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Swimming In Static

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SWIMMING IN STATIC

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SWIMMING IN STATIC

by

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THESIS

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Critical Preface

I remember the precise moment when this novel was born. It was late November 2008, my first semester in the MFA program. I was sitting at my desk, staring at the blank wall in front of me, and thinking about a recent amorous wreck that I had extricated myself out of. This is when the scene manifested itself in my mind. I saw a man, sitting at a café that looked out onto an Italian plaza. While drinking coffee, this man sees a woman he had dated ten years ago reading at a fountain in front of him. After the initial shock of the coincidence (neither the woman or the man are from Italy), he starts to daydream about the life he might have missed out on by shunning her. After a span of time has passed, the woman looks up, recognizes her former lover, and walks over to him. By now, the man has convinced himself that he might still be in love with the woman and experiences an unpleasant shock when she approaches him, and with a straight face says, “You owe me 437 dollars,” turns, and walks away. The last thing the reader sees is the man’s face, full of regret and devastation. The end.

I have to admit; at this point the scene was more a romanticized version of a self-fulfilling long-awaited-for lover’s revenge, than it was anything literary or novel-worthy. For some reason though, I couldn’t forget that scene, and so a few days later, I sat down and tried to capture it in narration with the hopes that it might develop into a short story I could use for a class or some other writing exercise.

I wrote about three pages before I realized that there was an inherent flaw in the story: how could I make the reader feel the man’s devastation if they knew nothing of the history or the past relationship between these two individuals? I had initially wanted a quick flash fiction piece, something completely immersed in imagery or scene, but in order to make my readers care about the last scene, or make any sense out of it, I would have to construct some sort of back story; or
at least use flashback to build tension and a relationship between the woman and the man that would give power and significance to the ending. I was rather deterred by this predicament, so I put the story aside for a few months.

Then, in December of 2008 my computer crashed. It took me a few days to realize that I had lost my Italian scene. Actually, out of everything that I lost, I was most upset about that document. In retrospect however, I think it was a fortunate loss, because losing that scene meant that I could formulate the same story from a different direction; that I could approach it with fresh eyes, and a new perspective. Which is what I did.

At the end of spring semester 2009, I turned in 15-pages of fiction for a Film and Literature class. This draft introduced two main characters, Camilo Polo and Darin Summers. While they still embodied (to some extent), the man and woman that I had initially envisioned in that first scene, Camilo and Darin had become more than that. They had evolved into characters that had a past and a present agenda. I created a history for both of them, and a purpose for their coincidental, yet simultaneous trips to Italy. Camilo was Latin American, from Colombia, and Darin was an American from California. I knew that they had met in high school, while Camilo was studying abroad, and that while Darin was in Colombia visiting him, they had witnessed (or experienced) a terrible act that had driven them apart. I knew that Camilo felt regret, and that Darin felt remorse. The scene I turned in for class introduced my peers to both characters during their first day in Italy and hinted at a past and possible entanglement between the two.

At this point, I thought that I could perhaps write a long short story, or maybe a short novella. That these pages had the potential to become my thesis was not even a remote possibility. In fact, the thought didn’t cross my mind—until I spent the next three summer months reading the entire book list for next fall’s Advanced Fiction class. Reading Like a Writer
by Francine Prose, *Letters to a Young Novelist* by Mario Vargas Llosa, John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction, On Writing* by Stephen King, *The Art of the Novel* by Milan Kundera, and finally *From Where You Dream* by Robert Olen Butler. These were the books that gave my previously scattered ideas about fiction, form and structure. These were the books that also ignited in me a real passion for writing. From author to author, patterns started to emerge, and to some degree, it felt like they were all saying the same thing: to be an author, you must read a lot, and you must *write*. You must write everyday, not a few times a week, not when you feel like it, and not just when inspiration strikes. They also seemed to be saying that an author must follow through with the images, scenes, or stories that refuse to go away.

At the start of my second year in the MFA program, I realized that the original cliché and melodramatic scene I had imagined in my head was not going to go away. This is when I began to think seriously about turning the story of Camilo and Darin into a novel. I decided to begin with a flashback to the horrible crime that Darin and Camilo experienced in Bogota, Colombia, and then return to present day Italy. I thought that by showing the one relevant scene from their past, I had covered my bases about what the reader had to know regarding their history and could move on from there. I began to alternate points of view, from Darin’s to Camilo’s and gave them each their own sections. I was also planning to weave in facts about the Amanda Knox crime in Perugia, Italy in order to create a social commentary on culture and violence. Even with my notes though, I found myself struggling to decide what exactly the characters should *do* in Italy. Camilo was there on a business trip, and Darin was there for vacation, but as I wrote, it felt like I was coming up with scenes that held no weight, as if I was just moving the characters around but not really considering how those movements might impact the story as a whole.

At some point during that same semester I started to feel as if the reader might still need
to see more of the character’s past in order to understand what brought them together. I began writing about how Camilo and Darin met in 1995, 12 years before their reconnection in Italy. These sections were narrated as if the characters were in the present; the points of view still alternated from Camilo to Darin, but for the first time, they were sharing the same space. The setting was San Diego, California, they were high school seniors, and they both had an interest in art.

During that semester I wrote about fifty pages. A story had begun to emerge but I felt as if it wasn’t coming together. I still couldn’t see the story. I didn’t know where it was headed, and I didn’t know whether it had a point. I had written the opening crime scene in Colombia twice, but it still wasn’t working. I had trouble accurately describing the setting, the crime was rushed and implausible, the Camilo character didn’t feel male enough, and I hadn’t captured the Colombian culture. In addition, my characters were getting lost in both Italy and California. I couldn’t see these places well enough to move them around in their own settings, let alone paint an adequate image for the reader.

I took a second Advanced Fiction workshop in the spring of 2010 to continue working on the story. I re-wrote the opening scene from the previous semester and completely changed the crime. It still wasn’t working; my classmates had the same complaints that I had already heard the semester before. So I re-wrote the opening again, but this fourth time, I extended the actions, thoughts, and decisions of my characters in order to slow down time and elongate the section. I added some flashback in, decided to only narrate from Darin’s point of view, and more significantly, I didn’t end the section with a crime.

There were two major advances I made with this fourth re-write. First, I realized that I could write a very large section of the story about the crime in Colombia, and second, that Darin
seemed to be very hesitant about being with Camilo. These realizations, along with an independent study that I did with Professor De Piérola on the fiction and techniques of Ian McEwan greatly influenced the direction that my story started to take.


The intensive semester-long study of McEwan’s fiction provided me with a writing template that I could work from with greater clarity. For example, by studying *Atonement*, I learned that understanding the history, knowledge and point of view of your narrator is essential to plot and character construction. Making Briony the narrator of *Atonement* helped McEwan understand what Briony should know, and how she should tell the story. Once the reader realizes that Briony was narrating from the point of view of an old woman looking back on her life, suddenly all the information she presented to the reader, and in the order she presented it, make sense because we understand her reflection, maturity, and sense of regret.

*Swimming in Static* alternates between Carlos and Darin in a third person limited omniscient point of view. Because of this, the story is continually moving forward, and never stops to give the reader lengthy insights into the past or future of either character. Nevertheless, I believe that understanding how my characters came together was integral to creating significance in the present-time Mexico scenes, which is why I decided to alternate time periods, thanks in
large part to the study of narrator knowledge and point of view in McEwan’s work.

Studying the opening scene of *Enduring Love*, and other scenes within *On Chesil Beach* and *The Child in Time* was critical to my understanding of how to create a scene. While McEwan’s scenes are more complex than mine have ever been, after studying his work, I felt like I understood the movement of a good scene: how to begin one, and how to focalize in action and some reflection before ending in such a way that problems are simultaneously resolved, while others are created. A really moving McEwan scene is also marked by a sense of self-sufficiency. That is, many of his scenes could stand as vignettes of their own. It is as if each of his novels is the compilation of tiny short stories all woven together with central themes and the same main characters.

For example, the opening scene of *Enduring Love* is intense and narrated at a quick pace that draws the reader in, while allowing them to see every movement of the characters from an informed vantage point. By the end of the scene, the immediate problem is solved: that of what will happen to the man hanging off the escaped air balloon, but another one has been created: what consequences will arise from the strange interaction between Jed Parry and Joe Rose? I tried to incorporate this narrative strategy into my story by crafting scenes that left the reader slightly unsatisfied, and slightly curious. I think by doing this, I was able to create the semblance of suspense and encourage my readers to move onto the next chapter.

Perhaps most importantly however, I feel as if I learned how to move a novel. By this I mean, how to decide when to break off scenes, how to complicate the plot, and how to choose only the relevant actions and ideas, while eliminating the rest. The novel *Saturday*, is one 24-hour period in the life of Henry Perowne, a brain surgeon. Given that McEwan needed to stretch out a single day into a novel, and given that he still needed to make each action interesting, I
found *Saturday* had excellent examples of plot movement and scene juxtaposition. Moreover, the story is told from the point of view of one man, and every action is focalized specifically through his eyes. This point of view was particularly helpful to me in constructing the point of view of my own characters. I learned how to see the world through one person’s lens, and avoid all those small switches a novice writer is prone to make.

By studying McEwan’s work I also learned how to integrate structure into my story. I realized that the movement of the story is dependent on the lengths of paragraphs, chapters, parts, sections, and scenes, which are all critical to how a story will be read. This is something I had not previously given a lot of thought to. Most importantly however, I realized that what I needed most in my story was simplicity.

All of McEwan's novels are marked with an intricate simplicity. There are no excessive scenes, or characters, or settings. Everything present is integral to the novel’s main point. With this observation I set about eliminating the unnecessary aspects of my novel. The first thing to go was Italy. I realized that I was forcing a story just because an interesting international crime, (the murder of Meredith Kercher) had taken place there. When I looked at my story from an outsider's perspective it became clear that Italy was not really needed. This coincided with a decision to expand on the crime in Colombia. I thought that I could use that setting to stretch time out and really get into the psychology of violence itself.

With simplicity as a guide, I began to reconsider the California setting as well. It seemed that a big part of my struggle with the story was simply about describing surroundings. This is when I decided to change the other half of the story to a setting I knew well: my alma mater, Whitman College. This change obviously had drastic implications. Moving the second setting to Whitman meant that I was going to be focused exclusively on characters that were much
younger. Given this, their past would no longer hold any relevance in the future. The “past”
became the present, and I decided to condense the overall span of time in the novel as well, so
that ultimately the story took place within a week and a half at Whitman, and only a few days in
Colombia. I have to admit that this decision was greatly influenced by McEwan's novel *On
Chesil Beach*. I read this story the semester before and was intrigued by how thoroughly
McEwan was able to create and destroy a relationship within the span of only a few hours. I
started narrating slower, moving the characters with less intensity, and tried to expand on each
scene.

Lastly, I changed the years that the story would be taking place. Originally I had placed
the story within the early to mid-1990, right at the midst of Colombia’s peak violence and drug
wars, which dictated how I could describe culture. This also meant that I was writing in the past,
which I found extremely difficult as I continually wanted to work technology into the story: cell
phones, texting, emails, and social networking are all such a relevant part of today’s society, that
it was challenging to omit them from my novel. I changed the setting to the spring and summer
of 2010, and marveled at how much faster and easier composition became.

After writing in this new time period, I realized that Colombia was no longer a relevant
setting. It felt as if I was trying to force my story into a setting of the past, and that if I wanted it
to be relevant to today and still explore the theme of violence, I should change the second setting
to Mexico so that I could capitalize on the violence that Mexico is currently experiencing. This
decision has been effective as well as problematic for me. Because I actually had traveled to
Mexico before, it became easier for me to describe the setting, but my lack of knowledge
regarding Mexican culture remained a struggle, and I continually felt uneasy about the
authenticity of my Mexican characters, and setting. Although my setting is not on the border,
where much of the drug-war violence is occurring, I think that the association between “Mexico” and “Violence” is prevalent enough in mainstream culture that my story could still stand as a social commentary on what violence is occurring in Mexico (especially on the border), and why.

Then one day, as I was falling asleep, I began to think about Whitman and what I liked about the campus. For some reason the swimming pool at Whitman stood out to me, and I started composing a line in my head about how Camilo used to return to the pool to escape the social rigors of college. I wrote the line down before I went to bed and the next day started narrating his trip to the pool. It was a fifteen-page scene, which has now been condensed, but it developed into an important basis in the story; both characters become swimmers, and were first brought together under the water, as a result, water became an important motif in the novel, and eventually influenced the direction of the plot.

By the end of September 2010, I turned in the first draft of my novel. At that point I still felt challenged by the daunting task of recreating a culture, setting, and character that I was unfamiliar with. I also found that as I continued to write, my story had started to expand. One of the main difficulties I was dealing with then, was juggling a multitude of themes that did not carry themselves throughout the whole story. To me the novel felt rushed, spread in different directions, and without the semblance of wholeness. If I had asked myself then what the main “point” of the story was, there would be multiple answers, none of which I felt very confident about.

What I can say about that first draft was that it had given me a form to work with. I realized that I would be switching back and forth between my two main settings: Walla Walla, Washington, and Mexico City/Tlaxcala, Mexico. Moreover, each setting was given a designated character that had a specific point of view. While Camilo (who became Carlos) was the main
character and eyes at Whitman, I let Darin narrate and explore Mexico. This way, I could justify my description of each setting, as well as allow growth within each character. Since both Carlos and Darin were narrating as outsiders, and both were somewhat uncomfortable in a foreign setting, each point of view would be fresher, would pay more attention to detail, and would hopefully inspire questions and provoke thought. It was this type of McEwan inspired simplicity that helped me actually finish a draft. Not every section was long, there were some very short glimpses into each setting, but I realized I was spending less time telling the story, and more time showing it; each section became some type of scene and I believe this further helped my story along.

The flaws and potholes in my first draft were numerous. After sitting down with my Thesis Director to discuss the draft, I had about four pages of issues that would need to be addressed. One major issue was expanding on the themes that seemed to be emerging (culture, language, and environment), and to make sure the themes were relevant throughout. While writing the first draft, I did find that certain themes, such as physics and quantum mechanics with Carlos, technology, and the environment with Darin started to become an important part of the plot. They appeared however, at different parts in the novel, and were not consistently relevant. For instance, in Walla Walla, technology was a huge part of the story, but whenever the setting switched to Mexico, technology basically disappeared. One of my goals for the re-write was to find a way to weave the themes throughout and not make them so isolated to specific settings, or characters.

Character inconsistency was another major problem. Since Camilo had become Carlos, there were a number of changes that occurred in my mind about who he was, that didn’t necessarily transfer to the new draft. This meant that some aspects of my male character felt
more representative of the original, while others had seemed to morph into this new male who was an avid swimmer, attended Whitman College even though he was from Mexico, and had a passion for physics, consciousness, and the mind. Darin as well, seemed to lack consistency. At points she was flighty, at other times, seemed sure of herself. Why she decided to go to Mexico, as well as her intentions for and during the trip were unclear.

The Mexico setting also remained problematic. The essence of Mexico City was not present, nor were physical landmarks. Even though I had been to Mexico, I had mostly spent time in Huamanlta, a small city in the state of Tlaxcala, and had not actually explored the capital city. I knew setting was extremely important to the story, first because it acted as a physical representation of the personalities and cultural beliefs my characters exuded, and secondly, because without a clear visual picture of each setting, I wouldn’t be able to thoroughly juxtapose both settings. Without the juxtaposition, I wouldn’t be able to make the cultural comparison that I was striving for. By exploiting the nature of each setting, I could exploit the differences and create a subtle commentary that spoke to the nature of the political, economical, and social differences that impede communication and understanding between nations.

Along with setting, theme, and character, there were plot holes. Given the replacement of Bogotá, Colombia for Mexico City, Mexico, I felt as if the final crime should be more reminiscent of present day violence in Mexico, and I decided to make the crime relate subtly to the current drug wars. I think I made this decision about halfway through composition however, because some of the actions of my characters reflected this relation, but others did not. Somehow, Carlos’s father had become part of the story as well, but his role was still unclear to me, and unclear in the story. The actual crime at the end remained muddled, the purpose of Darin’s pregnancy was uncertain, and the financial status of both Darin’s and Carlos’ family
needed to be refined.

Most importantly however, the first two chapters of my novel did not feel cohesive. They were rushed in the wrong places, bombarded the reader with too much information, and did not introduce the relevant topics and themes explored in the rest of the novel. I found re-writing the first two chapters extremely difficult, mostly because I realized I did not know whom my characters really were. They were both erratic individuals in my mind, and I couldn’t accurately or consistently predict how they would react to certain situations, or what thoughts they would have as they moved through the story. They didn’t feel reliably real to me, and I knew that this was hurting the validity of my novel. I finally decided to try and model Carlos after someone I knew. In essence, Carlos became my brother: his passion for physics and study of the mind, his dedication to his family, his sense of self, devotion to school, and his drive for the future. After I had a human model for my character, everything about Carlos seemed to fall into place. I knew how to write his scenes because I knew how he would think and I knew how he would react. With a human model I discovered the subtle intricacies that Carlos had previously been missing.

Darin’s character proved more challenging. Given the sphere of the story and scope of the plot, I couldn’t think of a single individual who met Darin’s needs. I spent some time outlining her character and deciding who and what she was as a person, but at times I still feel as if she’s unstable compared to Carlos. Since I don’t have a human model for Darin, I have to rely on my own sense of who she is. I find that tends to change the longer I work on the story, especially if I put it aside for a few days. Darin’s personality seems to be partly a reflection of my personality, and partly a reflection of a conglomeration of Whitman female attitudes and beliefs that I observed during my four years at the college. This is where Darin’s passion for environmental activism comes from, and her sense of right and wrong; her sense of duty, and her
need to plan for her future comes from me.

