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Δέχομαι  
(I accept)

Marcelo is chubby and blond next to me. Behind me is a steep, steep trench. Not really a ditch, but where a river used to be. That's where the girl confessed to me that she liked me years later. She was 10 and I was 12.

"Te amo" she said.

"Oh, te amo."

Her name was Katy.

I'm six. Maybe younger. Marcelo is four. Maybe younger. It was bright. The sun filtered through the leaves and felt exactly right on my skin. It's that time of day when you feel the warmth without any other complications to your senses.

I remember turning around, twisting my head over my shoulders and seeing the mango tree. It's not a thick mango tree like you would picture it, but a skinny tall tree with green mangoes that never ripened. I walked away from the balcony where we were sitting and *Mamita* was de-feathering a chicken. She sat with a big barrel between her legs, crouching on a log, her makeshift seat. She wore an apron. Always that apron. She smiled at me and I saw her gold teeth.

(This would be so much better to write in Spanish.)

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That's not the only memory. It's just the earliest memory I have of El Salvador and the most vivid one of that time. I remember running around with my cousin in red shorts and a blue Jersey. I was barefoot. It was hot and dry. We headed towards a mango tree about 20 feet behind the tall skinny one with the unripened fruit. This one was huge. My feet were itching because of all of the leaves that had fallen from the tree. Each leaf was bigger than my hand. When I gazed down, they were brown and when I gazed up, they were green. I thought of how they turned from green to brown. The simple thought of something changing color seemed mystifying to me, but I didn't care about it long enough to seek out the answer. It looked like you could carve a full room in the trunk and the tree itself looked like 50 damn feet high.

I looked at the branches and each one looked like trunks of other trees that I had seen. I thought while I stared at it that the only way you can get a mango is if you kill yourself. The nearest branch was at least 15 feet up.

Norvin was next to me. He was my age. A little pale, scrawny kid, with short spiky hair—not that my hair was any different than his. He picked up some rocks and looked up across from the tree and threw a small rock. I heard a thud against another tree trunk.

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When we came back from our house outside of San Miguel, Maryland looked grey. I don't remember the airplane, or when we landed, or being afraid. I just remember breathing. It felt natural coming back and forth. We hadn't seen our mom in 6 months, maybe a year. *She* had left us in El Salvador with our paternal grandparents. We were still toddlers. Marcelo had barely learned to walk when *she* left us. Now he could run.

I don't remember if *she* picked us up at the airport. I don't know if *she* came back for us, or if *she* sent for us. The first thing I remember about coming back is my Uncle's beat-up blue 1990 Honda Accord and the big house beside the car that was mine.

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The first thing I remember of my dad is him throwing a snowball at me. He knocked on the door of the big house with the beat-up blue Honda and then he threw a snowball through the door when we opened it.

(Damn, my memory is so fragmented. In all kinds of meetings, they say it's because my amygdala was always flooded with adrenaline and cortisol, which suppressed the part that cements the memories.)

The fight or flight instinct became the norm.

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I was in the dark with my head down on the pillow on the top bunk, staring at the orange light that came from the electric heater, signaling that it was on. I was playing around with it with my vision, making it double by crossing my eyes. At the time, I didn't know that that's what I was doing, so I thought I was special, that I had powers. I closed my eyes and without realizing, I fell asleep.

Behind my closed eyelids, I saw flashes of light. I opened my eyes and looked to the wall which was flashing red and blue. I heard sirens. I heard my pregnant mother screaming. And, then my uncle's girlfriend came in and told us we could jump on the beds and play around, but we couldn't get out of the room. I didn't understand and I was so tired, but I was curious to know what was outside. So, I played around with Marcelo in our pajama shorts, but I tried to listen, soon forgetting what I was listening for and then just playing. When kids are on a mission they eventually forget what they are doing.

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This is where it starts to get fuzzy.

It had been several days since the incident where I heard her screaming and I hadn't seen my father.

We woke up really early. *She* told me and Marcelo to take a shower. *She* helped us get dressed. Everything went by really quickly. I was barely awake and before I knew it we arrived at a cold, square building, very grey and grim. I didn't know why, but I felt how grim it was. As we entered it, I saw a vending machine. I was craving something sweet. I asked her if I could have some money. *She* just glared back. *She* went to a desk. All I could see was the side of the desk in front of me and I wasn't interested in listening to what *she* was asking for. I just wanted to find a place to sleep. Then they took us to a room with glass windows that reminded me of a carry-out. She sat down in a chair and my father came out in an orange jumpsuit. I don't know what he said because they used the phone, but he looked very cold and distant. I didn't talk to him either. I just saw him and we went back.

