are your dreams worse? Why is there more blood in the sink in the morning?

You learn a lot about her life. She came up with a Dominican doctor father who was crazy. Her mother left them for an Italian waiter, fled to Rome, and that was it for pops. Always threatening to kill himself and at least once a day she would have to beg him not to and that had messed her up but good. In her youth she'd been a gymnast and there was even talk of making the Olympic team, but then the coach robbed the money and the DR had to cancel for that year. I'm not claiming I would have won, she says, but I could have done something. After that bullshit she put on a foot of height and that was it for gymnastics. Then her father got a job in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and she and her three little siblings went with him. After six months he moved them in with a fat widow, una blanca asquerosa who hated Lora. She had no friends at all in school and in ninth grade she slept with her high school

history teacher. Ended up living in his house. His ex-wife was also a teacher at the school. You can only imagine what that was like. As soon as she graduated she ran off with a quiet black boy to a base in Ramstein, Germany, but that hadn't worked. To this day I think he was gay, she says. And finally after trying to make it in Berlin she came home. She moved in with a girlfriend who had an apartment in London Terrace, dated a few guys, one of her ex's old Air Force buddies who visited her on his leaves, a moreno with the sweetest disposition. When the girlfriend got married and moved away Miss Lora kept the apartment and got a teaching job. Made a conscious effort to stop moving. It was an OK life, she says, showing you the pictures. All things considered.

She is always trying to get you to talk about your brother. It will help, she says.

What is there to say? He got cancer, he died.

Well, that's a start.

She brings home college brochures from her school. She gives them to you with half the application filled out. You really need to get out of here.

Where? you ask her.

Go anywhere. Go to Alaska for all I care.

She sleeps with a mouth guard. And she covers her eyes with a mask.

If you have to go, wait till I fall asleep, OK? But after a few weeks it's Please don't go. And finally just: Stay.



And you do. At dawn you slip out of her apartment and into your basement window. Your mother doesn't have a fucking clue. In the old days she used to know everything. She had that campesino radar. Now she is somewhere else. Her grief, tending to it, takes all her time.

You are scared stupid at what you are doing but it is also exciting and makes you feel less lonely in the world. And you are sixteen and you have a feeling that now that the Ass Engine has started, no force on the earth will ever stop it.

Then your abuelo catches something in the DR and your mother has to fly home. You'll be fine, la Doña says. Miss Lora said she'd look after you.

I can cook, Ma.

No you can't. And don't bring that Puerto Rican girl in here. Do you understand?

You nod. You bring the Dominican woman in instead.

She squeals with delight when she sees the plastic-covered sofas and the wooden spoons hanging on the wall. You admit to feeling a little bad for your mother.

Of course you end up downstairs in your basement. Where your brother's things are still in evidence. She goes right for his boxing gloves.

Please put those down.

She pushes them into her face, smelling them.

You can't relax. You keep swearing that you hear your mother or Paloma at the door. It makes you stop every five minutes.

It's unsettling to wake up in your bed with her. She makes coffee and scrambled eggs and listens not to Radio WADO but to the Morning Zoo and laughs at everything. It's too strange. Paloma calls to see if you are going to school and Miss Lora is walking around in a T-shirt, her flat skinny rump visible.

## *12*

Then your senior year she gets a job at your high school. Of course. To say it is strange is to say nada. You see her in the halls and your heart goes through you. That's your neighbor? Paloma asks. God, she's fucking looking at you. The old whore. At the school the Spanish girls are the ones who give her trouble. They make fun of her accent, her clothes, her physique. (They call her Miss Pat.) She never complains about it—It's a really great job, she says—but you see the nonsense firsthand. It's just the Spanish girls, though. The whitegirls love her to death. She takes over the gymnastics team. She brings them to dance programs for inspiration. And in no time at all they start winning. One day outside the school the gymnasts are all egging her on and she does a back handspring that nearly staggers you with its perfection. It is the most beautiful thing you ever saw. Of course Mr. Everson, the science teacher, falls all over her. He's always falling over someone. For a while it was Paloma

until she threatened to report his ass. You see them laughing in the hallways, you see them having lunch in the teachers' room.

Paloma doesn't stop busting. They say Mr. Everson likes to put on dresses. You think she straps it on for him?

You girls are nuts.

She probably does strap it on.

It all makes you very tense. But it does make the sex that much better.

A few times you see Mr. Everson's car outside her apartment. Looks like Mr. Everson is in the hood, one of your boys laughs. You suddenly find yourself weak with fury. You think about fucking up his car. You think about knocking on the door. You think a thousand things. But you stay at home lifting until he leaves. When she opens the door you stalk in without saying a word to her. The house reeks of cigarettes.