After taking time to figure out my characters, the first two chapters of the story seemed to come together. I was able to slow down the pace of the prose and work in the themes that had become relevant by the end of the first draft. At this point I found myself rather overwhelmed by the amount of changes I needed to work into the story. There were still thematic, plot, setting and character consistency problems to address and I didn’t know where to begin. I thought about trying to segregate certain “problematic” areas, but they seemed widespread, and not isolated to any one part of the novel. To solve this dilemma, I began re-writing the entire story. Starting with the subsequent chapter after the beginning, I took about 25 pages a week and edited each page line by line.

In order to address the issue of setting, I started to use Google maps, which let me actually see the layout of Mexico, the streets, and the landmarks of the city. Street View, a tool in Google maps was helpful as well, and I began to feel as if I could see the city in my mind, which allowed me to better describe its sensory and visual characteristics.

Once I decided how the ending crime should actually occur, I was able to figure out the role of Carlo’s father. His function was clarified, and all the hints that I had semi-integrated into my first draft started to make sense. I decided to give the father ties to drug money (although this is never stated outright), while making both of Carlos’s parents’ ex-employees of the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. I also made Darin’s father an immigration lawyer, so that social commentary on current immigration issues, as well as Mexican drug organizations and crimes would become more prevalent. This ensured that the theme of violence, and culture was relevant throughout the work. I also worked to incorporate water, and technology more thoroughly as well.
After re-writing my original draft, I thought that I was mostly done with the story. I submitted the finished second draft to both committee readers, and my Thesis Director at the end of the fall 2010 semester. A month and a half later, I received comments back from all three readers. They were positive, yet constructive: push male sexuality in Carlos, add in more detail about Mexico, condense and polish the prose, eliminate unnecessary questions, and cultivate core themes in each chapter.

I found that revising the prose, while time consuming, was simple once I got used to the rhythm of my own writing. Pushing Carlos’s sexuality, and adding details about Mexico was easy as well. Cultivating core themes in each chapter however, became a daunting task. I realized that I had no idea what my core themes were, and this greatly impeded the editing process. I decided to make a list of the existing themes of my novel, and came up with ten items: the relationship between life and water, consciousness and creation, time and space, new life (motherhood), the relationship between money and danger and violence, language and levels of communication, technology affecting communication, loss, culture (Mexico v. U.S.), and sex.

As I incorporated my prose edits, I began to keep a list of the missing thematic elements of each chapter, and I started to understand which themes were really important: life and water, consciousness, motherhood, technology, and communication. During this process, I also realized that there were some missing scenes that I could add to the story to make it stronger. This included giving more importance to the main character’s relationships with their parents through memory and flashback, and having Darin admit to a fear of dying previous to the end of the book. I started to really clarify Darin’s yearning, which became finding a way to tell Carlos that she was pregnant in order to decide whether she should keep the baby or not.

After pushing my main themes in subtle ways throughout each chapter of the novel, I was
satisfied with my draft, but not completely happy. I knew intrinsically that the point of the novel was still muddled. There had to be a way to match Carlos’s yearning to Darin’s so that their end goals became inevitably entwined with the other.

Darin’s main concerns are her pregnancy and protecting the planet’s water. If the reader were to consider what holds the planet together, and how reliant on water people are, one might see water as the womb of the world. This is reflective of Darin’s own womb, which suggestively holds the consciousness of Carlos’s dead mother reborn. Darin’s past implies as well, that humans continue to hold onto ideas and occurrences that they have previously experienced, suggesting a re-patterning of life.

Carlos’s main concerns are focused on consciousness. He is fascinating by science’s inability to define or explain what it is. By a series of logical choices, and the influence of books, Carlos comes to the conclusion that consciousness is reality, which means consciousness has created the world. He uses Darin to test his theory about consciousness creating realities, and seems to find that through the effort of consciously focusing on her, he is able to implicate her into his life. He sees this as proof that with the power of thought, he can affect his own reality. I decided that there had to be an evolution of thought within Carlos, so that the reader might explore the idea of consciousness with him. This evolution led him to consider how his own consciousness is a part of reality, and eventually decide that if reality exists forever, so must his consciousness, which would mean that the idea of reincarnation was possible. I then realized that their interests only overlapped at the point of reincarnation. It was this realization that lent itself so nicely to Darin’s main theme: birth and motherhood, and seemed to bind together the yearnings of both characters.

The ending of the novel then, remained my only problem area. My last chapter was
vague, and “pointless.” There were also three very strong themes that hadn’t worked their way into the “epiphany moment” at all: water, communication, and technology.

Language and communication continued to be a struggle for both characters throughout the novel as they work to express themselves in foreign settings. Even individuals who speak the same language have trouble communicating with each other; this is seen between Carlos and his father, and Darin and her father. It becomes evident that the spread of technology has influenced the ability of individuals to truly communicate within society. This idea is echoed in Carlos’s thought that, “No one communicated anymore. They all just hid behind technology,” (p. 155). Specific aspects of technology, such as Facebook, Skype, online chat, and cell phones appear to reflect a global consciousness that is moving away from one another, isolating people, and discouraging moments of actual face to face contact.

All of the characters in the novel seem to have communication issues; they feel alone, as if no one truly understands them. I believe this is reflective of technology acting as a barrier between human connections. For example, once Darin throws Carlos’s phone into the pool, she forces him to listen to her, and forces herself to actually speak to him. Once this web of understanding is weaved between them, she is able to tell him about their baby without words.

I revised my ending to reflect these newfound connections. After Darin tells Carlos about the baby, they approach Carlos’s family, only to face the same act of violence that occurred in the original draft. I thought about eliminating the shooting, but I realized it was important for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to impress on my readers the idea that violent thoughts have violent consequences. Darin continuously expresses a fear of dying from violence, Ale is often afraid, and Señor Solano brought violence into their lives through his relationship to drug trafficking, which resulted in the violent death of his wife.
Both Darin and Carlos however, are round characters that change and realize a number of things about how reality is shaped. Carlos specifically, tries hard to control his thoughts, and influences Darin to do the same. At the end of the story, Darin is open-minded enough to change the way she sees the world. She is able to overcome her fear, and tell Carlos about the baby to his face. It is also Darin who helps Carlos realize that thoughts do not just affect the life of the person who thinks them, but that everyone, everywhere is responsible for the events that occur worldwide. The interconnectedness of all people, and the influence that conscious thoughts have on reality is echoed in Darin’s idea that humans carry humans, creating connectivity that is forgotten through the separation that technology has imposed on us.

Although I see my writing influenced most heavily by McEwan’s fiction, I know that in terms of a literary tradition, McEwan’s work is labeled Contemporary British Literature. As an American writer, I obviously cannot consider myself part of that sphere, but I do see myself working toward a “contemporary” literature tradition in a broader sense. For example, in some of his recent books, including *Saturday* and *Solar*, McEwan works to exploit present-day social issues within the frame of a literary story. In *Saturday*, McEwan comments on the nature of terrorism in light of 9-11. In *Solar*, his focus is to explore and present the potential outcomes of global warming. I see my novel as working in a similar sphere.

My technique does diverge somewhat from McEwan’s fictional style. I believe that McEwan presents a social issue from the standpoint of a philosopher presenting ideas and facts. He is not forceful in his presentation, and he doesn’t impose his personal opinions on the reader. If, after reading *Saturday*, I come to the conclusion that terrorism is bad, it is not because McEwan forced his plot or characters to communicate this idea. It is because the forces that shape terrorism on both sides were presented to me, and after reading the story, I was able to
consider both sides, and decide for myself.

I do not think that my story was so subtle. I feel strongly about the issues presented in *Swimming In Static*, and did not leave them so open-ended. At the end of the story, Darin decides they should delete their Facebook accounts, and Carlos agrees. It is only after Darin throws Carlos’s cell phone into the water, and forces him to pay attention to her, that they truly communicate for the first time. These actions, along with the character’s commentary regarding how Facebook, cell phones, and other technological advances have impeded true communication, should leave the reader with no illusions.

That being said, three main issues were presented to my reader for review in *Swimming In Static*. These were: Facebook, the question of consciousness, and water. I believe my presentation of these aspects explored relevant questions in such a way that the reader is one forced to think about his own responsibility in relation to the world. For example, Facebook is a rampant part of society today, and is a relevant aspect of my novel. I believe I represented all aspects of Facebook: what a person’s profile stands for, how Facebook is used to represent oneself, how it has become a major communication tool, as well as how it impedes communication by giving users a façade to hide behind. The novel also portrays how time consuming Facebook has become, and how people have begun to shape their lives around it.

Along with Facebook, the inability of current day religions to answer many people’s questions regarding existence is also a rising issue in mainstream society. Carlos’s yearning to understand consciousness is an echo of this trend. Carlos asks the appropriate questions, actively works to understand what awareness is, what makes up the essence of the individual, and what separates mind from thoughts. Most importantly, Carlos is preoccupied with how thoughts affect reality, and comes to the conclusion that thoughts are reality, which means what he thinks,
physically affects the life he lives. I think many of these questions are a prevalent part of today’s society, and the fact that the science community does not have the answers, only adds to their appeal.

Another main motif in the novel is water. Water is developed in a number of ways throughout *Swimming In Static*. Darin cares about the quality and quantity of water on the planet, and in this way, I believe it functions to reflect a major global crisis. The availability of potable water on Earth is finite, and in the past few decades has become a top environmental concern. Darin’s obsession with water; her attendance at the rally, and the questions she asks in Mexico, bring these concerns to light, thereby forcing the reader to consider them.

The presence of water however, also functions on a deeper level throughout the story. Both main characters are swimmers. The fact that they first meet under water, conceive a child under water, and are finally able to completely communicate under water, points to a continual cleansing and rebirth. It suggests flexibility within both characters, but moreover flexibility within humanity. It suggests that humans, as conscious beings, can be continually reborn: can modify their ideas, cultivate thoughts, and change their attitudes about life. With this viewpoint, water works to give significance to the themes of communication and social responsibility. Darin calls water “the womb of the world,” and I think this further reflects the message of the novel; that all life is connected, that people’s thoughts and actions affect not only them, but everyone around the world.
Bibliography


## Table of Contents

*Swimming In Static*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critical Preface</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>xxiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>xxv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 12</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 13</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 14</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 15</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 16</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 17</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 18</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 19</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 20</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 21</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 22</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 23</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 24</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 25</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 26 ................................................................................................................. 126
Chapter 27 ................................................................................................................. 132
Chapter 28 ................................................................................................................. 136
Chapter 29 ................................................................................................................ 143
Chapter 30 ................................................................................................................ 147
Chapter 31 ................................................................................................................ 149
Chapter 32 ................................................................................................................ 151
Chapter 33 ................................................................................................................ 156
Chapter 34 ................................................................................................................ 159
Chapter 36 ................................................................................................................ 170
Chapter 37 ................................................................................................................ 172
Chapter 38 ................................................................................................................ 175
Chapter 39 ................................................................................................................ 177
Chapter 40 ................................................................................................................ 179
Chapter 41 ................................................................................................................ 180
Chapter 42 ................................................................................................................ 181
Curriculum Vita ......................................................................................................... 182
Chapter 1

Tuesday, July 6, 2010 - Benito Juárez Airport - Mexico City, Mexico

Below her, Mexico City spread like multicolored coral under a hazy sea. She watched the shapes gradually become familiar forms: buildings, cars, trees. The plane landed roughly on the tarmac, jostling her and the other passengers. Darin braced herself to lessen the impact, she imagined briefly what it would feel like to die in a plane crash; how the impact would shake her, and the explosion would burn her body to weightless ashes.

She shuffled up the aisle, as the other passengers slowly de-boarded. Her mouth felt dry; she craved water and the familiar. Glancing out each small oval window as the line moved forward, she could see the late afternoon sun, and the foreign cloudless sky.

“Gracias,” the flight attendant said, as she left the plane. Darin nodded back, not wanting to speak and reveal herself. Relieved to have gone through customs in Hermosillo, she cupped one hand over her small belly, hoisted her backpack higher on her shoulders, and followed the other passengers into the terminal.

The Benito Juárez Airport felt like every other international airport Darin had ever been in. It was large and modern, with shiny, clean patterned walkways and brightly lit corridors. There were travelers speaking different languages, and announcements booming every other minute. She stopped to listen. The first one was in Spanish: something about safety and luggage. Then it was repeated in English: “For the safety of yourself and those around you, please do not leave your baggage unattended.” For what felt like the hundredth time, Darin wished there was a universal language she could rely on in times of uncertainty.

Instead of asking someone for help, she followed a tanned man with thinning hair to a small baggage claim inside the terminal. There were a number of airport officials around the
baggage area, but none of them paid her any attention. She didn’t know what the procedure was, but by luck had spotted her bag coming off of a conveyor belt. Grabbing it, she pulled out the handle bar, and set off to find Carlos.

After two months of trying to maintain a relationship over Skype, emailing, and chatting on Facebook, Darin knew that the early rush of romance was dead. What they had managed to develop—a necessity for each other—was balanced between the death of his mother, and the surprise pregnancy. There was no head over heels love, and there had never been a romantic obsession.

She wanted to be a lawyer, like her father. A doubtful possibility if she was to become a young mother. She imagined hip-hopping her way from one mishap to another, taking it all in stride. Hoping to, but probably never making much of herself. Yet, there were times, when she began to re-envision a future that looked nothing like the one she had dreamed of in high school. Maybe she could have it all: a happy family, a career, a nice home. It all depended on how Carlos reacted to the news. If love could be cultivated from nothing, then she had a chance. Even through a computer screen, his intelligent milk chocolate eyes filled her stomach with butterflies.

She continued walking. Looking up facts about Mexico City hadn’t prepared her for the reality of what that meant. There were so many people that she found herself making conscious efforts to avoid running into anyone. While looking down to check that her purse was zipped, a woman on her cell phone bumped her roughly in the shoulder.

“Uh, sorr—perdón,” Darin mumbled, but the woman just frowned and walked on.

After multiple corridors, Darin joined the back of the airport exit line. Her stomach contracted with a familiar tightening sensation. She envisioned Carlos waiting, and imagined his reaction to the pregnancy.
Darin lifted her backpack off her shoulders, and let out an audible sigh. Would the grief have changed him? She remembered speaking to him over Skype three days after he had left for Mexico. Sitting on the floor of her dorm room with her legs drawn up to her chin, Darin leaned against the wooden frame of her bed. She kept skimming her palm over the thin carpet thread of the floor, imagining it was water. She saw his face again, strained, and apologetic for not contacting her before he left. They attempted a casual conversation about finals, but neither was able to maintain a relaxed tone.

She had been distracted, unsure of how to comfort him. After fifteen minutes of self-censored chitchat, Darin mustered the courage to ask how it had happened. Quietly, Carlos had said “a car crash.” His mother had been on the highway, going too fast. Carlos had started to cry then, and she nodded back. Her cell phone began to ring and she told him she had to answer it. He had pleaded then, while her phone was ringing: *I need you Darin; say you’ll come to see me, this summer. I’ll wait for you.* And she had nodded, yes.

Darin smoothed the top of her pant leg and gathered her light brown hair into a ponytail. The line had slowed to a crawl, then stopped.
His body anticipated the swim like it would a meal, or sleep. Tensing hours before, his muscled stored up the energy they would need in the pool, while his mind quelled the storm of thought into a quiet center. It was routine, a tradition.

He had started going to the pool last fall, a few weeks after the school year began. He had been on overload: meeting American students, taking colleges classes, speaking English, cohabitatiing in a dorm. His initial intention with the swim was to get a workout. But it soon became his weekly escape. This getaway wasn’t predicated on sadness or discontent; Carlos wasn’t looking for something new. It was just taking time off. Under the water he was completely alone. He could breath, think, and let his muscle memory take over without being overwhelmed by other students, schoolwork, or American social situations. The swim provided him an hour to himself, and an hour of solitude on Whitman’s campus of 1200 students was a rare and wonderful thing.

He approached Baker Ferguson, admiring the architecture of Whitman’s newest workout facility. The building seemed to be made of pure glass. Light reflected off the gleaming walls, and through them he could see students running on treadmills, biking, and lifting weights. Carlos slid his ID card through the security scanner, and opened the double-glass door. He passed the expansive workout room quickly as he headed toward the locker room and hoped he wouldn’t run into anyone.

By the time his tennis shoes, socks, jeans, and t-shirt were off, revealing his dark skin, and blue Speedo, Carlos was shivering. Hot water from the shower warmed him for a few seconds until grabbing his cap, goggles, and towel Carlos walked out to the pool.
The first thing he always noticed was the smell: a wave of clammy chlorine that blasted him in the face and stuck to his wet skin. The two student lifeguards looked up as he entered, but didn’t motion for him to sign the pool’s user sheet—he was a regular. Carlos wrote his name and date-4/24/10, remorseful that his first year at Whitman was almost over.

Besides an old history professor doing a slow, heavy backstroke in lane 6, the pool was empty. This didn’t surprise Carlos. Saturday afternoons were never a popular workout time with the white, rich upper-class student body. Many preferred to eat brunch and nap, pre-funk for the night’s coming festivities, or nest in some nook of Penrose library to study and socialize until sunset fell over the wheat fields.

Only after dark, would the academics creep out and find some dorm party to crash, staying up until the early hours of morning, smoking cigarettes and rough strains of pot, drinking cheap beers from the local Safeway, laughing, arguing about philosophy or the state of the world in order to justify an existence that seemed hard to understand in the sheltered bubble of Whitman’s campus. They were safe, and they knew it. Some days he could join in, and forget where he came from. Usually though, Carlos felt like he watched their untroubled existence from a distance, incredulous of the life most of his peers lived. They all acted like they cared adamantly about social issues and justice and would frequently go to lengths to voice their opinions, and argue right versus wrong in order to prove just how much they cared. But Carlos knew none of them really understood what they were arguing about. To him, this made all the difference.