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*She* was no longer pregnant. There is an unmarked grave in the cemetery on Lincoln Road.

(My sister's name would have been Jasmine.)

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Time was long, but it passed. We moved so much that I eventually lost count. I tracked our movement with each finger, but soon I moved on to counting on toes and then ran out of places I could use to keep track. Stability was something I was no longer familiar with. I had barely known it anyway. But, fear and loathing were constants.

We didn't have a big house to call our own anymore. It had been replaced with a number of damp basements and shitty apartments. My dad was no longer in the picture. He was only a peripheral character, with the instability filling in for him. As such, he couldn't offer much support and so he couldn't be the buffer that kept her at bay.

One of these apartments was a room with a large closet in it. It would be right to assume that Marcelo and I got the closet. For sleeping. After a month of living there, the whole thing started to fall apart. It started with the water being shut off, then the electricity, no entertainment, then last, the gas heat. We used bags instead of the toilet. For water, we bought bottles. For light, we used candles. It went on like this for at least two months.

Marcelo and I learned to see the "bright side" and we had fun playing classic games like hide-and-seek with a twist. With no lights, we could hide anywhere and not be found. After some time, refined commodities like flushing toilets, showers, TV, microwave, fridge didn't exist in our minds anymore. Damn. I can't remember anymore. Just a big, black blur that had no light.

When winter came, the neighbor called the city on us. *These people are living with no electricity or heat in the cold of winter.* We were evicted and taken to a shelter for two weeks. They told her if *she* returned to that house, they would "take us away." I didn't understand what that meant. Where would they take us? Would it be fun? Would the people be nice? Would we be able to return? It wasn't going to happen, so why think about it?

Despite all this, her stubbornness made her return. Although her action had no consequence, I couldn't understand her decision to return. Finally it occurred to me that I could doubt her capabilities as a mother.

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School became a silent, safe retreat. While there, I did everything I was asked to do with no objections, but it was fine. They weren't the torments that I had to suffer at home. My constant moves from school district to school district turned my below-average social life into a non-existent one. I slowly began drifting away from my peers until they were unrecognizable to me and I could not see myself in them or be part of them in any way. I didn't criticize or hate, just carried a bit of jealousy towards them. Yet, I couldn't understand their constant chatter about the latest shoes or the newest game console technology. I knew some of my classmates shared my economic situation, but I also knew they had a good family, so they couldn't understand me either.

I got bullied in fifth grade for the first time. It turned from annoying to very, very frustrating. I tried to ignore it, but it isn't possible when somebody is in your face constantly.

My retreat was being interrupted.

When recess came, he started a fight with me. I had no experience whatsoever. I had never wanted to retaliate in my life, but it was different this time. It was another *kid*. The worst of the consequences would be a suspension, but I didn't care because I could let out all my anger and my frustration for just a moment. So, I grabbed his neck, put him in a chokehold and didn't let go. I didn't care what the hell happened to him. Then, the teacher came and I was put in "time-out."

It was worth it.

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Inside the multiple walls of our multiple basements, we lived in fear of the constant shifts of her mood and her personality. An affectionate mother-son moment would turn into a struggle for dominance. Only *she* could be the winner. It was like living with an alcoholic drug-addict except *she* hated such substances and was never intoxicated.

For several years, Marcelo and I looked forward to going grocery shopping, not because we were treated to anything, but because we got a momentary escape from living in fear.

It wasn't an escape her, but at least it was an escape from the confinement.

*She* always watched us like a hawk when we were in public. We had to uphold an image that we were an ordinary family. *She* wanted us to be beside her at all times. We didn't always comply.

I enjoyed my solitary moments, walking down aisles, observing. I watched families and their interactions very closely and wondered, "Are they like me? Are they scared?"

*She* found me and pulled my ear. I understood that sign. It was a threat and I knew that regardless of anything that I would *get it* at home.

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Belts. Brooms. Shoes. Hands. Coat hangers. Words. *Anything*.

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*She* got pregnant again. My dad had been in prison. Still was. *She* was angrier, more violent. Marcelo and I hid from her more now, wherever we could. When Emiliano was born, it was an uneventful birth. His own father was not in the picture, but in a Polaroid *she* kept on her dresser. I didn't feel anything when I saw my baby brother for the first time. I do remember biting his little fingers when he was maybe three-months old. I'd hold his baby fingers in my mouth.