You smell like shit, you say.

You walk into her bedroom but the bed is made.

Ay mi pobre, she laughs. No seas celoso.

But of course you are.

## 13

You graduate in June and she is there with your mother, clapping. She is wearing a red dress because you once told her it

was your favorite color and underneath matching underwear. Afterward she drives you both to Perth Amboy for a Mexican dinner. Paloma can't come along because her mother is sick. But you see her late that night in front of her apartment.

I did it, Paloma says, cheesing.

I'm proud of you, you say. And then you add, uncharacteristically: You are an extraordinary young woman.

That summer you and Paloma see each other maybe twice—there are no more make-out sessions. She's already gone. In August she leaves for the University of Delaware. You are not surprised when after about a week on campus she writes you a letter with the header MOVING ON. You don't even bother finishing it. You think about driving all the way down there to talk to her but you realize how hopeless that is. As might be expected, she never comes back.

You stay in the neighborhood. You land a job at Raritan River Steel. At first you have to fight the Pennsylvania hillbillies but eventually you find your footing and they leave you alone. At night you go to the bars with some of the other idiots who stuck around the neighborhood, get seriously faded, and show up at Miss Lora's door with your dick in your hand. She's still pushing the college thing, offers to pay all the admission fees but your heart ain't in it and you tell her, Not right now. She's taking night classes herself at Montclair. She's thinking of getting her Ph.D. Then you'll have to call me doctora.

Occasionally you two meet up in Perth Amboy, where

people don't know either of you. You have dinner like normal folks. You look too young for her and it kills you when she touches you in public but what can you do? She's always happy to be out with you. You know this ain't going to last, you tell her and she nods. I just want what's best for you. You try your damndest to meet other girls, telling yourself they'll help you transition, but you never meet anyone you really like.

Sometimes after you leave her apartment you walk out to the landfill where you and your brother played as children and sit on the swings. This is also the spot where Mr. del Orbe threatened to shoot your brother in the nuts. Go ahead, Rafa said, and then my brother here will shoot *you* in the pussy. Behind you in the distance hums New York City. The world, you tell yourself, will never end.

## *14*

It takes a long time to get over it. To get used to a life without a Secret. Even after it's behind you and you've blocked her completely, you're still afraid you'll slip back to it. At Rutgers, where you've finally landed, you date like crazy and every time it doesn't work out you're convinced that you have trouble with girls your own age. Because of her.

You certainly never talk about it. Until senior year when you

meet the *mujerón* of your dreams, the one who leaves her *moreno* boyfriend to date you, who drives all your little chickies out the coop. She's the one you finally trust. The one you finally tell.

They should arrest that crazy bitch.

It wasn't like that.

They should arrest her ass today.

Still it is good to tell someone. In your heart you thought she would hate you—that they would all hate you.

I don't hate you. *Tú eres mi hombre*, she says proudly.

When you two visit the apartment she brings it up to your mother. *Doña, es verdad que tu hijo taba rapando una vieja?*

Your mother shakes her head in disgust. He's just like his father and his brother.

Dominican men, right, *Doña?*

These three are worse than the rest.

Afterward, she makes you walk past Miss Lora's spot. There is a light on.

I'm going to go have a word with her, the *mujerón* says.

Don't. Please.

I'm going to go.

She bangs on the door.

*Negra*, please don't.

Answer the door! she yells.

No one does.

You don't speak to the *mujerón* for a few weeks after that.

It's one of your big breakups. But finally you're both at a Tribe Called Quest show and she sees you dancing with another girl and she waves to you and that does it. You go up to where she's seated with all her evil line sisters. She has shaved her head again.

Negra, you say.

She pulls you over to a corner. I'm sorry I got carried away. I just wanted to protect you.

You shake your head. She steps into your arms.

## 15

Graduation: it's not a surprise to see her there. What surprises you is that you didn't predict it. The instant before you and the *mujerón* join the procession you see her standing alone in a red dress. She is finally starting to put on weight; it looks good on her. Afterward, you spot her walking alone across the lawn of Old Queens, carrying a mortarboard she picked up. Your mother grabbed a second one, too. Hung it on her wall.

What happens is that in the end she moves away from London Terrace. Prices are going up. The Banglas and the Pakistanis are moving in. A few years later your mother moves, too, up to the Bergenline.

Later, after you and the *mujerón* are over, you will type her

name into the computer but she never turns up. On one DR trip you drive up to La Vega and put her name out there. You show a picture, too, like a private eye. It is of the two of you, the one time you went to the beach, to Sandy Hook. Both of you are smiling. Both of you blinked.