He walked over to lane 3, and dipped his left foot in the water. Rays of sunlight streamed through the large glass windows. To his chilled body the liquid felt almost warm. He took a few deep breaths, enjoying the tranquility of the moment. Then in one decisive movement, jumped.
It was exhilarating. The soft cold enveloped him as he sank, suspended for a moment in sheet weightlessness before floating slowly up toward the surface. Then the chill of the water shocked his body into motion. Carlos began kicking, pulling himself into an easy freestyle, forcing himself to take the first few laps slow even though his body wanted speed. It was mind over body, the principle of the matter. One, two, three strokes breathe to the right, one, two, three breathe to the left. Carlos felt his body sway side to side, allowing himself to move to the natural rhythm of his pull.

The cold water and musical cadence, the machine-like precision regulated to muscle memory dulled his senses. He began a sequence of inconsequential thoughts: Lili’s blue eyes looking up as he entered her dorm room to help her with Spanish homework. His roommate Mike, laughing yesterday during their game of Frolf as Carlos accidentally threw the disc into a tree. Then his dislike of hand-eye coordination sports, and preference for foot sports, like soccer. Back in Mexico, he was playing with the other boys in the cement schoolyard, running, yelling with the rest, kicking the ball as hard as he could.

A familiar tug of homesickness spread through him. Coming to the end of the lane, Carlos gave one last kick, and let his momentum glide him into the edge. He had swum 6 laps, only 150 meters. His breathing was a little faster than normal, but not much. The rising and falling of his chest was only slightly perceptible with each breath. His body, now acclimated to the temperature of the water, felt cold in the clammy air. Carlos glanced at the two lifeguards, a boy and girl deep in conversation, and wondered whether he would ever completely understand American culture.
Chapter 3

Initially, her mother and father had been adamant. Darin was not to travel alone to that violence-infested country in order to visit a summer fling. They were hesitant to send their only child to “that trashy country” full of drug dealers, kidnappers, and gangs. *What about Juárez? Look at what was happening in Juárez.*

In a spirit of rebellion, Darin spent weeks arguing with them, turning their normally peaceful household into a distressing power struggle. She showed them pictures of Carlos and his family to prove that many parts of Mexico were beautiful. She emphasized that the violence was concentrated in the north and not widespread, and that Carlos, a native, would be with her at all times; that they would be safe. Through tears, she talked about his mother, and described his pain so they could understand how much he needed her.

It wasn’t until late May though, that the trip to Mexico shifted from desire to necessity. This is when she drove trembling to the grocery store to buy a basketful of food, hoping to mask the small test that was hidden at the bottom of it. After arriving home, she stayed on Facebook for an hour, procrastinating to avoid the inevitable.

Then finally, sitting in her bathroom, she watched the small oval patch of white grow into a bright pink plus sign. She had wanted to panic, but felt frozen, as if suddenly paralyzed.

It was late enough in the day that her parents were home, but she didn’t want to talk to both of them. She knew this was nothing her father would accept.

She checked her Gmail account and saw that her mother was online.

*Mom, can you come to my room plz? I need to talk to you.*

The knock came a few minutes later. There was a catch in her throat that made it hard for her to speak, so she remained silent.
“Darin?” her mother opened the door.

“Mom,” she couldn’t control the tremble in her voice.

“What is it, sweetheart?” her mother whispered.

But she couldn’t say it. All Darin could do was shake her head back and forth, rub her forehead over the soft warmth of her mother’s shoulder, feel her skin.

“I made a mistake.”

Her mother took Darin’s head in both her hands, and lifted it so that they might look at each other.

“Darin. We make choices. And sometimes those choices may feel like mistakes, but—.”

“Mom, I’m pregnant.”

Darin watched her mother’s eyes close.

“That’s all you can say to me?” Darin looked at her mother, incredulous. “My life is potentially ruined and you’re giving me one word responses?”

Darin felt her mother tuck a strand of hair behind her ear, and rub her shoulder.

“I’m not going to feel sorry for you, my daughter. This is a traumatic situation. But you know, I was twenty when your father and I had you. And look how good you turned out.”

“So you’re saying I should keep it?” Darin looked up at her mother. Her eyes felt dry and swollen.

“Do you love this Carlos?” she answered, “A baby born in love is never a bad thing. A baby born out of love though, will feel like a burden. You need to find out. You’ll know when you tell him about the baby, whether he’s a man worth loving.”

That same night, under the oath of secrecy, her mother put her fork down loudly and said
she was tired of arguing, that it was Darin’s choice. Her father walked out of the room without saying a word, but Darin knew she had won. Now all she had to do was wait.

He woke her at 6am two days later, kneeling to face her, his voice low yet steady.

“Alright, you can go. But listen to me. If you are hurt, if something bad happens to you, understand that it was your decision, and not what your mother or I wanted.”

Darin lay silently, eyes open, and didn’t say a word as he kissed the top of her head, and closed the door behind him.

After a few days of searching she found cheap tickets online and convinced her mother to split the cost. She told Carlos later that week while Skyping. He had been ecstatic. Laughing and yelling into the camera, he kept repeating, “I don’t believe it! I don’t believe it! ¡Increíble!” She laughed along with him, but now weighed down by the pressure of the trip, didn’t feel quite so happy.

The next day, Carlos changed his Facebook status to In a Relationship and requested that the status be linked to her name. A cold sweat had swept over her body. Was he falling in love with her? While a part of her chastised him for being socially hasty, another part felt pleased to accept his request. To acknowledge a relationship between them meant she was one step closer to knowing.

She had gone that day, to the pool, and swam until her body ached with exhaustion. Water was the only thing that kept her from rebelling at the injustice of it all.

The airport line moved forward briefly, then stopped again. She had already begun to tune out the Spanish, which was far from the slow, romantic language that Carlos used with her. Darin tried to understand a conversation between a boy and his mother, but she couldn’t distinguish single words, their expressions seemed smashed together with exaggerated sounds.
Two years of high school Spanish had not prepared her for full immersion. She instinctively put her hand over her stomach, feeling vulnerable, and conceded that she understood nothing.

Watching them though, Darin, for a brief, guilty moment wished her parents were with her. She wished that she could rest on the shoulder of her mother while her father planned out the trip; wished there were someone else to take the responsibility off her shoulders. She dug her cell phone out of her backpack. They had agreed it was only to be used in case of emergency. Darin sighed and put it away. This was no emergency, just a bout of homesickness.
Chapter 4

He remembered the day he had gotten Whitman’s acceptance letter. It had been slipped into their mail slot, along with a few magazines, and a letter addressed to his father. He opened it in his room, read the congratulatory line and felt that rare, hot sense of accomplishment spread throughout his body. He had wanted to call the admissions office right then and accept. But there were hurtles still to overcome, and doubts clouded his euphoria. Could he live so far away from his friends? Could he handle the all-English course load? And most importantly, would his family be able to afford it?

That night, he asked his father if they could speak privately, and in the seclusion of the family study, Carlos began to explain his situation. He wanted his father to understand how important an American education was; he was ready to plead for his support, to tell him he would work and help pay for his own education.

“Papá, recibí la carta de Whitman.”

“Y, ¿qué dice, mi’jo?”

“Qué sí, me aceptaron.”

He averted his eyes to the silence, not wanting to see the remorse on his father’s face. Then he heard a strange sound. Looking up, he was astonished to see his father laughing with his head thrown back, and his hands lifted toward the ceiling.

“¡Gracias a Dios, gracias a Dios!” he kept repeating.

“Papá, voy a trabajar mucho, voy a superarme.”

But he wouldn’t listen. He just sat there, shaking his head and laughing.

“No te preocupes, mi’jo, yo me hago cargo. Vas a recibir una educación americana. Vas a hacer algo importante en la vida.”
And he had gone on about how important it was for Carlos to get out of Mexico and make something of himself. And he kept insisting that their family had plenty of money; that Carlos should not worry. His father would pay for everything.

And he had, to his word. His father paid for tuition at the beginning of each semester. He had paid for Carlos’s books, his room and board, his food, and his plane ticket. He even sent him extra money every month so that could “go out with his friends, and enjoy college.” And every time Carlos expressed concern, or told him to save the money, his father would just laugh and tell him that his education was important; that it was worth it.

It still bothered him though. His parents had good jobs. When he started Whitman they had both worked at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. They lived above-average lives for their country’s standards, though they weren’t excessively wealthy. Were they blowing through their savings just for him?

He declined his father’s offer of a plane ticket home for Christmas on the pretense of wanting to sightsee, and had spent the month-long break with Mike’s family in Seattle. They fed him every meal, and even bought him a couple of thoughtful Christmas presents: a nice blue wool sweater for the freezing Walla Walla winters, a few new notebooks, and a CD of Carlos’s favorite American band, the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Once they were back at school, Carlos felt like he owed Mike something for their hospitality, and tried to make it up by keeping their drinking supply steady on the weekends. Often, he would go out of his way to convince some upper classman to make beer runs for them on Friday nights.

To Carlos, Whitman meant more than just the next four years of his life. They were the next four years that would dictate his future—a new life. He felt driven by urgency to make something of himself. Carlos loved his country, but he was tired of the fighting. They had already
lost a cousin in a random street shoot out in Juárez. Although he knew that money created corruption and violence, and there was no guarantee the U.S. would be any better, he had to try.

Sinking back into the warmth of the pool, Carlos glanced at the clock: 3:35. He took one last breath, waited until the second hand hit the 60 on the racing clock, then pushed off the wall, spring-like with his feet in a streamline position. Clenched tightly, his pressed his legs together, feet pointed, arms up over his head: he was soaring. He closed his eyes and for a few brief seconds felt completely weightless. This must be what it felt like to fly. His body carved a path through the gentle giving water, the way it might carve a path through air. He remembered water and air shared the same atoms; that they were essential to each other’s existence.

Reminded then, of his looming physics final Carlos tensed briefly, then realized the test was just another step to becoming an expert in the field. To truly pursue his passion, he needed a thorough understanding of Physics. Only with the proper degree and science background would he be able to publish his findings on consciousness—what made up the essence of his being. And could it, as some books suggested, affect actual mass? He imagined his first published paper, proving that consciousness was a weighted reality. It would be like Einstein’s General Theory of Relativity. It would change the world. No, it would change the way people saw the world. Carlos had started a few experiments of his own: using the power of thought to alter his own personal reality. It was exciting to see how his life could change. Whitman had been one of those changes.

His left arm lifted from the water, and Carlos turned his head to breath with his stroke. He swam at an even rhythm, but these laps were faster: a race against time.

Nearing the end of the lane, Carlos turned his head to breathe and saw a girl in the next lane enter the pool feet first, rapidly amidst bubbles and froth. She sank for a few seconds then shot up to the surface. Carlos decided to break his normal breathing pattern, for another look. On
the next stroke, he turned his head to the same side and was awarded a thin pair of white freckled legs, a high-cut black spandex suit, and a toned, rounded backside. He tucked his head for the flip and saw, briefly, raised flesh on the thigh closest to him. Pushing off from the turn, the hair on his arms rose, vacillating as the water rushed over him.

He returned to his fast-paced stroke, and allowed his thoughts to drift to old friends from home. He made a mental note to create a Facebook invite for a big reunion when he arrived next month; hopefully his father would allow the gathering.

No longer smooth and settled by his stroke, Carlos suddenly noticed that the pool’s water had turned choppy, interfered with his breathing, and sloshed him in the face. The violent churning of the water slowed him down. Aggravated, Carlos turned his head and saw through the slight fog of his goggles, white freckled limbs in a black suit hacking through the water swiftly, matching him stroke for stroke.

Carlos immediately tried to increase the speed of his stroke, cutting through the rough waves quicker, and kicking harder to distance himself from the frantic splashing, and from the personal unease her presence gave him. Every increase in his speed however, marked an increase from her too.

They were nearing the end of the lane. Carlos pulled hard and glided, one, two seconds then tucked his head tightly and entered the turn. He thought he could beat her off the wall, and he was right. He felt a fresh burn in his calves as he sprung into a streamline glide. She hadn’t caught up to him. Urging his body to swim faster, Carlos felt his lungs tighten in protest.

Then she was there, matching his speed. How humiliating to be racing a girl. They neared the end of the lane again and this time it was the girl who pulled in front. Carlos turned his head, and saw her slender body rocking side-to-side, churning stillness into froth, her small arms
slicing through the water.

He felt exhaustion course through his body. His arms and legs ached, each breath scratched at his ragged lungs. No longer himself, but a radiating heat, Carlos was grateful for the cool waves that washed over him, slipped through the slits between his fingers, and caressed his cheeks.

Then he was a young boy again, swimming his first race in Mexico City for his team Colima. The silence under the water broke each time he lifted his head to take a breath. The people were yelling, waving their hands telling him to swim faster. He saw boys on either side of him, gaining. He kicked forward with a surge of strength, not feeling the protest of his limbs, not until after. He turned his head for one last breath and saw his mother’s face, dark eyes wide, mouth open, telling him to kick with the motion of her flapping hands. He felt her love and belief in him, and it was her face that propelled him to finish the race.

He hadn’t felt such a need to win, such a burning in his lungs for a long time. They came out of the turn simultaneously. She was so close, how easy it would be to reach under the lane and touch her. Every muscle in his body pulsed with exhaustion, but under the water he felt like laughing—like screaming out hysterically with a joy he couldn’t explain.

They were halfway across the lane. Carlos urged himself to kick harder, to keep up with the freckled limbs. He gave two strong kicks as they came to the wall, determined to beat her off the turn, and tucked his head for a tight flip. The wall did not give, and he slapped his feet against it for a brief second before rocketing off again, arms and legs pressed together, soaring through the forgiving water.

For a brief moment, he thought he had done it. He thought she had given up, conceded defeat. But the water was too still. Slowing his stroke, Carlos dipped his head down and back,
turning his neck as if to breath and saw under the water that her lane was empty.

Slowing to a crawl, Carlos began to breath every stroke; his heart thumping against the side of his chest. Only the cool water that slid over him could calm his burning cheeks. Turning onto his back, Carlos swam the last twenty-five yards staring up at the white ceiling, wishing he could drink the air. Why did she race with him, why leave so suddenly? He might pass her on campus and never know; he hadn’t seen her face. His memory was only a fragmentation of limbs and cool splashes—a wavering underwater view of reality.

He glided to the end, waiting until his hand touched the curb of the gutter before stopping to rest against the wall.

“Some race,” the lifeguard called out.

“Yeah,” Carlos answered.

“Hey, where did she—?” he asked suddenly.

“She left man, just jumped out.”

Carlos held onto the edge and looked down into the pool. It’s smooth, still surface was enticing. He glided his hand over the top, back and forth, back and forth, barely feeling the liquid. Water dripped off his black hair, slid down the hill of his wide nose, skimmed over the skin behind his ears, and gathered in tiny drops on his eyelashes. The door to the locker room opened and he looked up expectantly. But it was just a chubby woman in a ruffled one-piece with two young girls complaining about the cold. Their mother urged them crossly and walked over to sign the visitor’s book. A draft from the locker room hit Carlos’s face and staring at the door, he shivered. *Exhausted from a good swim.* No, too generic, *Workout? Done. Now ready to study.* Nah, that was common. *Who was she?* Yes, that captured his mood. Plus, it left his friends guessing. It never hurt to be cryptic. He smiled; content with the clever Facebook status he
would post on his wall, then hauled himself out of the pool.
Chapter 5

With the exit only minutes away, she tried to imagine living in Mexico. Her Spanish was sub-par, but she could take lessons, and Carlos would help her. She knew no one, but if they had a baby she would probably be too busy to socialize. How long until she could get a driver’s license, or a job, and become a legal resident? She displaced a creeping feeling, like she was drowning in unknowns, with the reassuring thought that she could start a list of To Do’s as soon as she got to the Solano residence.

Shuffling forward, she became aware of a familiar nausea. Darin closed her eyes and tried to think about something else. She could leave the terminal, but still she faltered. Should she tell him as soon as she saw him, or wait?

*You’ll know when you tell him about the baby, whether he’s a man worth loving.* Darin still wasn’t sure what this meant. People didn’t just know. They had to ponder and deliberate, to weigh the options before making a decision. Her mom made it sound too easy.

Maybe she could teach herself to love him. Hadn’t she been accepted into Whitman? She was intelligent. With enough time and practice, she thought she could teach herself to do anything. She felt dizzy; the ground beneath her began to wave. There was a sign for the bathroom, and she walked inside.

Standing in front of a mirror, Darin leaned against the sink trying to inhale as much air as possible. Inhale deeply, out exhale. The dry heaving started slow. Deep in the gut of her stomach. One heave. She breathed heavily. It worked its way up into her stomach cavity. Another heave. She walked quickly to the garbage can. Two short heaves as it moved through her esophagus. Then a fifth and she was gagging, puking up the food served on the plane. Her body shook as it contracted in two long heaves. It felt like it wouldn’t end, but just as suddenly she was out of
breath and began to cough.

A mother with a young child in her arms approached Darin, and said something in Spanish. Her eyes were kind, and her hand reached out to Darin as if in a gesture of compassion. Glancing up, Darin shook her head. The words wouldn’t come. *I don’t understand you,* she wanted to say. *I’m sorry.* The mother frowned, looking back once before exiting the bathroom. Darin rinsed her mouth out twice with water from the sink’s tap, and spit the remains of her vomit into the basin before turning the faucet on full blast to wash it down. She let the water run over her hands, enjoying its soothing feel. Chewing her last two crackers, Darin inspected herself in the mirror. She smoothed a few loose side strands of hair, rubbed away the smeared make-up under her hazel-brown eyes, and bit her lips a few times to make them red. Now it was time.