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*She* sent us back to El Salvador again. *She* left us there again for six or seven months that time. We didn't go to school. We just stayed with my paternal grandparents in the town of San Miguel.

When I got there, I was excited for many reasons, but most of all, because everyone was in the same situation as we were economically. So, when I got there, I was showing off my American Payless shoes, my brand new shirts that we bought in some make-shift store in a person's Adam's Morgan apartment. As time progressed, in a week or so, things started to even out and I started to realize that in a way they were in a much better situation than I was. I use my cousin as a reference point for this. His mom had left him there, so he had lived his whole life in El Salvador. His mom, my aunt, had been sending money for him. He was in a much better situation than I was. He had two game systems. They made new uniforms for him to go to school because in El Salvador, you don't go to a big warehouse to buy your uniform; you just buy your cloth and a tailor makes it for you.

As weeks and months rolled on, I began to assimilate. I got the local greetings and mannerisms. Sometimes I didn't even wear shoes because that's what they did over there. One of the things I couldn't get used to though was taking a "shower." We had to use little cups to scoop up water and throw it on ourselves. In the mornings in the mountainous landscape, the air was very crisp and the water was even colder. The other thing I couldn't get use to was using the bathroom. I smelled it. I wasn't used to smelling feces. In America, at least sometimes we used to flush toilets, but there, it was an outdoor bathroom that was a big whole in the ground with a slab

of wood on top of it with a whole in the middle. It was filled with roaches. We used newspaper to scrape the roaches from the inside of the hole, then to clean ourselves.

I became more incorporated into the family. Marcelo and I started planting *maiz* with my uncles. Every morning they went to sow and fertilize the seeds, to some degree, and added pesticides. I didn't go all the time. I thought that I didn't really have to work, figuring my mom was sending them money to help care for me and my brothers. I learned that while she had been sending money, it wasn't nearly enough to sustain us for the time that we had stayed there. It was one of those instances where I thought to myself: *what the fuck? I thought you left us here to work and give us a better life? It doesn't seem like it. This is even less than we get through welfare.* I dropped the thought though because there wasn't anything I could do about it and started adopting my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins as my family.

I was there long enough to experience the rainy season and we had these neighbors that lived across a trench that contained little isolated ponds. With the rainy season, the trench transformed into a roaring river. Because of its rapid movement, the water was brown and sludgy. One day, I found myself stuck at our neighbor's house during one of the rainstorms and my neighbors had to help me cross the gorged river, fearing I might get swept away.

The rain brought the food with it, the food that became a big part of my stay with my extended family and that encompasses many of my elusive memories. I watched my uncles bring in live iguanas as long as my 12-year-old arm, holding them by their tails, their gnarly faces, their leathery skin. I saw them hunt squirrels, opossums, and armadillos with their slingshots in the mountains that surrounded our home. It all tasted like chicken to me.

I can still feel the repulsive texture of the turtle-egg-delicacies my family rarely got to enjoy. But, my most bizarre experience wasn't all this strange cuisine. It was with a common animal that many people in American were so used to eating: the staple meat that makes burgers and steaks. The cow. I heard my cousin throwing a tantrum of sorts, not out of anger, but in awe and shock of something he had seen. So, I asked him what had happened and he told me:

*Oh man...this cow just got killed crossing the road. The truck that killed it made three flips! Que puta! It was like a movie scene! He laughed. You should have seen Jaime! He got covered in shit when the cow got hit!*

I was amused by the story, but I knew that he was exaggerating some of the details.

While I was envisioning this scene, my *mamita* asked me and my cousin to get a piece of this cow. *Free meat*, she said, matter-of -fact. I thought to myself, *Why not? A new experience.*

My cousin and I ran as fast as we could with a machete in his hand to the scene of the accident, knowing that everyone from the town would be there in no time. So, when we got there, just as we had called it, there were a dozen people surrounding the scene.

The image of the cow has really stuck with me. A brown cow, pulled to the side of the road, lying on its side. When I was watching it soon after its death, I wondered if it naturally sleeps on its side. If so, then does it fold its legs under itself? Its eyes were cloudy—I'm not going to say that it looked like it was going to cry, but like the eyes of a fish, motionless, fixed, dead. Its tongue had a bluish tint and it had flopped out the side of its head. It looked like a cartoon, like when they show a dead animal in cartoons with the eyes crossed out and the tongue spilling out. My cousin and I didn't talk about the image between us. We just did what we had come for, which was to get some of it, and we decided to go for a hind leg. We took the machete and we hacked at the leg. I wouldn't call the sensation dull, but more squishy and fleshy. I don't remember blood, but I'm sure there was a lot of it. Once we got to the bone, that was the interesting part because we had been careful not to hurt ourselves by going at it hard, but after a

while, with frustration at not being able to cut through the bone, we became more forceful and finally got through it. After thirty minutes at cutting at the leg, we had finally freed it.