She saw Carlos as soon as she passed through the security checkpoint. He was standing alone, scanning the crowd, and holding a large bouquet of pink roses. She faltered at his appearance. He had always been slender, but now appeared concave. Dark circles sagged under his eyes. His hair, which fell in strands around his face, had grown long and shaggy. He wore a nice pair of jeans and a dressy black jacket, but Darin thought there was only so much a person could do to hide the sadness. He turned his head slightly and they made eye contact. Then he was walking toward her. She smiled. Before she could say a word he was there, crushing her body to his, caressing her hair and face. Darin tried to pull away, to lift her head and greet him, but his lips found hers and they were kissing. Short, frantic kisses that left her breathless and wanting air.

After a few moments they pulled apart, and he handed her the roses.

“Thank you, they’re beautiful,” she said. Her face was flushed and she could feel her heart pounding in her chest.
“I’m so glad you’re here, I’m very happy,” Carlos said, kissing three of her knuckles. He looked up and smiled, letting his brown eyes stare into hers.

“Carlos, I…”

Darin averted her gaze to watch a young girl holding a baby. The girl, so young, was wearing a bright red dress. She cooed and bounced the child gently while it screamed. It wouldn’t hurt to wait a little longer before telling him.

“I’m happy too,” she said.

“How was the flight?”

“It was good.”

They stood there, looking at each other. Darin tried to think of something to say. She was so used to chatting with him online, and writing e-mails that face-to-face felt too forward, too raw.

“Let’s go to the car. Ready?” he asked.

She made a fleeting panoramic glance around the airport.

“Wait,” she said. “I need a drink of water first. I’m thirsty from the plane ride.”

She moved toward a water fountain she had spotted against the wall, but Carlos grabbed her arm.

“Not that water, amor,” he said. “We have some bottled in the car, it’s safer.”

He pulled her away gently; one of his hands on her arm, the other, tugged at her suitcase. She frowned and after a few steps, stopped.

“What do you mean it’s safer?” she asked.

Carlos looked back at her.

“For foreigners I mean. Sometimes they can’t handle the water in Mexico City.”
“Is something wrong with it?”

Darin knew that the water in some parts of the world was polluted and undrinkable, but she never assumed that Mexico City, the life and industrial hub of its country, would be one of those places.

“That’s nothing wrong with it,” Carlos answered with an edge of defensiveness in his voice. “If you’re native to this part of the world.”

“What does that mean?”

“Can we talk about this in the car?” Carlos asked, brushing the stringy strands of hair out of his face.

“Sure,” she said.

But water was her life, it was their life, and good water would mean a healthy life for their potential child. Why wasn’t Carlos more concerned about this? She shook her head indiscernibly, and following him into Mexico City.

She stopped behind him at a walkway that connected the curb to a parking lot ahead. It was hot, but not as blistering as Hermosillo had been, and definitely not as warm as she had expected. Still, a moist sweat broke out over her chest, and on her upper lip, which she wiped away with the back of her hand. Trucks and cars continued to pull up to the curb, people climbed in and out of their vehicles, hugged, lifted luggage into truck beds and trunks. Everywhere, there was Spanish: in the cries of greetings, the yelling of directions, the exuberant recognition of friends and relations, the comfort of small talk. The airport seemed busy for a Tuesday; she kept a wary eye on her suitcase.

“Where did you park?” she asked.

“I didn’t park,” Carlos replied, looking distractedly to his left.
“You taxied here? I thought you had a car?” she frowned, still thirsty.

“No,” Carlos said. “We have a driver. I just texted him. He’s supposed to be here.”

The front of her hair had fallen loose from her ponytail, and Darin tucked the strands tightly behind her left ear.

“A driver? Like a rented one?”

“No, he works for my family.”

A driver? Her parents worked full time jobs and they didn’t even have a driver. Her dad was only an immigration lawyer, but they still lived comfortable lives. She should have known Carlos and his family were rich. How else could they afford to send their son to a private American college?

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

Darin had no idea whether it made sense or not, but she didn’t want to sound uneducated, or even worse, uncultured.

“There he is,” Carlos said, and pointed to a sleek, silver Land Rover that maneuvered around two parked vans loading passengers, and glided silently up to the side of the curb.

A stocky man with large arms, and a balding head, got out of the driver’s seat and walked around to the side of the car. Carlos said something to him in Spanish. The driver held his hand out, and in a thick accent said, “Hello, nice to meet you. Welcome to Mexico. My name Raúl.”

His callouses were rough against her soft palm. She didn’t know how to answer him, but smiled back as he opened the side door. Carlos motioned for her to climb in first, then followed after her.

The inside of the car was immaculate, and smelled like a recent interior cleaning. Darin wished briefly she had worn nicer clothes. After Carlos was seated, Raúl shut the door carefully,
then loaded Darin’s suitcase in the back before returning to the driver’s seat and pulling away from the loading area.

Cool air blasted them as soon as the car started. Darin leaned back into her seat feeling clammy and tired.

“I think you will like the drive, we pass some beautiful things,” Carlos said, looking over at her.

She glanced back at him.

“How far away do you live from the airport?” she asked.

“About an hour. I’ll point out some, so you can start to know Mexico.”

His English had lessened a bit, just a few mispronunciations, or a slight falter for the right word. She heard them, but didn’t correct him.

Darin turned to look out the window. It was late afternoon. The sun was low in the blue sky, which was shaded with light pinks, and yellows. They passed green trees and bushes, which surprised her. She had expected more of a desert. Where were all the cactuses? Tall modern buildings loomed over them. Cars spread out across three lanes, and multitudes of people walked on the sidewalks. They came to a stoplight, and as soon as the cars around them slowed down, Darin watched three men and one women walk in and out of the inert traffic, holding up newspapers, candy, and bottles of water.

One man with cracked skin under a dirty baseball hat walked up to their car and wobbled a spray bottle and rag at their windshield. Darin watched as Raúl shook his head and hand, indicating no. The man ignored the motions and moved closer to the car. He was about to spray when the light turned green. Darin jumped as Raúl hit the horn, and yelled something before accelerating their car forward.
“Isn’t it dangerous for people to be walking in traffic?”

“We aren’t scared of cars like Americans,” Carlos replied.

“Maybe you should be,” Darin said, laying her hand over her belly.

“Maybe. We have to make a living though. Many people are poor here,” Carlos answered her.

Turning to the front, he said something to Raúl in Spanish, who nodded back at him.

“What did you say to him?” she asked.

“Just a reminder.”

“Oh,” Darin said.

Her body was heavy and listless while her stomach growled in protest.

“Here’s water, if you’re still thirsty. Look, there is La Cabeza de Juárez.”

Darin took the bottle of water that Carlos handed her. Glancing out the window, she saw a huge wooden bust of a man’s face and shoulders surrounded by a gate and green trees. The face was painted different pastel colors, and a mural spread across the chest.

“It’s pretty,” Darin said. “Is it a park?”

“No, just a monument to Benito Juárez, an old president of Mexico. I think it is closed though.”

They sped past, and Darin opened the sealed bottle of water.

“So you would drink the city water?” she asked him, after a few gulps.

“My family prefers to use bottled water,” Carlos looked straight at her. “Why do you care so much?”

A Spanish radio station sounded softly from the front of the car. She heard the excited yell of an announcer’s voice and assumed it was a World Cup match. She knew Carlos had been
following the games. When he reached over and touched her leg, she flinched.

“It’s just something I care about,” she finally said.

“Are you okay?” the tone in Carlos’s voice had a slight rise.

Darin looked at him, trying to read his thoughts.

“I’m fine, why?”

“You seem, distant, not quite here. I want you here, with me, all of you.”

Darin’s eyes widened, and she motioned with her head in Raúl’s direction.

Carlos smiled, “Don’t worry, he doesn’t understand much English.”

She sat back in her seat, and tried to return his smile.

“I’m sorry Carlos. I’m just a tired. It’s been a long day.”

He didn’t say anything, but rested his hand on her leg, and caressed the top of her thigh in a gentle circular motion.

She sighed softly and looked out the window. They drove by more tall buildings, but the farther they went from the airport, the less frequent they became.

“There are so many things I want to show you,” Carlos said. “Tonight we can walk around the streets of Huamantla, and maybe I’ll take you to carnaval. It’s beautiful, you’re gonna love it.”

“Huamantla?” she asked. “I thought you lived in Mexico City.”

“We moved after…It’s my grandmother’s house. My father inherited it a few years ago.”

Carlos took his hand off her leg, and turned to look out the window.

“What were you saying, about carnaval?” she asked.

“It’s not important,” he looked back at her.

“And tomorrow?” she asked.
“Whatever you like. I don’t care. As long as I’m with you.”

“Okay,” she said. “Alright.”
Chapter 6

Carlos walked straight across Ankeny Field, narrowly avoiding a Frisbee thrown over his head. Like he usually did after a hard swim, Carlos felt genuinely happy. The campus was in full bloom, and added to the fervor of being alive. He passed the library and tennis courts, and admired the cherry blossoms that lined the back and sides of the campus buildings, the walkways, and ponds. Long willow branches grew by the brooks, caressing green blades of grass and the stream surfaces. Everything was green, white, pink, blooming and bursting onto the Whitman scene. He watched a line of ducklings jump into a pond, and a set of squirrels spiral up a fir tree.

Carlos thought that if he ever had to paint a picture of paradise, Whitman’s campus would be the outline on his palette; the rest he would fill in with the fervor of Mexico City’s liveliest streets, the beauty of the city at dusk, and the warm generosity of his people.

During the past few weeks the days had gotten longer and warmer, and the campus had grown even more beautiful. Instead of staying holed up in their dorms, houses, or study corners, students were slinking outside, lying in the grass, kicking balls, and tossing Frisbees. Carlos admired the easy, happy ignorance of most of his peers, aware that it isolated him. He knew more about the real world, the one that wasn’t so picturesque, or peaceful, and this precluded him from the doe-eyed existence of many students.

On some days though, when it seemed as if the entire study body was outside, when shouts and laughter echoed throughout the buildings making it hard to focus, Carlos let himself forget the troubles of his country, and joined his peers in their lazy enjoyments.

Smiling at a girl he recognized from his Core class, Carlos crossed the wooden bridge and walked toward his dorm. Tucked into one corner of campus, Anderson Hall was isolated
from the other buildings, which created a sense of solidarity among the inhabitants. With only three floors and two wings, Anderson was small, yet intimate. His room was in the left wing of the building and from there he could see the backside of Anderson, a small green lawn, and a half basketball court.

Carlos entered the building, climbed one flight of stairs, and turned left into B-Section. Their room was at the end of the hall. Carlos opened the unlocked door, and realized Mike was gone. Closing the door to muffle the various voices emitting from other rooms, he put his backpack down on the floor and stood still, enjoying the quiet Saturday afternoon.

Carlos neat bed, and Mike’s unmade one were lined perpendicular to the wall on the left. Both of their desks sat under the windows, and were littered with papers, their Core books on antiquity and modernity, and various other English and math textbooks. Carlos could see Homer’s *The Odyssey*, Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, and Plato’s *Symposium*, mixed in with Henry James’ *What Maisie Knew*, a beginning Spanish textbook on Mike’s desk, *Calculus I*, and *The Elegant Universe* on his.

Mike had decided to take Spanish second semester because, as he told Carlos, with a native speaker for a roommate, no class would be easier. Carlos hadn’t minded. He enjoyed teaching Mike the rhythms and rules of his native language.

His ultimate securities though, were his calculus and physics textbooks. Numbers kept him sane. They made him feel as if order still prevailed in the world. Remembering again, his physics final in a week and a half, Carlos decided to create a study guide after dinner.

Large piles of clothes lined the floor by Mike’s bed, and as Carlos walked over to his desk, he accidentally brushed two cans of Keystone Light, which fell and rattled to a stop on the floor. Sitting down at his computer, he pulled up his Facebook profile, typed the status he had
revised in the pool, and published it to his profile. He clicked open another browser and scanned his personal e-mail. There was a message from his father. The first line mentioned a sum of money he had just deposited in Carlos’s account. Scowling, Carlos exited without finishing the message, and shut the lid of his laptop.

Moving over to his bed, Carlos took off his shirt, then pushed his blankets and sheets to the side and lay down on his back. What a peculiar mood he was in. Overly content with his education, and his beautiful school, walking back had momentarily stripped the swim from his mind. But still, it was there. Returning now, it rushed back in fragmented images.

He saw again the raised skin of a thigh right before his turn, her rounded bottom tight and taut. She had taunted him. Stretched out her wet body, length for length with his. Teasing, only to disappear. Why had he kept going? He could have pulled up short during the race, and waited for her, or touched her under the lane. Then he might have seen her face, and introduced himself. But he had wanted to win. Testosterone trumped rationality and now he was paying the consequence. He had created an experience and ignored the opportunity it gave him.

Carlos sat up in bed and walked over to the mirror. *Who are you?* He stared into his own brown eyes. What made up the essence of him—Carlos? What gave him the sense that he was alive, able to process experiences, and produce thought? What if she could lead him somehow to the answers? He must have brought her to his life for a reason.

Metal jiggling in the doorknob returned Carlos to the present. Moving away from the mirror, he sat back down on his bed. For a brief second, Carlos regretted Mike’s return, preferring the quiet of the room and his own thoughts to that of company. Then Mike’s goofy face, with his big ears, and bushy eyebrows appeared around the open door, and Carlos felt relieved by the onset of his roommate’s distractions.
“I will, I will!” Mike yelled down the hall, before closing the door.

“Whew! You stink like pool,” Mike said, pinching his nose comically, as he edged around Carlos’ bed with exaggerated movements. Once at his desk, he began emptying the contents of his backpack.

“Oh come on,” Carlos laughed in protest. “It’s not that bad.”

“Hey man, I just saw Lili in the hall. She wanted me to remind you to help her with Spanish tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah. Right,” Carlos answered.

Mike turned from his desk to look at him.

“Yeah, right?” he repeated. “Yeah, right? Is this the same roommate that I have lived with for a year? You’ve been chasing this girl since September! I thought you would be thrilled she finally wants to study with you.”

Carlos looked out the window past Mike. He saw milky white limbs powdered with freckles in the reflection. There was something more to that swim then he could process.

“Yes, I am excited,” he answered.

Mike narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Carlos, but didn’t inquire further. They were both, in their own ways, respectful of privacy.

“Alright, well don’t forget, or she’ll be upset with me, and I don’t want to get in trouble with the drama queen of E-section.”

Mike smiled good-naturedly, and Carlos returned his smile.

“Hey, today in the pool…” Carlos paused.

“Yeah?” Mike asked without turning around from his desk, where he shuffled through stacks of paper.
Carlos knew then, that he wasn’t ready to explain. He wanted to stay wrapped in the secret for the rest of the day, to let it harden his stomach whenever he remembered.

“Oh, there was just a hot girl, no big deal.”

“Nice man, hey listen, a group of us are going to grab some taco truck and head out to the wheat fields for dinner. You in?”

“I guess I could eat your American tacos tonight” Carlos grinned. “What time?”

“Hey go easy on us!” Mike laughed. “Six, I think. I’m going to try and finish this essay before though, so go take a shower, I need some peace and quiet.” Mike laughed again at his own bad manners before turning back to his writing.

Putting his shirt back on, Carlos grabbed his Calculus textbook, and slipped on his Chaco sandals before leaving the room. He knew he wouldn’t take a shower, not today. He wanted the water they had shared to soak into his skin, and the smell to stay as a reminder of what he had felt, for as long as it might last.
Chapter 7

They had been driving for half an hour. Outside, dusk had set. Carlos had asked her if she was tired, and gave her a sweatshirt. Leaning against the window, she closed her eyes, but could not sleep. Darin listened to Carlos text while she returned to the one question that continued to plague her. Why had she slept with him that night? She had only done it six times: three times with an ex-high school boyfriend, twice with Fred Barnes who lived down the hall from her, and now once with Carlos.

All six sessions she admitted to herself, had felt relatively the same. Something larger and warmer than a tampon pushed, and prodded its way in and out of her vagina for a number of minutes before the body on top of her shuddered and jerked forward in a few violent thrusts, and the hard thing inside of her pulsated three to four times then began to shrink.

It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy it. The kissing, caressing, and fondling were nice. If she moved her hips in a circular motion she sometimes felt a faint sensation of pleasure, like budding warmth. But it was always distant and never manifested into anything great.

Where was the ecstasy? The screaming, clawing, life-changing sex that would leave her begging for more? After nineteen years of seeing sex on TV, in the movies, and from a few brief glimpses of Internet porn, Darin had to admit that she was rather disappointed by the whole experience.

The truth was—and she knew it to be true in the unstated way that she loved her mom—she had seduced Carlos for the experience. In order to understand the workings of the world, she needed to experience basic human nature. She needed to have amazing sex so she could understand people’s obsession with it. The opportunity with Carlos had presented itself and she had taken it without considering the consequences. The outcome, she supposed, was also just
another step in her education. An unexpected one to be sure, but perhaps that was how life went.

Carlos’s touched her arm, gently, and she opened her eyes.

“Sorry, mi amor. I didn’t mean to startle you,” Carlos said. “We’re almost there.”

“It’s okay.” Darin smiled at Carlos and grabbed his hand.

“I was just thinking about tonight,” she said.

He smiled back at her, the first real smile that she had seen since he picked her up; free of inhibitions. Darin wondered if he had forgotten about his mother’s death. Telling him about the baby would surely achieve similar results.

“Welcome to Huamantla,” Carlos murmured.

She looked out the window. They had entered a neighborhood, but she couldn’t see everything in the dim lighting. Houses lined the streets side to side, as if they shared a wall. Everything was pushed together: the upturned sidewalks, the roads, and the walls. Darin breathed in deeply, holding the breath tight in her lungs. There were no yards, no gates, no grass, and no trees. Just walls, locks, cracked cement walkways, and dirt roads.

It was early evening. Many people were still outside. Some walked along the sidewalks, while others stood still on the street corners, laughing and talking. Two young boys stuffed handfuls of Cheetos in their mouths, and looked up as they drove past. Darin waved from the car window. The smallest one waved back.

The car finally stopped in front of a long door that seemed part of a block of wall lining the street. Darin watched a cloud of dust drift up, envelope them, and settle down to the ground like a drowsy spirit momentarily wakened. Raúl said something to Carlos, who flipped opened his phone and sent a text.

Darin watched as a door on the wall slid open a minute later. Raúl turned the car around,
and backed it into a small, enclosed room, bare except for a couple of blankets and some tools along the back wall.

“This is our garage,” Carlos explained as Raúl eased the Land Rover to a stop.

Darin moved to open the door after the car turned off, but Carlos held her back.

“Raúl will get it,” he said.

“Oh,” Darin answered, and waited for Raúl to climb down from the front seat, and open her door.

“Gracias,” she said, while exiting the car.

“De nada, señorita,” Raúl answered, before closing her door and walking over to Carlos’s side to do the same.

She walked around the side of the car to join Carlos, only then noticing a petite girl with long black hair a few feet away. The girl said a few words to Raúl who fastened a padlock on the garage door. He nodded to her in response, lifted Darin’s suitcase from the trunk, and left. The girl walked over to her, said something in Spanish, and brought her face very close to Darin’s, as if to kiss her.

Darin jerked back from the girl’s embrace.

“I’m sorry, I...”

The girl frowned and spoke loudly to Carlos, who was playing with his phone. Looking up, he grinned.

“Meet my sister,” he said to Darin. “Alejandra. She’s not coming on to you or anything.” Carlos gave a course laugh, “We Mexicans like to greet with a kiss on the cheek.”

“Oh, hi!” Darin stuck out her hand and tried to smile sincerely. She wondered how close Alejandra and Carlos were. She would ask Carlos about it later. The thought of having a sister
was exhilarating.

“Hola,” Alejandra replied back, and softly shook Darin’s hand.

Together they left the garage and walked into a miniature courtyard illuminated by small white light fixtures that hung in every corner. The ground was lined with tile and surrounded by white walls on all sides. In the center there was a white fountain no bigger than a birdbath, decorated with blue flowers. There was no water inside the fountain, and judging by the cracks on the bowl, Darin guessed there hadn’t been for a while. A few dead flowers sat in pots along the perimeter; the courtyard was otherwise bare.

She imagined sitting here with her young son or daughter, pointing out the flowers, talking quietly under the afternoon sun. They would play only in the house, or the courtyard. Never in the street. Darin was a few steps ahead of Carlos and Ale, but could hear them whispering in a rapid Spanish. Bending her head closer to the fountain to inspect the blue floral design, she heard Ale say “mamá,” and “gringa,” to which Carlos replied—the only word she understood was “dójalo”—drop it. Was this how the trip was going to be? Ale concealing her hostility, while both of them still mourned for their mother? What would happen if she announced the baby? Straightening up, Darin walked toward the siblings. Carlos gave her a thin smile.

“You must be tired, amor. Let’s go inside, we have a surprise for you.”

Carlos took her hand as they crossed the short courtyard to a door opposite the garage. Darin followed Carlos and Alejandra into a darkened room. She stepped inside as someone switched on the lights. Balloons. They were hung all over the room. Pink, blue, and yellow balloons bunches hung in the corners of the walls and on the back of chairs.

Curved arches separated by columns divided the center of the room. In between the
columns hung a banner that read “Bienvenida a México, Darin!” Some of the balloons had writing on them as well. Most of them said, “Welcome” or “México”, or just “Darin!”

“Do you like it? Our mother used to do this if we had guests who had never been to Mexico before.”

Darin saw Ale turn to face a desk that stood in the corner. Carlos ignored his sister.

“It’s very pretty, thank you,” Darin went up to Carlos and kissed him on the cheek.

Ale said something, opened up one of the desk drawers, and grabbed a camera.

“Photo,” she said to Darin, and motioned with her hand for Darin and Carlos to get together under the banner. Darin wanted to protest the picture, but couldn’t think of the right words. Carlos pulled her closer to him. She smiled with her mouth closed just seconds before the flash, both hands resting gently over the curve of her belly.
Chapter 8

Carlos normally ordered for everyone whenever they went to Taco Truck. During those times, he felt proud to be a Mexican living and functioning in America. His friends admired the fact that he was bilingual; most people on campus were not.

The long, deserted road stretched forward with sinewy hands. A coating of blue sky fell over untamed wheat fields on both sides of him. While his friends chatted in the car, Carlos turned to study each one.

Amy was slightly chubby, with soft blonde hair that fell in abundant curls down her back. She was studious, but loved to drink, and was a Delta Gamma sorority girl. He always wondered whether drinking, like generously loaning her car was just a ploy for friends, or whether it was a true part of her nature.

Amanda, a small brunette, and Lili, his yearlong crush, had been friends since high school. They were both on Whitman’s tennis team and as far as Carlos could tell, fairly consumed by it. David was a tiny guy, who always dressed in tight fitting pants, and dyed his hair black. He was mostly quiet, but had a sharp wit.

“We’re going to miss the sunset!” Amanda complained.

“We’re almost there,” Amy said.

“You’re such a whiner Amanda,” Mike teased.

They passed miles of wheat fields. Hills rolled out in the distance, though Walla Walla was mostly flat and full of produce. Carlos stared out the window, watching the wheat move like waves of water in the wind. He wondered what she was doing tonight.

“Man, Carl, you’re so quiet!” Mike elbowed him in the side. Everyone turned toward Carlos, eager for entertainment to pass the time.
“Tired,” Carlos mumbled, then grinned. “And this food smells too damn good!”

The rest of them nodded in agreement, causing a fresh round “drive faster,” from the girls.

“We’re practically there.”

Amy slowed the car and turned left onto a dirt road. Bumping and jostling over potholes and uneven ground, they stopped near a defunct wheat mill and worn train tracks.

The girls jumped out of the car to spread a blanket on the ground. Carlos, Mike, and David grabbed the beer, and food.

The sun hadn’t quite set as Carlos sat down and took his first bite of taco. It was large and full of onions, cilantro, cheese, lettuce, and seasoned chicken. Still didn’t beat tacos from home. Mike popped off the top of a Corona and handed it to him. He took a big swallow and thought how funny it was that a common Mexican beer was considered “exotic” in the U.S.

For the first few minutes they sat in silence, chewing and drinking, watching the sun set behind pale yellow fields. The sky filled with deep purple and orange clouds streaked with canary yellow wings as the crest of the sun finally passed the horizon and was gone. The temperature fell, and the six of them scooted closer on the blanket.

“I can’t wait for Core to be over, St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is so boring!” Amy said.

The others, mouths full, nodded in agreement.

“His ideas about guilt are kind of interesting though. According to him, we’re all living in sin,” Mike offered.

Lili rolled her eyes.

“Anyone who’s not a chaste, devout Catholic is living in sin. He’s ridiculous.”

“He’s unique for his time though. At least he offers a chance at redemption. Just look at
the first few sections of the book, he was a bad boy,” Carlos laughed at his own joke and the others joined in.

“Yeah, those impure thoughts of his were wild,” Amanda said innocently, causing another round of laughter.

“What?” she asked. “They were!” and gave a shy smile.

“We should start a Facebook page for Core,” Mike suggested.

“What do you mean?” Lili asked.

“Well,” Mike said, between bites of food. “It would be nice to have an online forum that all freshman could access to talk about Core, you know, if we have questions about certain books, or if we all just want a place to collectively complain.”

The rest of them nodded in agreement as they ate.

“I like it,” Carlos said. “We should design the page tonight.”

“Make sure you invite me,” Amy said.

“And me, and me,” Lili and Amanda chimed in.

The rest of them laughed.

“You want to Mike?” Carlos asked, intrigued by the prospect of a campus-wide online project.

“I’m down,” Mike grinned. “And don’t worry, we’re going to invite all the freshmen.”

They eventually finished eating. The three girls left to walk off the food while Carlos lay back on the blanket and looked up at the darkening sky. Mike and David began an enthusiastic discussion on U.S. politics, but Carlos tried to tune them out.

Every time he looked up into the sky, really looked, he felt overwhelmed by its size and the placement of his existence within the universe. His mind tried to visualize moving past the
ozone layer, past the moon and the planets orbiting their sun, past more stars and more solar systems just like theirs to the center of the Milky Way. Although he felt individualized, separate within the whole of existence, Carlos couldn’t help but ponder his relationship to the rest of the universe.

   Somewhere, somehow, the universe came to exist—energy and matter spread throughout the planes of time and space—and because of this, Carlos knew they were all just part of a whole. But what was that “whole?” If his body was made from the same matter as a huge star thousands of light years away, shouldn’t there exist a connection between him and that star? And moreover, shouldn’t there exist a connection between him and anything sharing that same matter?

   He remembered a trip his family had taken to Veracruz, a month before he left for Whitman. On the second day of their vacation, they had gone to the beach to have lunch and play in the ocean. Carlos spent an hour with his sister in the water, splashing one another, running into and away from the waves, and later walking far enough in that his feet lifted from the sand, and he could float suspended in the ocean.

   Eventually Alejandra left to eat, but he had wanted to stay in the water. It was there, weightless in the ocean, as the rhythm of the waves moved his body back and forth, that he experienced a strange sensation, as if he was no longer himself. As if he was aware of his existence, but for a moment, became part of something greater than just ‘Carlos.’ He felt the wind on his face, and the water surrounding his body and knew then, that there was a larger life force shaping the world.

   His memory was interrupted, as Mike and David opened up their second beers and lay down next to Carlos.
“Seriously, the economic situation in this country is worse than my little sister’s plan to get rich by saving up every penny she ever finds,” David commented, laughing briefly, but soon fell quiet.

“We’ve done it to ourselves though, that’s capitalism at its finest. The system is inherently flawed, designed to widen the gap between the mass amounts of very poor just for the very rich elite. The system not working in our favor is actually the system working. Ironic isn’t it?” Mike sighed.

“Yeah, but the government could try to temper the financial burden a bit more, instead of privatizing state assets, and outsourcing to poor countries like Mexico and India. No offense Carlos,” David retorted.

“No worries,” Carlos responded.

A silence encased them. Carlos focused his attention on one particularly bright star, willing away a creeping guilt. The night was too nice to dwell on money.

“Man, I love Whitman, I just wish it wasn’t so expensive. I’ve had to accept so many student loans it’s not even funny. I’m going to be paying off my education until I die!” Mike exclaimed.

“Seriously dude,” David agreed.

They were waiting for him to say something. But what?

“What about you, Carlos, up to your neck in loans?” Mike finally asked after a sip of beer.

“Not really,” he replied.

“What, got rich folks?” David asked.

“Just generous, I guess.”
“Fifty thousand a year generous! Oowee, lucky lucky you,” Mike laughed.

“Yeah, lucky me,” Carlos said sullenly.

And then he heard it. Lili’s scream was a sudden sound in the still wheat fields. Carlos stood up, startled, trying to locate the girls in the dusky light.

“What the hell?” David asked.

Carlos was about to call out to them, when Amanda yelled over, “Guys, you have to see this, it’s horrible!”

The girls had wandered past the old mill and down the train tracks. Carlos looked around and realized how far they were from town, how many miles of wheat stood between them and civilized help, should they need it.

He walked quickly over the dusty, rocky ground. What was there to meet him? David and Mike began to run, and Carlos followed suit. After a minute of silence though, he realized they were not in peril danger and slowed to a brisk walk; panting softly as the pounding of his heart subsided.

Huddled together next to a shapeless mass of fur, the girls remained silent as Carlos, Mike, and David approached. Carlos walked past them, and stood directly over the train tracks where the motionless pile lay. It was an animal corpse roughly the size of a black collie, or a cocker spaniel, and Carlos guessed it had once been a dog.

“Jesus Christ,” Mike said, under his breath.

The front and back of the dog was indiscernible. There was no tail, or face. Just a bloody stump on both ends as if someone had taken a metal mallet and pounded on the dog until the bone structure gave way and melded into the beginning and end of the spine.

“Someone probably brought the poor bastard out here to kill him,” David whispered.
“Shot him in both ends.”

“Don’t you mean her?” Carlos said quietly, and pointed to the dog’s bloody abdomen, where a small mound of rotting fetuses splayed onto the ground.

“Oh God,” Amanda said, then again. “Oh God.”

The light of the evening was fading fast, but Carlos couldn’t take his eyes off the animal. He looked away, then felt his gaze being pulled back, as if there were a magnetic attraction between them and the force was too strong to fight.

“We should go,” Mike said.

Lili, Amanda, and Amy had crept up behind him. Dusk in the wheat fields was quiet.

“Why would someone do this?” Lili asked softly.

Carlos wanted to say something to break the cold solemnity of the moment, but couldn’t. Something had been stripped away from him, and he felt frozen, immobile, like the dog. Gray clouds rolled rapidly over them, and a light rain started to fall. Next to him, Lili stood shivering. He lifted his hand to comfort her, but something made him hesitate; perhaps it was the way the drops of rain slid down his bare arm as he let it fall slowly back to his side.
Chapter 9

She felt heavy, and exhausted. Carlos led her down a dark hall that connected the dining room to the rest of the house. They passed the living room on the right, the kitchen where a short, plump woman was busy at the sink, and a small nook where an old computer monitor sagged on a desk.

“Who’s that?” she asked Carlos.

“Esmeralda, our house keeper. She’s making the best dinner for you tonight,” Carlos smiled.

“You have a house keeper too?” Darin asked before thinking.

“Don’t you?” Carlos asked.

“No,” she replied.

“I would have thought you did,” he said.

“Can I get on the computer later?” Darin asked, thinking of checking her e-mail and Facebook.

“Sure, amor,” Carlos answered.

They continued down the hallway. The walls were lined with framed photographs of people that Darin didn’t recognize.

“Is this you?” she paused, and pointed to a smiling boy riding a red tricycle.

“No, that’s my uncle, my dad’s brother. This is me,” Carlos gestured to a larger picture where a little boy and girl gripped each other on a dance floor. They were dressed in bright ruffled clothing, and their mouths were stained red.

“And who’s this? You never told me you had a beauty queen in the family!”

Carlos paused, quiet.
“That was my mother,” he finally said. “At eighteen. My Dad put it up after she died. We told him to take it down but…” Carlos looked away, and she saw that his eyes were glazed and distant. She put her hand on his forearm.

“She was beautiful,” Darin whispered. “I’m sorry Carlos. Truly, I—“

“It’s okay,” he cut her off. “I’ve got you now.”

Turning toward her, Carlos reached out both his arms and pulled her into such a fierce embrace that she felt her throat constrict with his grief. They stood there in the hallway, listening to the clinking of pots on the stove, and hushed voices from the kitchen. Darin wondered if this was the moment she had been waiting for. To offset his grief with new life; Carlos might welcome it as a miracle and not an unexpected obligation.

Gently, she pulled herself away from him.

“Carlos?” Darin looked into his sad eyes and her mouth dry. She reached up and removed her ponytail, letting her light brown hair fall down over her neck and shoulders.

Carlos stared at her. Then a loud vibration emitted from his pocket. Looking away, he extracted his cell phone from his pants pocket and flipped the cover up.

Darin pulled her hair back into the ponytail.

“What room am I staying in?” she asked.

“This back one, it has a bathroom,” Carlos finished his text and led her to the back room. He turned the light on as they entered.

There were two twin beds, both covered with thin pink blankets and flat pillows. Headboards at the back of the beds were decorated with various religious paraphernalia: crosses, wooden beads, a picture of Jesus, a picture of a woman saint titled “La Malinche,” and a number of candles.
“I didn’t know your family was religious,” Darin stated.

“We’re not.”

“Is that the bathroom?” Darin pointed to a second door against the back wall.

“Yes, let me show you,” Carlos opened the door and walked into a second room lined with closets.

Her suitcase was resting on top of a table.

“You can keep your clothes in this room if you’d like.”

“How did my suitcase get here?” Darin asked.

“Raúl brought it in for you.”

“Oh. What’s the table for?”

“My grandma used to do her ironing here,” Carlos walked into the adjoining bathroom. Darin followed silently.

The bathroom had a tiny toilet, a standing sink, and a showerhead surrounded by a clear plastic sliding door. An open window admitted interspersed sounds from the street: the motor putts of cars and trucks, children yelling in Spanish, the rising and falling of voices, music, radios, strange announcements that seemed to be advertised from cars passing the house. Darin was unsure of what to do first—Unpack? Nap? Tell Carlos about the baby?

“Those recordings from the cars, what are they saying?” Darin moved to the window and stood on her tiptoes to look out into the street.

“Advertisements mostly…miracle vitamins, or jobs, or 10 amazing ways to change your life.”

“Do people fall for stuff like that?”

Carlos moved closer to her.
“If they’re desperate enough, people will do anything,” he answered. “It’s just like the Internet ads back in the states, except here, less people have online access.”

He was close now. She could feel the heat of his body just barely on her back. He put his mouth and nose into the nape of her neck and kissed her lightly.

“Carlos?”

“Sí, cariño?” he whispered.

“Why doesn’t Ale speak English as well as you?”

The arms around her relaxed their embrace.