A drunkard came to the scene, claiming to be the owner of the cow. *This is my fucking cow. This bitch escaped.* He took it by the head and yelled at it: *Where the hell were you? Fine, everyone just take its meat.* He grabbed his switchblade. *I'm going to take the best part. This is my cow.* He reached for the tongue and sliced through it.

My cousin held the hoof and I held the protruding bone. We struggled to carry the bloody leg all the way home to cook for dinner.

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Marcelo, Emiliano and I used to go meet my dad on weekends at the Greek restaurant, *Parthenon*, where he was a cook. *She* used to take us there with the intention for extortion and would leave him to take care of us for the weekends. After the prison incident, their relationship collapsed and we were stuck in the middle of a relationship where one parent was extremely nice and could have been a good parent, but had no balls, while the other one was twisted and should not have been a parent at all.

Even when we were living with my dad though, he wasn't a central character. He was nice, but we weren't very close. We thought he was cool, but he was kind of aloof, like me. I guess that's where I get my nature from.

When we used to go visit, it was another way for us to get away from her. So, in our minds, my dad became a savior and that's why we held him in high regard. We would get very excited to go see him because apart from living with a roommate, he had a nice apartment in *The Woodner*, which had a store and video rentals in the lobby. At the restaurant where he worked, he would sneak us desserts while we waited for him to finish his shift. A few of his cousins used to work at the same restaurant and they would give us money because they understood our situation and the type of person *she* was.

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He was pretty ugly when he was a newborn—a little brown ball of flesh. But, as he grew a few months older, I became really attached to him. *She* was lazy and teaching me how to change his diapers on the premise that I would need to know how to do it for my own kids. I was seven years old and I learned to change his diapers without gagging. I prepared his formula in a bottle at the right temperature so that he wouldn't get burned. I hated it and I hated her for it. I questioned her in my mind so many times. *If you aren't going to change your fucking baby yourself then why did you have it in the first place?* While the sentiments remained, the thoughts went away as the action quickly became a routine.

As Emiliano grew older, we grew apart. Not only did our age separate us, but our feelings towards her split. While her anger was directed towards me and Marcelo, as she beat us senseless, he was the object of her affection. At first, I was jealous of such attention, but I quickly became disgusted by it. Her two-faced nature and her illogical favoritism. I also was repulsed by him for not seeing the horrible person that she was.

Growing older for me brought a bit of wisdom and patience and I slowly began to see that his reality was not the same as mine and as such I accepted it even though I was angered by his naiveté. With time, our relationship healed and although it was never the same, I began to look after him. When he was starting school, thoughts crossed my mind that if he became smarter, he could be better, maybe he would get out of all this. I didn't think that far ahead, but my mind did it for me. Those were my intentions.

Since I was much older than him, I tasked myself with helping him with his homework and this is how I began to slip in some more advanced concepts, just hinting at them, not really teaching them. While he was learning addition, I was also teaching him what was coming like

multiplication. I got frustrated when he wanted to read kids picture books and I hinted at reading books with no pictures. With this I thought he'd advance, excel past what I could ever reach.

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The weekends that we spent with my dad were few and far between, but they were memorable. I revered him not only because he was the parent figure I wished could always be present, but also because he empathized enough to accept Emiliano as his own since he was our brother. He was the person I hoped to become. I admired his taste although he did have the slicked-back, greasy hairstyle. I remember once when his shift at the *Parthenon* ended and we were heading back to his apartment, I asked him if he knew any Greek. He told me he knew how to count in Greek – ένα δύο τρία...

I don't remember the rest, but my thoughts were something along the lines of *That's incredible!* I was so impressed that my dad knew how to count in another language and, to some degree, that influenced my desire to develop my own knowledge and intellect.

One night, while he was drinking, I was complaining that I didn't want to go back and asking him if I could stay there, and he brought up that he couldn't because she had custody. I asked him why he didn't just get custody. He said, «this country supports mothers. Mothers have more rights here.» I didn't understand his logic, so I kept on complaining. I don't know how it came up, but he told me not to worry, that it would be better if the government took custody of us. I didn't understand what he meant by that either: did that mean we were going to be homeless? Would we be up for adoption? The idea amused me, but scared me. I thought that maybe some rich family would take us in and we would be happy, but I also wondered who the hell would want us? And, if nobody would want us, what would happen to us? I didn't realize at the time what a cheap move it was to tell your own son that it would be better for the government to take him in.