“Because she chose French,” he whispered into her ear. “When we were young, our parents put us in intensive language programs that we continued throughout high school. But they let us choose. I chose English, but Ale was obsessed with French. So we took different programs.”

He finished the anecdote by turning her around gently and kissing her. His lips were hot and dry. Darin returned his slow, small kisses, but kept her hand on the back of his head, and her fingers in his hair. She might pull his face away, should she gather the courage to tell him what she had traveled to Mexico to say.

They had begun a gentle shuffle toward the bed. Carlos led her as they kissed. Darin followed his feet, guided by the small pressure on her back from his hands.

“Carlos?” Darin pulled away.

“Hmm?” he responded distractedly.

“Does your sister like me? I have the feeling that she doesn’t.”

“Of course she likes you,” Carlos kept walking backwards, through the ironing room, and toward the bedroom.
“I’m so glad you’re here,” he repeated.

He began to kiss her again, this time with fervor.

“I can’t stop thinking about that day in the pool,” Carlos whispered. “I want you, Darin.”

His voice was hot and breathy in her ear, like steam. She looked at him, and could see that he had already lost himself in the moment.

They had made it to the bed, and with a little sidestep Darin maneuvered herself out of Carlos’s arms.

“Don’t you think we should wait?” she said lightly. “Your sister, she might hear us.”

“No, no,” Carlos sat down on the bed and pulled her down next to him.

“She’s always helping Esmeralda, and Raúl went to pick up my dad. We’re alone cariño, don’t worry.”

“Let’s wait until tonight, I think it’ll be more romantic,” Darin suggested, looking straight at him.

“You don’t want me?” Carlos frowned.

“It’s not that,” she said softly. “I’m just so tired from the flight.”

“Too tired to make love.”

She looked up into his face and saw that it was hard, and sad, full of self-righteousness at what she was sure he believed was a justified reaction.

“We haven’t seen each other for two months, I thought you would want this.”

“It’s not that…” she faltered. He had just lost his mother, and sex was just that, sex. But then she remembered why she was even in Mexico.

“I just feel so exhausted. I can barely keep my eyes open. I think after I rest, and take a shower. It’ll be better for both of us.”
“Are you sure?” Carlos said shifting his body to straddle her with a playful smile, “that you’re not just playing hard to get?”

Carlos bent toward her, and began kissing her neck and face, running his hands over her body. She closed her eyes. It felt like she was in a half-dream, drifting, physically in more than one place: here in Mexico, being caressed, and elsewhere: her dorm room late at night, shopping for groceries with her mother, picking up trash in the parking lot, crying as a young girl when her father said he was cutting down her favorite tree. Disassociated memories floated in her mind and she moved back, forward, and through them in time. Seeing herself at eighty; an unthinkable physical state, impossible. She would never have wrinkles. No, she would be saved, preserved from such horrors.

And what of her own sweet child? Grown into an adult. Would that ever come to be? She hated not knowing, and let thoughts of eternal youth comforted her. It was self-empowering: a way to forgo and forget pathways to greater, more alarming discoveries like death, and the inevitable afterlife. Could she now, question and then dismiss the existence of God: his existence as a construct of man’s need for purpose and a power higher than their own; someone to shoulder the guilt for them. There was only so long and so far that she could think about these topics before they had to be forgotten. To understand it all meant that life itself seemed rather pointless and at nineteen, that depressing thought was too much to bear.

She continued to kiss him, to arouse her drowsy body. He started unbuttoning her pants, then stopped suddenly, and sat up.

“Damn it,” he muttered. “He’s home.”
Chapter 10

Back to the pool. Everyday, whenever he had free time, Carlos returned to the pool determined to figure out who the girl was. If his consciousness affected reality, then he brought her into his life for a reason. He believed she would somehow, help him prove his theory.

Unfortunately, he had yet to see her. As the week wore on, he began to wonder if his efforts were not only in vain, but becoming slightly neurotic. Was he still a scientist pursuing knowledge, or had he become an obsessive stalker? He avoided labels by ignoring the question.

Mike however, bombarded him with inquiries every chance he could. When those had gotten him nowhere, Mike began to tease Carlos by coming up with potential hypotheses that would explain his roommate’s sudden absences.

“You having an affair with a professor?” Had been Mike’s latest. This after, “Have you secretly become a frat tool?” and “Did you finally decide to join Hippy John down the hall in his chase to intellectual freedom through pot and Adderall?”

Carlos had laughed at his roommate’s hypotheses, while trying to reassure him with elaborate stories of long study sessions, and swim workouts.

He knew Mike wasn’t buying it, although he was pretending to. It wasn’t like Carlos to lie, and this made it harder for him to be persuasive. He had begun to wonder whether hiding his trips to the pool was even worth it. It was only the slight pleasure that Carlos derived from having a secret that kept him quiet. Finding this girl felt like his private treasure hunt, and he wasn’t eager to share it.

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. They had all been the same: letdowns. Pointless hours spent perusing the pool, pretending to get in a workout when he should have been studying for finals.
On Tuesday he was doing an easy backstroke when a slender girl began doing stretches in front of the lane next to his. His pulse increased as he completed the lap, noticing only when he stopped to get a drink of water that she was much too tan, and much too freckle-free to be the girl he was looking for.

On Thursday a girl with whitish limbs started swimming a few lanes over, but she was wearing the wrong colored suit and her stroke was choppy, as if she had only been swimming for a few years.

Yesterday he had seen a freckled, white-limbed girl, but she wasn’t swimming. She was a lifeguard on duty, and he hesitated at assuming anything. Not having seen her face was haunting him. Everything was inconclusive. He began to feel frustrated by how much time and energy he had spent on a girl he wouldn’t even recognize if she sat across from him in the same classroom.

It was now Saturday: a week since the incident. He had replayed the moments in his head so many times that they seemed surreal, like the blur between memory and photograph. He started to question what aspects of the incident had really happened, and what details had been fabricated through his over-analysis of the moment.

He went to Baker Ferguson around the same time, 3pm. Late in the afternoon, but not too close to the 5pm dinner hour. Carlos figured that most people were creatures of habit, and that if he knew one thing about this girl, it was that she went swimming on Saturday afternoons.

When he got in the water it was 3:10. He began a slow, lazy warm-up: his kick was languid, a floppy half-dead fish at best, while his stroke was sloppy with sagging elbows and uncupped hands. The water passed through his fingers warm and thick like tepid gravy. Closing his eyes, Carlos envisioned the girl, her appearance in the pool, their inevitable encounter; he had to put his theory to the test. After four laps, he stopped and looked at the clock, 3:15. He didn’t
know how much longer his imagination would triumph over boredom. The warmth of the water and the humidity in the air made him drowsy.

Maybe he could just wait here. Let the water lap against his chest while he held onto the wall of the pool, gently treading water to keep himself afloat. Isn’t that what most people did when they came to work out? There was the occasional athlete, but the majority of people who entered the pool seemed to do so on the pretense that getting into the water counted as a workout.

He had worked himself into such a brooding mood that he failed to hear the door from the girl’s locker room open. With his back to the lifeguards, he also failed to see the girl who walked up to the pool. It wasn’t until after she had jumped into the lane on his right and began kicking frantically toward the other end of the lane, that he wiped water from his eyes and knew this was the girl he had been looking for.

It had to be her. The patterned behavior was unmistakable. Carlos felt his heart race while blood rushed through his head, white noise pounding in his ears. He had spent so many days and hours envisioning this moment. Carlos watched the girl do a flip turn at the end of the pool and head back toward him, still with no idea about how to approach her.

In his fantasies, she had always recognized him. She had been the one that stopped and talked, while he laughed and asked the appropriate questions. And she always exclaimed an enthusiastic ‘yes!’ when he asked her for a date the following day. But reality was presenting a much harsher version of the situation he had tried to manifest, and his mental freeze became a physical one.

He didn’t move as she swam toward him. With one arm resting on the lane, and the rest of his body bobbing in the water, his eyes remained on the ripples in front of him. Carlos watched the current from her lane create concentric circles in his as she moved through the
water. When she did a flip turn against the wall he felt his body rock, and wondered whether she had taken a sideways glimpse of him, or whether she was aware of his presence.

She swam away in a flutter of water, splashes, and limbs. He turned his face just slightly and watched her recede down the lane, her arms slicing through the water like knives. It was then that he realized he couldn’t do it. The moment was forced, and he wasn’t prepared.

The girl flipped against the wall at the other end of the pool and began swimming toward him again. Carlos pulled himself out of the water, grabbed his Klean Kanteen, and walked over to the pool sign-in sheet. He stared at it for a few seconds, then opened the door to the locker room, and left the water behind him.
Chapter 11

“Who is?” Darin whispered.

“My Dad,” Carlos stood up from the bed and winced when it creaked under the shifting weight.

“Quick, get ready. We should go out and greet him.”

Darin gave Carlos a reproachful look, but stood, zipped her pants, and reached down to smooth the blankets of the bed. She wanted to check her hair, but Carlos grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the room.

“Carlos!”

The voice came from the living room, where the sound of a T.V. now played in the background. For the first time since her arrival, Darin felt genuinely nervous, unsure of how to react to Carlos’s sudden apprehension.

Past the computer and the pictures lining the hallway wall, past the kitchen where Darin caught a glimpse of Esmeralda, and into the living room. He led her to a large man sitting on the couch. The man had bushy eyebrows and a mustache with small handlebars, as if he hadn’t trimmed it in a while. His long legs spread out from underneath him, supporting a rather large gut, wide shoulders, and a pronounced chest. Darin could tell that he was tall, used to respect and getting answers. She was also struck by an odd and puzzling impression: that Señor Solano was a kind man. Although she didn’t know where this feeling came from, it continued to nag her whenever she thought about it.

“Papá te presento a Darin, mi novia,” Carlos gestured to Darin.

He spoke slow and clear. She was being presented to the father of the house as a girlfriend, Carlos’s possession. Apparently Facebook was that official. She felt a brief flicker of
annoyance as she offered out her hand.

“Hola, mucho gusto,” she said, hoping her accent didn’t sound too harsh or foreign.

Señor Solano smiled and shook her hand.

“Encantado de conocerla, señorita. I hope my son is good to you.”

Darin was startled, but masked her surprise by saying, “You speak English very well.”

“Thank you, we are very happy you’re here, and especially our Carlitos.”

Señor Solano laughed at Carlos’s embarrassment.

“A nickname for him,” he explained. “It means little Carlos. Please, sit and relax, Esmeralda is preparing dinner.”

Darin looked at Carlos, who nodded and inclined his head to the couch on their left. She sat and couldn’t help but wonder, how Señor Solano would react if he knew why she was really in Mexico.

“Tomorrow,” Señor Solano began in English, then switched to Spanish to address Carlos, who began protesting.

Darin heard “pesos” and “carnaval” but didn’t really understand the content of the conversation. Señor Solano nodded, “I give you money,” he said, then grinned satisfied, before returning his eyes to the television screen.

“What did he mean by that?” she whispered to Carlos.

“Nothing,” Carlos said.

Darin thought about pressing him further, but was too tired. She tried to follow the program; they appeared to be watching a game show trivia, with teams of two. The game show hosts and the contestants were talking too fast. Darin couldn’t understand anything and soon lost interest.
She and Carlos were close enough to graze shoulders, but he sat rigid without touching her. Darin felt uneasy in front of his father, especially under the false pretenses of her trip. She decided to tell Carlos, so that they might finally talk. The longer she put off telling him the truth, the more she was inclined to never tell him.

Leaning close to Carlos, Darin whispered in his ear: “Where’s Alejandra?”

Carlos replied without taking his eyes off the screen, “In her room maybe, or helping Esmeralda in the kitchen.”

“Should we go help too?” she asked in a soft voice. Once they were away from his father, it would be easy to sway him into the bedroom for a little chat.

“Why would we go help them?” Carlos turned his head then, and gave her a strange look.

Darin returned Carlos’s facial expression with a fake smile.

“I have to go to the bathroom.”

Darin left the living room not exactly sure where she was going. She had heard about social inequality in Mexico, but she never thought Carlos’s family would exemplify it. Wasn’t he intelligent, a progressive? Didn’t he know that all people were equal, regardless of whether one was a maid, or a younger sister?

She walked by the kitchen, and stopped just outside the doorframe. Alejandra and Esmeralda were together, talking and laughing softly. They were peeling something into a garbage can, and with their backs to her Darin glanced around the room.

The kitchen was rather small, and made even smaller by the short island counter and stools that spread down its length. There was a window in front of the sink, with a stove to its left and cupboards to the right. The fridge was next to the doorway, and Darin saw what she guessed was a pantry against the back wall. A few spices hung over the sink. She recognized garlic,
lavender, oregano, and some dried red peppers, but there were a few that she looked unfamiliar. Four plastic milk jugs filled with water lined the wall.

What stood out was the run-down look of the appliances. The stovetop was yellow with age and had square buttons instead of dials. The fridge was swollen with cracks on the front and had a metal pull out handle that ran the length of the door. Everything in the kitchen was a far cry from the synthesized, brand name model homes that she and most of her friends lived in. Yet, there was a homey air to the house that gave her an impression of stability and love. It felt as if many generations had passed through the home, and would continue to do so for many years.

Suddenly Alejandra turned and let out a gasp, startling Darin. Esmeralda looked at her, then smiled and beckoned with a hand for her to enter. Her face was squat like a pumpkin’s, and her flat, wide smile spread the length of her cheeks. A gray bun sat on the crown of Esmeralda’s head, and Darin resisted the urge to reach out and squeeze it.

“Sorry, lo siento,” Darin took a step forward into the kitchen. “Hola Esmeralda, mucho gusto.”

“Mucho gusto, mi’ja, es un placer conocerla.”

Darin grinned in response.

“Would you like any help?” she asked.

Alejandra stared at her silently. Esmeralda looked puzzled and glanced at Alejandra.

“¿Ayuda?” Darin ventured in Spanish.

“Entiendo inglés,” Alejandra said.

Esmeralda smiled widely. Ignoring Alejandra, she nodded her head, and grabbed Darin’s hand.

Darin followed Esmeralda hesitantly, torn by the welcoming reception of one woman and
the cold shoulder of the other. She supposed she didn’t blame her. If Darin had recently lost her mother, she would probably be wary of newcomers too. It was the exaggerated amount of hostility that she didn’t understand. Only strangers were untrustworthy.

“Look, I’m not exactly sure why I feel tension between us…”

Darin turned away from Esmeralda, faltering at the blank stare that Ale continued to give her.

“I mean, I know you lost your mother, which is awful, but, I have no intention of trying to force my way into your family. I would love it, if we were friends, or at least nice to each other.”

Darin took another step closer to her, and was now on the other side of the wooden island facing Alejandra.

“You call me Ale,” she said, her face suddenly softer.

Holding out an avocado, she showed Darin how to slice it along the center ridge. Rotating it slowly in her hands, Ale then pulled the halves apart so that she held two soft pods in her palms. She handed the halves to Darin and demonstrated how she could use a spoon to scoop out thin slices of the avocado and place them in a bowl next to her. Esmeralda watched Darin cut open the next avocado, nodded her head approvingly, and went back to putting pieces of green melon in a blender.

Darin took the spoon from Ale and made her first slice. The fruit came away like scooped ice cream, and the soft green color reminded her of pistachio gelato.

“What are we making?” Darin ventured after a few moments.

“Guacamole,” Ale answered.

The silence in the kitchen was soothing. Darin felt a calm reassurance in the brainless
repetitiveness of a task such as this. She had eaten guacamole before, not homemade, but it was a bit of familiarity in a foreign place.

The three of them fell into a comfortable stillness. Both she and Ale continued to scoop fresh avocado in a bowl while Esmeralda cut melon on the counter. For the first time in her life, Darin thought she understood the origins of that sexist saying. Maybe being placed in the kitchen wasn’t an insult at all. Maybe it was a compliment. The soft, calm room was a sanctuary, a haven from the outside world, gratifying its users.

“Do you like cooking?” Darin asked Ale. She made sure to pronounce each word slowly and clearly.

Ale looked at her, and nodded.

“My mamá teach me, everything,” she said. “To cook is remind me of her. One day, my daughter, I teach everything too.”

Darin nodded back, and looked down at the avocado in her hand. The green flesh was so smooth and giving. What had she learned from her mother? Darin had always been too busy to cook. If she didn’t have swim practice, she was doing homework, or hanging out with friends. It had never occurred to her to learn the art. She had always assumed she would when the time came, but so far it hadn’t and her skills, she realized, were pathetically underdeveloped. That’s what she would do, if Carlos was worth loving. She would come live here. Learn how to cook, and sew. She would learn the womanly skills she had missed out on as a girl so she could teach her own child. It would be the four of them, Darin, Esmeralda, Ale, and the baby. Laughing and talking in the kitchen; cooking for the lazy men watching TV.

“Tus padres, to cook?” Ale asked hesitantly.

Darin wrinkled her nose and shook her head.
“No mucho,” she responded. 

Ale laughed. “You miss, yes?”

“Mis padres?” Darin asked.

“Sí,” Ale responded.

“A little, un poquito,” Darin admitted.

“You call them?” Ale asked.

“No,” Darin shook her head. She had thought about it earlier, but didn’t want the expensive charge on her parent’s phone bill.

She looked up and saw Ale holding a cell phone.

“You call,” she said. “They happy to hear you.”

Darin hesitated then reached out her hand. But before she could grab it, Esmeralda clucked her tongue.

“Trabajo, mis hijas, más trabajo, y luego juegen con el celular.”

Darin, understanding the gist of what Esmeralda had said, caught Alejandra’s eye. She grinned, and made a funny face in the direction of Esmeralda. Alejandra laughed as she put her phone back in her pocket. Then Darin laughed. They continued to giggle intermittently for the next few minutes until the contagion caught Esmeralda too, and suddenly the three of them were laughing, loudly, holding their sides; food left forgotten on the counter.

“What are you doing?”

Darin straightened to face Carlos, who stood in the doorway.

“You might be above working, but I'm not,” she responded.

“I never said I was above working.”

“You implied it.”
He stood there, staring.

“"I decided I wanted to help,"" Darin picked up an avocado half with one hand, and her spoon with the other.

“You came here to visit me,” Carlos said, walking toward her. He took the avocado and spoon from her hand and set them down on the wooden island.

“You’re a guest. You don’t have to work. You should be resting and enjoying yourself,”

He shook his head disappointedly at his sister and their housekeeper.

“I wanted to help. Don’t be mad at them,” Darin looked squarely at Carlos and tried hard to contain the sudden onset of anger she felt in her chest and throat. Could grief do this much damage?

“You don’t understand. It’s different here. Now that our mother is gone,” Carlos faltered as he spoke, and Ale took advantage of his silence to begin a rapid rebuttal in Spanish.

Esmeralda tried to intervene but was ignored by both of them. Darin understood nothing.

“This is not how it’s supposed to be,” Darin said into the midst of their argument. The statement was more to herself, but they both stopped talking.

Carlos agitated, looked at his sister before grabbing Darin’s hand. She looked back as they crossed the doorway, but both Ale and Esmeralda averted their eyes; Darin would have to deal with Carlos alone.
Chapter 12

Darin Belladonna. This was the girl he had been looking for. A quick Internet search linked her last name to a poisonous plant. It was also Italian for “beautiful woman.” Her first name yielded no results. The irony of Belladonna however, was slightly amusing. Sitting at his computer, Carlos wondered why he had never heard of her before. He assumed she lived in Jewett Hall, since it was the largest hall on campus. Jewett and Anderson students tended to stay relatively separated, though there was usually enough overlap with classes and extracurricular activities that they still knew of one another, even if they did not actually interact.

Carlos opened his physics notebook to a blank page. Never one to ignore the symbology of his own life, Carlos believed this girl’s submersion into his world of water was a significant one. He thought back to the wheat fields and his experience in Veracruz, then wrote:

1. Consciousness is awareness, is self
2. My “self” is made up of the same matter that created the Universe
3. So my consciousness is part of something greater, it is connected to reality
4. If I am part of reality, then I should be able to affect that reality
5. If I can affect my reality, then I somehow created Darin’s interaction with me
6. She must have a purpose—can I use her to test my theory?
7. Theory: I can bring Darin into my life by consciously focusing on her existence intertwined with mine.

He knew intrinsically that she was important; now he had to find out who she was. Opening up a new browser, Carlos abandoned any intention of work and went to the only reliable social search engine he could think of: Facebook.

He liked that Facebook allowed him to maintain a level of anonymity while
simultaneously it promoted his images and thoughts worldwide. Carlos typed Darin Belladonna, Whitman into the search function. Before he had time to scan the results though, he heard Mike’s voice outside their door. Carlos minimized the Facebook window and maximized a word document he had been working on earlier.

“Hey,” Mike said, entering the room.

“What’s up?” Carlos replied, swinging around in his chair to face Mike.

“What are you up to?” Mike asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

“It looks like you’re working on something.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s just some paper for Core. Nothing really.”

“Man, you’ve been acting weird all week. I’ll figure out what you’re hiding eventually, just wait.”

Carlos let his statement hang in the air as Mike put down his backpack and lay on his bed.

“I can’t believe finals are next week,” he said, as if thinking out loud.

“Yeah, it’s crazy,” Carlos muttered, and turning back to his computer, restored the Facebook search to full screen.

There were only six results. He clicked on the first one, and tilting his head to stare at it closer, realized that the image was the back of a red high-heel shoe. He also noticed that her privacy settings denied him access to the rest of her page.

“Darin Belladonna?” Mike’s voice made Carlos whip his head around in surprise.

“Just some random person I found.”

Theoretically, this was true.
“Really?” Mike looked at him, skeptical. “Friend her if you want, she’s pretty cool.”

“You know her?”

“Yeah, she’s in my Intro to Enviro-Studies class. Why? How do you know her?” Mike frowned.

Carlos paused, “Well, technically, I don’t.”

“But you want to,” Mike affirmed. “Man, you are a piece of work. You pine after Lili for an entire year, and just like that, you’re done, moved on to the next.”

“Yeah, I guess. Why do you care anyway?” Carlos turned back to his computer.

“I don’t,” Mike said, flopping onto his bed. “Maybe we should eat in Jewett tonight.”

“Why?” Carlos asked.

“Because she’ll probably be there.”
Chapter 13

“Are you crazy?” Darin hissed, as soon as they were down the hall and out of earshot of the kitchen.

“Me, crazy? No, you are crazy. What is wrong with you?”

Darin felt blood rush to her face.

“Carlos, you were watching TV with your dad. I didn’t understand the show. What is so horribly wrong about going and helping your sister and Esmeralda in the kitchen?”

He had pulled her into the back bedroom where she was staying. She didn’t bother turning the light on, and stood there in the semi-dark, staring at the outline of his face, which was illuminated by the hallway light.

“You’re acting so strange, I feel like I’m visiting someone I don’t even know,” she said.

“Darin, you’re acting like you don’t want to be here. Like you don’t even want to spend time with me. Do you know how long I’ve been looking forward to your visit? Ever since…And now you’re here and only for six more days. It is so awful I want you to spend that short amount of time with me?”

“But we might—” she began, then cut herself short.

“Might what, Darin? Might what?”

His gaze on her face was firm and steady.

“Listen amor, the unknowns are only for people who are too weak to know what they actually want, or are too scared to go and get it. For you and I, there is no might, there only is.”

“You don’t understand,” she whispered.

Her throat went dry and the sides of her face began to tighten. *Don’t cry.* But she couldn’t help it. She felt the first sob rise up in her chest. It crawled up, up, and out and before she knew it
she was stifling small coughs and hiccups, soaking hot tears into Carlos’s T-shirt while he pressed her tightly to his chest.

“Shhh, mi amor, shhh. I’m sorry I got upset, don’t cry, shhh.”

Darin knew that Carlos would forgive her, for keeping her secret a bit longer, so she remained, still and quiet in his arms until her sobbing subsided.

Afterwards, Carlos followed her into the bathroom.

“The water feels good,” she said, splashing her blotchy face.

“We should go swimming,” Carlos said, sitting on the toilet cover, watching her.

“I would like that,” she replied. “It would feel like home.”
Chapter 14

Mike and Carlos left Anderson and walked along the sidewalk that carved a path past Prentiss Hall, snaked around Douglas Hall, and carried them over the small bubbling creek. From there, they crossed Boyer Avenue, meandered past the Memorial Building, walked by the outdoor tennis courts, and the library, until finally they were on Ankeny Field. From there Jewett stretched out diagonally in the farthest corner of the campus.

Carlos had timed the walk, and knew it took approximately seven minutes. He also knew that it was the longest walk from one point on campus to another, and because of this, seemed particularly unbearable to most students. If only those pitiful groaners would look around as they walked. They might appreciate the beautiful landscaping, ponds, crisp green lawns, water-dewed flowers, trees, and old brick buildings that littered their path.

Carlos had once asked Mike why he complained so much about his life; it was the only time he’d seen his roommate get truly upset. Mike lashed back with a vehemence unusual for his easy-going countenance: Didn’t he stay up night after night until 2, 3, or 4am to finish the ungodly amount of homework their professors piled on them? Wasn’t he an active, intelligent student who wanted to learn, who was adamant about his pursuit of knowledge? Didn’t he help Whitman climb up the rating lists of Private Liberal Arts Colleges? Couldn’t he then, whine a little bit before remembering to appreciate the niceties? Carlos had nodded, silently, and turned back to his work. Mike left the room and neither of them brought the conversation up again.

“I wonder how many hours the typical Whitman student spends in the library,” Carlos asked on their trek across Ankeny.

“Too many,” Mike answered. “I mean, some people practically live there since it’s open 24-7. Damn over-achievers.”
“True.”

“That reminds me, when do you want to make our Facebook Core page?” Mike asked.


“Do you have a lot of work?”

“No more than normal,” Carlos shrugged. “So, yes.”

They both laughed.

“We’re never going to make the page, are we?” Mike looked at Carlos, grinning.

“Probably not,” Carlos said. “It was a good idea though.”

“What are you going to say to her?” Mike changed the subject.

“I don’t know,” his smile faded.

“So let me get this straight. This chick races you last week in the water, but neither of you actually see the other’s face. Then you stalk her all week at the pool until you see her again, except this time, instead of introducing yourself, you skulk out of the water and creepily memorize her name from the sign-in sheet. Then you track her down on Facebook, and now we’re hunting her in a dining hall where you just happen to be tonight, even though we live across campus?”

“Haven’t you ever felt an instant connection to someone?” Carlos answered.

“Oh here we go again with your consciousness crap!” Mike laughed out loud. “You are one strange dude Carlos. But seriously, what are you going to say to her?”

“I don’t know,” Carlos answered. “I don’t have a plan.”

“This is going to be entertaining,” Mike responded, grinning.

They walked over the final patches of Ankeny’s lawn and started up the steps to the entrance of Jewett Hall.
“Is it a bad idea?” Carlos asked out loud.

“Just get it over with,” Mike said.

“You’re right.”

Mike followed Carlos into the hall and stopped in front of the attendant that swiped their student ID cards.

“Oh man,” Mike looked into his wallet. “I was so sure my ID card was in here.”

“You forgot it?” Carlos asked.

“Can you spot me?” Mike looked at him. “I promise I’ll pay you back.”

“Of course,” Carlos handed the attendant his own ID card, and she swiped it twice, then nodded to allow them past.

“Don’t worry, we’re cool,” Carlos said, as they walked into the dining hall.

“No, dude, I got your next meal. How do you have so much money all the time anyway? You don’t even have a job!” Mike shook his head.

“I don’t know,” Carlos mumbled. “Let’s eat, I’m starving.”

It was almost 5:30. The lines were practically empty, but the tables were mostly full. Carlos followed Mike through the dining hall, glancing around as they made their way toward the front counters and realized he barely knew anyone. Jovial, carefree voices rose and fell in overlapping crescendos from every corner of the room. For a brief moment Carlos felt like he was under the water, as if the single voices were one big inundating wave.

They approached the counter and he chose spaghetti and meatballs, a standard plate, but made sure to sprinkle it with some red pepper sauce to liven the taste, before following Mike to the drink station.

“Have you seen her?” he asked under the crash of ice into their cups.
“I saw her as soon as we came in,” Mike replied.

“Where is she?”

“She’s over by the door and we’re going to talk to her now. I want to get this over with.”

Mike picked up his tray, grinned at Carlos and motioned with a jerk of his head for him to follow.

It was all coming together. He tried to step back from the moment’s immediacy and consider how he had come to be here. This space and time in reality. It seemed that with every step he took, the dining hall murmur diminished, while a peculiar sound like the static from his childhood TV, increased.

What felt different? Was it the fact that he had never met her? Or, was it that, for the first time, he had taken control of his own life and physically altered reality?

Carlos watched Mike approach a round table of six girls. Mike was talking to one particular girl with light skin, long brown hair, light brown eyes, and white freckled arms. Those arms. She was wearing a tank top and Carlos could see the entirety: long, slender, taut, and speckled. Just like he remembered.

“This is my roommate Carlos, have you met? Mike’s voice. The freckled girl smiled and extended out her hand, but seemed distracted, and made eye contact for only a fraction of a second.

“Nice to meet you,” she said.

He repeated her words and smiled, but she had already turned away.

“Hey Darin, you swim right?” Mike asked.

“Yeah, how’d you know?” she turned back toward them.

“Oh, I heard it somewhere. Carlos swims too.”
“Really?” It was then that she looked at him. Really looked at him.

Carlos held her gaze and noticed that her eyes were such a light brown they appeared hazel.

“We should work out sometime together. If you really swim.” This time she didn’t look away.

“Yes,” Carlos answered, as Mike struck up a conversation with another girl at the table.

“What days do you go to the pool?” Darin asked.

“Random days, times. Whenever I feel the urge, really,” he answered.

“I see,” she said.

“Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

And then he saw it. A barely perceptible shiver in her shoulders as she lowered her eyes.

Without thinking, he reached out his hand, and for a fraction of a second, enclosed her closest shoulder in his cupped palm. She flinched at his touch, and he let go.

“I think we would make good swimming partners,” he said.

“You do?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Mike grabbed his arm.

“I thought you were starving,” he said. “Let’s go chow down.”

“Right,” Carlos responded.

He turned back to Darin. “It was good to meet you.”

“You can email me. From the directory. Or find me on Facebook,” she answered, then
turned to Mike. “See you in class.”

“See you!” Mike called out over his shoulder. Carlos nodded to Darin, then turned to catch up to his roommate.

“See? Easy,” Mike plopped into his seat, and began to chomp into a baked bread roll.

“Yeah,” Carlos replied. “Thanks for your help.”

“Anytime man,” Mike dug his fork into a heaping pile of spaghetti.

Carlos cast a quick glance back at Darin’s table. How easy. Darin was fresh and new, and moreover, she was real. He had touched her. As he dipped his fork into his own spaghetti, Carlos grinned and wondered what turn his experiment would take tomorrow.
Chapter 15

Darin realized, as she pulled out a chair and sat down at the dining table, that she was as unprepared for the first dinner, as she had been for her emotional reunion with Carlos. It wasn’t that she couldn’t be sociable, or that she was scared of new food, faces, or customs, but simply that she hated having to rely on someone else in order to comprehend the world around her. Without Carlos, the dinner conversation would be simplified to Spanish One banalities and nothing of substance or importance would be said.

Señor Solano was at the table when she sat down. It was small, dark oak and set for four. A larger table stretched to the left of them, but Carlos had said they only used it for big gatherings, parties, and family reunions. Darin thought it must be hard to see the table set for four, and know that they were still incomplete. They had left the T.V. on and she wondered whether she was a welcomed distraction, or a harsh reminder of reality?

She smiled at Señor Solano as he greeted her in Spanish with a nod of his head. If he noticed her red eyes and face, he didn’t show it, for which she was grateful. Carlos sat down and grabbed her hand under the table. Moments later, Alejandra appeared, followed by Esmeralda who placed the last dish on the table and left. Señor Solano turned to Darin, and began speaking in Spanish. He kept nodding his head and gesturing with his hands as he spoke, and from his body language Darin assumed he was giving some sort of greeting speech. She thought she heard “bienvenida,” but she wasn’t sure. Darin smiled back at him as he spoke.

After he finished, both Carlos and Alejandra looked at her expectantly. Feeling pressured to say something, Darin mumbled “muchas gracias, estoy feliz de estar aquí…to be here, and thank you so much for allowing me into your home and for your hospitality,” she added quickly at the end, wanting to appear grateful but unsure of how to say it. Darin glanced at Carlos after
she had finished, and he smiled back. It seemed she had said the right thing.

Darin looked out over the table and realized how hungry she was. Everything smelled delicious. There were fresh hot corn tortillas, refried beans, and something that Carlos called empanadas de chile. The guacamole sat in a bowl next to some shredded chicken in a red sauce that she was warned was “very spicy.” To drink, there was a pitcher of blended melon, and a tall bottle of sealed drinking water, although Carlos and his father were drinking beer labeled Negra Modelo.

“Would you like a glass of wine, or a beer, amor?”

Darin looked at Carlos, then froze, smiled, and shook her head.

“No, I’m fine,” she said.

Ale took her plate and gave her a little bit of everything. While Darin busied herself with the food, the family began to discuss their day. As far as Darin could tell, Señor Solano and Ale had not experienced anything eventful, although Carlos entertained them with an account of his trip into Mexico City. He kept using her name so Darin knew he was talking about the two of them together. Both his father and sister remained engaged and Darin thought that maybe they did enjoy her visit. Maybe anything out of the ordinary was a good distraction from the life that must seem devoid of anything new or good since the death of Señora Solano.

Carlos’s story ended and for a few minutes they fell into silence. The only sounds in the room were the muted voices, music, and laughter of the T.V., the clicking of forks and knives against plates, chewing, gulping and the clunk of cups or beer bottles being placed back down on the table. Uncomfortable as the silence was, Darin was also aware that she was not responsible for continuing the conversation, nor could she, even if she wanted to.

Unable to truly understand what was being said, Darin couldn’t even formulate a reply.
She felt herself falling into a silence broken only by thoughts inside her head. Was this perhaps, what it felt like to be mute? Darin decided to filter her environment through observation instead. What did it mean—the way Ale looked at her father, the dark circles under Señor Solano’s eyes, or the gentle caress of Carlos’s hand on her leg.

She decided to experience the food, to let it absorb in her mouth, taste it on her tongue, to feel its texture: the soft thin membrane of a bean shell, the warm flaky tortilla, the creamy guacamole, and grainy sweet melon juice. The calm luxury of food prepared by someone else. If he said yes, she could forget about a law degree and start a new plan.

After a large gulp of Negra Modelo, it was Señor Solano who broke the silence by looking directly at Darin and asking her a question in Spanish. The only word she could decipher was “políticos.” She looked at Carlos who said hesitantly, “He wants to know what you think of the government and politics of the U.S. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

Darin stared blankly at Carlos. She felt herself struggle to find a single Spanish word, but the translations wouldn’t fall into place.

“Can I answer in English?” she said quietly.

“Sure,” he said.

“Okay,” She looked up at Señor Solano and Ale.