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Soon after the last visit with my dad, he disappeared completely. I remember going to his apartment and asking his roommate if he was there. He told me he hadn't seen him for two weeks even though his clothes were still there. At the time, I was wondering what had happened to him. The thought crossed my mind that he may have been killed, run over by a car. Now that I think about it, I wasn't worried or anything. As time went on, just like him, thoughts of him in my mind also disappeared.

Being the person that *she* is, *she* blamed me and Marcelo for his absence and the absence of the child support check. The beatings became more frequent, more violent, more trivial. Anything that wasn't to her liking would set her off. That didn't help our relationship and our thoughts of her. I quickly began to loathe her, to hate her very being and every habit and everything about her, everything that pointed to her. I hated her connections; I hated her cigars, the smell of them; I hated how she bought hundreds of dollars worth of cigars that she stored in a rolling suitcase. With each beating, I slowly began to care less, fear less. Silent tears turned into yelling, screams. Screams turned into cursing under my breath. Then, I cursed her to her face. It felt good.

*She began to feed Emiliano lies. Your brothers are bad kids. Look at them, cursing their own mother. Look at his eyes. He's on drugs.*

Like a cycle, my relationship with Emiliano again began to deteriorate. He became even more attached to her and I hated them both. In a way, he became her little spy. He adopted her habit of blowing things out of proportion; his descriptions were always over the top, twisted renditions of the actual happenings.

I started to withdraw more, but with each beating, I became a bit more resilient. It came to the point where I couldn't take her shit anymore. I wanted to end it. It's funny. I was scared,

not because I couldn't do it, but because I was raised Christian and believed that if I killed myself I'd have to relive it for the rest of eternity. My faith dwindled, I guess. *She* had no pity. My dad couldn't save us. And, it also seemed like the one above didn't care.

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*Oh shit. Oh shit. I pushed her. What the hell's happening? Who's she talking on the phone to? Fuck, is she talking to the police? What the hell is going to happen?*

All these thoughts raced through my mind while I was sitting on a chair with a straight face, trying to hold back tears. When the police came in, I thought, *you guys still haven't learned. She's wasting your time. She's called you here to be my alarm clock, to escort me to school. Hell, to get me out of the backyard and into the basement where we lived. To move me five feet. FIVE FEET.* Yet, all I could mutter out was "Hello." I looked at them and I thought to myself: *You assholes. Is this why you became cops? What's up with this tough guy attitude? You're talking to a fifteen year old. Did you ever think about the lead-up to this moment? I'm the victim here.* To the countless questions that I don't remember them asking, my response was "I don't know." My mind raced with fear, anger, and it was all her fault. I hated her. I decided from that point on that she wouldn't be my mother.

They told me to take off my belt. They tried to take it off for me. He couldn't, so he pulled out his knife and was about to cut it off when I told him I could do it myself. Marcelo and Emiliano were there in the room, staring at me while they asked me to take off my shoelaces. I complied and my reward was handcuffs.

As I sat in the police car, my arms held in place behind my back by the mold in the seat, I thought of my past, of all the things that *she'd* done to me and how *she* had never experienced the backseat of a police car. I was scared and happy. Had my life been leading up to that moment?

God damn that ride was long, but it wasn't even a mile away from the station.

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I stared up at the ceiling while lying on an uncomfortable surface. I looked to my left: graffiti, some gang-related. I didn't care to read it. I looked behind me. There weren't bars, just thick glass. I held back my emotions, trying to process the possibilities, the likelihood of this and the unlikelihood of that. They called me up, said I had a phonecall. It was my school principal, the person who had already provided us with food and shelter and love and unwavering support. She asked me questions. I don't remember what they were. I just responded with *yesses and nos*. I heard her crying. I tried to hold back. I tried. I couldn't though. The reality that I was being held at a juvenile detention center for hours hit me. And, just as I had done when *she* had hit me, I cried.

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We went to court where *she* dropped the charges and through that process, it was discovered that she was an abusive and neglectful parent. We were taken out of her care, and just as my dad had predicted, we became wards of the state. We moved around a few times until I finally found my family. I finally have time to think, time to understand the impact of what we have survived.

*Have you read and understood the terms of confidentiality?*

I have and I accept.

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