“Well, I don’t think Obama’s been particularly productive, but I don’t follow politics as much as I should. He doesn’t seem to have made that many decisions to help out the environment, not the way he promised anyway. I hated Bush, but who didn’t? I think probably a large part of our government is corrupt, and power or money hungry. Which is why they rarely make the right decisions. Sometimes I think about us all dying in 200 years when we’ve ruined the water supply and polluted the planet to the point where it no longer nourishes us, or we have
burnt ourselves to death by destroying the ozone layer, or all die in a flood from the melting of the ice caps…and I feel sort of, happy. Like, it’ll have served us right. Our leaders now, they only care about money, money and themselves. But if we’re all gone, even if they survive, it won’t matter anymore. There will be no one left to control and certainly no supply and demand. With no one left to idolize their status and the amount of money they have in the bank, they’ll just cease to exist, in a sense. I mean, if no one observes your existence, what’s life worth anyway? Isn’t that what Facebook has taught us?”

Darin, realizing that she had gone on a long rant without meaning to, stopped abruptly. She, along with Señor Solano, and Ale looked at Carlos expectantly. His explanation seemed more succinct than hers, but Señor Solano nodded and muttered “Sí, sí,” which Darin assumed was a good thing.

Then Darin decided to be gusty. While Señor Solano and Alejandra began a discussion about her statements, she mentally formed a Spanish question in her mind that she planned to ask in order to prolong the dinner conversation, contribute to the meal, and avoid another awkward silence. When their voices dropped, she jumped in.

“Y qué piensan ustedes, sobre el gobierno y los políticos de Mexico?”

Every word was drawn out and overly pronounced, but Darin was sure she had just asked the Solanos what they thought about Mexican politics. Pleased with herself, she turned and smiled at Carlos, who didn’t meet her eye.

Señor Solano looked at Carlos, and asked him something in a low voice. Carlos shook his head “no” and looked down at his lap. Alejandra was silent also, staring at a thumbnail. Señor Solano looked her in the eye, said something in rapid Spanish, ending with “perdón,” pushed his chair back, and walked through the dining hall to the master bedroom. A second later he had
returned with a hat, jacket, and keys. As he passed them at the table, Carlos looked up and spoke an entreaty “papá,” that Ale echoed. The tone of reply wasn’t harsh, nor was it kind. He walked past them, down the hall. The silence fell heavy at the table after the click and clack of the three locks on their front door echoed throughout the house.

Neither Carlos nor Ale spoke. Darin supposed that they were too upset to say anything. She was confused by the guilt she felt.

Finally Carlos said, “My father is still very upset over our mother’s death. I apologize for his actions.”

“I didn’t mean to upset him. I don’t even know what I said,” Darin said, relieved to speak her mind.

“I need to tell you something, about our mother’s death,” Carlos said. Before he could go on however, a string of Spanish burst out from Ale’s mouth, shaking the table and filling the room. She motioned fervently with her hands as she spoke; Darin wished desperately that she could understand.

“What? About the car accident?” Tired of waiting, Darin tried to interrupt the argument, but it didn’t work. The siblings continued to yell at each other for another minute until finally Carlos stood up.

“¡Ya no me hables!”

The room was plunged into a sudden stillness. Darin began twisting a strand of hair around her finger. This was not her place, and this was not her fight.

“Darin, my sister and I,” and here Carlos looked over at Ale, who nodded reluctantly. “We trust you and want to tell you something that will help you understand our father’s actions. There are complications to the original story I told you.”
Darin brushed the hair away from her face before wiping her palms on the legs of her pants.

“About her car accident?” Darin prodded Carlos, hoping to get the story out in the open.

He took a deep breath. “She was in an accident, that’s true. But it wasn’t until after she was shot.” He looked at her as if trying to gauge her internal reaction.

“I don’t get it,” she shook her head. “People are murdered everyday. If she was shot, why didn’t you tell me? And I still don’t understand your father’s reaction.”

Carlos took her hand, but she let it lay hot and limp in his palm.

“It is because she was shot by members of a very powerful gang here. They do a lot of drug trafficking, and have a lot of money. Our mother worked in the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. Where our house is. I don’t know what they were after, if anything, maybe they just wanted to make a statement. But it might mean trouble for my family. I didn’t want to worry you, Darin. I wanted you to still come and visit. We think we’re safe here.”

Carlos finished talking and made eye contact with Ale, who started to cry.

“But, this is crazy,” she felt shocked, confused still, and enraged. “What about the police, what did they do? Did they find the shooter?”

“Things don’t work like that here, mi amor. The drug lords have more money than the government. They pay off cops. There won’t be any consequences. Our government can barely control its own country. My father hates them for their weakness, and what happened to our mother. Your question, tonight, reminded him, which is why he left. Probably to go drink somewhere. He loved her, too much.”

“And, so. She was just shot in her car? By someone on the street?” Darin needed to understand the situation and its implications for Carlos, for her, for their unborn baby.
“We think they followed her first. In their own car, then shot her from a moving vehicle. It’s hard to say, but it happens often like that. At least she was alone. Usually they’ll kill everyone in the car. Not just their target.”

“And you’re okay with this? You don’t care if the people who did this are never going to pay for their crime?”

Ale got up suddenly and yelled at Carlos. Something about understanding. Darin heard the word “entiende.” She wanted to somehow take back her outburst and apologize for what she had just said, but she couldn’t translate it to Spanish.

“Lo siento, lo siento mucho,” Darin turned to Ale, who still stood, but nodded at her.

“Por favor. No entiendo todo, tengo que entender todo,” Darin looked at Carlos. “Did that make sense?”

“Yes,” Ale answered, and sat back down.

“Listen, Darin. The drug lords have too much power. Too much protection. If the government tries to intervene, well, look what happens when they do. Like in Ciudad Juárez—they just revolt and kill more.”

“But this is insane. Your mother was murdered, and you do nothing,” she had lowered her voice, but still felt adamant, like she had to stand up for a fight that wasn’t hers. Maybe Carlos needed her more than she thought.

“Please, Darin, don’t.” Carlos’s eyes were shining and his forehead was red. “You think I haven’t thought the exact things that you are saying? Just try to see it from our point of view. Use your mind, don’t listen to your emotions.”

“No, I can’t see it from your perspective. Yours is a decision based on fear.”

“Fear, or rationality?”
Darin bit the bottom of her lip and looked away.

A round of laughter emitted from the T.V.

“Americans buy drugs, and Mexico needs money. We’re a good distributing country, we share a border. It’s how things work,” Carlos continued.

“This is all wrong.”

“I’m sorry, amor. I didn’t want to upset you. I thought you needed to know.”

“And your father? He doesn’t want to do anything?”

Ale inhaled a small breath of air sharply. Darin watched the two siblings exchange glances.

“He understands the situation,” Carlos said, but avoided eye contact with her. “He won’t do anything foolish.”

Darin fell silent, and tried to comprehend everything she had just learned.

“Does your father still work at the Embassy too? Maybe there are employees who would support him if he decided to file a report.”

She was thinking of her own father, and how he would never have allowed a matter like this to rest.

Ale coughed softly and stared at Carlos.

“He doesn’t have a job,” Carlos answered. “He used to work at the Embassy with my mother. But they laid him off a year ago.”

“But your two houses, and the driver, and maid?”

Darin knew she shouldn’t be prying, but a part of her believed she had the right to know.

“I have to bring my father home,” Carlos answered, and got up from the table. “Do you need anything? I’m sorry we can’t go to carnaval tonight. Tomorrow we’ll go sightseeing. It will
be fun.”

She stared at him.

He kissed her forehead and squeezed her hand. She watched him get up, move down the hallway, and grab a pair of keys on a side table. She didn’t move until she heard the clicks of the front door locks, and only then to look at Ale.

They stared at each other. Darin sensed that they were both trying to figure out how much the other understood of what had just taken place, but she didn’t have the patience, or the strength, to attempt a verbal exchange. Putting both of her hands together on the side of her face, Darin mimed falling asleep, and Ale nodded in response. They both got up from the table wordlessly. Ale returned to the kitchen, and Darin to the back room.

Two minutes later she was laying in the dark, imagining herself in that car. Driving to save her life, heart palpitating in her chest. She heard the bark of the shots, one, two, glass shattering. A baby crying. She needed to get back to the safety of Washington.
Chapter 16

Sometimes, no matter how many people he saw during the day, or how much time he and Mike spent together, Carlos still felt lonely. It wasn’t the culture, or that they didn’t speak his native language, only that he never felt completely understood by anyone. Facebook alleviated this loneliness to a degree. Or maybe it was that Facebook numbed the sensation by connecting him to the inner thoughts of people who would never choose to tell him exactly what they were thinking. Part of the allure was being able to unlock their secrets anonymously; they would never know that he cared enough to try.

Staring at his computer screen. Carlos logged onto Facebook and typed Darin’s name into the search engine. That damn red shoe. He looked at the “Add as Friend” button and debated. Facebook was the easiest forum to cultivate communication. E-mail was too formal and face-to-face chatting, while productive, felt almost too forward. Besides, everyone checked Facebook, but not everyone checked e-mail. He would probably get a faster response if he wrote on her wall.

“You’re not friending her right now are you?” Mike peered over his shoulder.

“Don’t you have homework to do?”

“If you friend her now, she’ll think you’re desperate. We just got back from dinner an hour ago.”

“School’s over in a week though, then she’ll be gone,” Carlos sighed.

“Just wait until tomorrow morning. My bet is she’ll friend you. Then you’ll have the upper hand, and she won’t think you’re so eager,” Mike laughed at the face Carlos gave him, and turned to the homework on his desk.

Carlos went back to staring at the red heel. Why the mystery picture? When people
represented themselves with abstract profile pictures, it usually meant that they were either not very attractive, or had a quirky, or eccentric personality. Since Carlos knew the first criterion wasn’t true, he began brooding about the second.

She had acted strange at dinner. Maybe she was some sort of extremist. It was hard to tell at Whitman. They could come out of nowhere. If only he could access the Info page of her profile. In his physics notebook he wrote:

Evidence for consciousness hypothesis:

A. Met Darin at dinner
B. We agreed to swim together sometime
C. She told me to contact her

Test Method:

1. I will continue to envision her in my life.

Closing his notebook, Carlos logged into his personal e-mail account. There was a message from his mother, which he scanned quickly.

“Dude, I wish I was bilingual, that would be so cool,” Mike said, walking to his closet.

“Stop looking at my screen,” Carlos replied.

“It’s not like I can read it anyway, what does it say?”

“It’s just from my mom. You know, the usual parent stuff. She loves me, misses me, wants me to talk to my father more often. Can’t wait for me to come home. Same old stuff.”

“Geez, lighten up, at least your parents write to you. Mine are always too busy. I usually have to call them!” Mike laughed.

“Hey, are we still going to that party tonight?” Carlos asked, taking a sip of water from his Klean Kanteen.
“Yeah, just let me finish up this paper, I’ll be ready in half an hour.”

“Sounds good.”
Chapter 17

With a loud gasp, Darin sat up. The room was so dark she couldn’t see her hands, or the color of the blanket covering her. Beads of sweat dripped from her neck and back. Reaching out her hand, Darin groped about the nightstand for her phone before remembering that she was in Mexico, and her phone was shut off in her backpack.

Her dream had ended abruptly and it took her a moment to re-formulate the pictures in her mind. Carlos had been there. And her mother. They were angry with her. They had blamed her for something. And then she was in a pool alone, but she wasn’t alive, or rather she would only stay alive in the pool. Once she left the water, she would be dead forever. A great sadness filled her as the reality of her confinement set in. Bobbing sluggishly in the shallow end, Darin remembered going too close to the wall and feeling a rough hand grab her arm. The hand was pulling her out of the water! The grip tugged, and burned her arm, and she had screamed to be let free. She did not want to die. Right before she was dragged completely out of the water, Darin woke up.

*It was only a dream, it was only a dream,* she chanted over and over. After a few minutes her heartbeat returned to normal, and her back and neck began to dry. Closing her eyes, Darin willed the dream images away. Her heightened, stressful state of being couldn’t be good for the baby. Or did it matter? She didn’t want to start caring for a child that might not be brought into the world. No more excuses. She would talk to Carlos tomorrow. Drifting back to sleep, Darin’s last thought was: either way, she had to know.
Sunday morning. Most students didn’t bother getting up before 11am. There were three reasons for this: first, they had a hangover from the night before; second they had stayed up way too late trying to engage in existentialist conversation; and third the dining hall didn’t open until 11:30am. Without food, there wasn’t much point to waking up.

This Sunday though, Carlos woke up at 8am. It was an ungodly hour, causing him to feel general spite toward whoever had poured three extra shots of vodka into his, already stiff, vodka tonic.

The party had been at The Fishbowl, an upper-classman house a few blocks off campus. Though juniors and seniors no longer had their meals cooked for them, they did get to name the houses they lived in. Usually some unique attribute of the house was responsible for its christening. For instance, The Fishbowl had large glass windows on three sides of the house allowing any ambling passerby a full view of the interior.

Once a house’s name fit, it stuck, passed down from student to student. He sometimes wondered what house he would live in his junior year. What would it be like to have so much responsibility? With chores like cleaning and cooking, could he still remain focused on his goals, and research?

In his groggy state of mind, Carlos tried to recollect the hazy events of the party. Each time he restarted his memory, he was rewarded with new scenes that returned to him like flashes of film in a movie: standing in the kitchen watching some frat boy do a keg stand, talking to a girl with pigtails and trying to teach her words in Spanish, dancing in the living room, hot bodies pressed against him, cold beer spilling down his leg, then his downfall—accepting extra shots from a hysterical blonde who ran around pouring vodka into people’s mouths and drinks.
Carlos could never sleep off bad hangovers, and he spent a few minutes musing over why these experiences were important for him to have. Why were any “bad” events experienced in people’s lives? If his consciousness shaped reality, why couldn’t he control his conscious mind more? Was it some form of karma? He had routinely stolen candy from a street vendor when he was a boy. He had also cheated on a few spelling tests, and tortured his sister incessantly when they were young…but weren’t those average misdemeanors? It was nothing half the world didn’t already do. And if half the world was cursed with hangovers that couldn’t be slept off, then Sunday brunch would be served at 7am.

Besides, karma didn’t make sense to him. It would still mean that some deity marked tallies, kept track of the good and bad, and enforced a worldwide “balancing out.” It was too much work, and moreover, it would mean that the world was too black and white. Good and bad, these classifications were so subjective. The world was too flexible. If the planes of space were rigid like wood, there would be no room for mass. It had to give; bend to forces to allow experience. It bent to allow his existence, didn’t it?

Carlos threw back his top blanket and untangled the sheet wrapped around his leg. Standing up he became acutely aware of a dull ache on the front of his skull, a dizziness, and growing pressure on his bladder.

Grabbing his t-shirt from off the floor and hopping into a random pair of workout shorts, Carlos opened his door and walked the few short steps down the hall as fast as his headache would allow. He punched in the five-digit code to unlock the door handle and felt his hands and face break out into a sweat. It was at this moment that he remembered he hadn’t checked Facebook to see if Darin had contacted him. A burst of adrenaline rushed into his stomach, and he knew that if he didn’t get to the toilet that second, he might find himself in a very
embarrassing situation.

He rushed around the corner of the bathroom, and entered the first stall. The sound of his urine, coupled with the feeling of great relief, was like breathing—necessary, and oddly pleasurable.

Carlos left the bathroom stall, went to the long line of sinks, and rinsed his hands under cold, running water. He wished the pool were open now. There was nothing better than a good swim to dull a hangover and cool his nerves. Unfortunately the pool, like everything else on campus, opened late on Sundays. Maybe he would be able to get a few more hours of sleep.

Carlos walked down the tiled bathroom corridor and pulled open the door.

It was only leaving the bathroom that he saw it: a head of long dark hair resting on the top step of the landing to the second floor. Carlos moved closer, and saw that a girl had fallen asleep on the stairs, probably drunk, and probably much too late for anyone to find her. He knelt down, and gently shook her back with his hand.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey, are you okay?”

The girl groaned, but didn’t move. Carlos sat down on the floor next to her and debated his options. He could leave her and go back to sleep. He could continue to try and wake her. He could go get her RA. Or he could pick her up and carry her somewhere. But where?

He figured the last option was the quickest, and most charitable of him. Plus it might save her from a day of aches and pains.

Carlos shook her again, this time, a little harder.

“Hey, wake up. I’m going to take you to your room, okay?”

The girl groaned, but shook her head before collapsing. Carlos grabbed her shoulders firmly and pushed her to a sitting position. Her head hung down, limp. Bringing his knees up to
support one of her shoulders while he used his free hand to gently hold her face up, Carlos raised her chin.

Why hadn’t he recognized the dark hair earlier? It was Lili. Of course he would find her now, after spending two semesters visualizing this instant; seeing some situation where he could save her, make her realize that he was deserving of her time. Of course he had brought himself to this moment. But why, he wondered, had he brought himself too late? He felt completely disinterested. Compassionate, but indifferent to any romantic prospects this opportunity could bring.

“Lili,” he said. “Lili, come on. I’m going to take you to your room.”

She shook her head then, and looking up, squinted at Carlos. He could see only a sliver of her fire-blue eyes.

“Carlos?” she croaked. “Where am I?”

“You fell asleep on the stairs,” he smiled briefly. “Let’s go, I’ll help you to your room.”

“I’m going to be sick,” she said.

Lili sat up, wobbling as if the ground was unstable.

“Where?” she said.

Carlos looked around. The trash can? No, too smelly. The men’s bathroom.

“Lili, up, get to the toilet, now.”

He pulled on her arm, and she stood, then lurched forward, falling on the top step.

“I’m sick,” she said again, sounding as if she was about to cry.

“Quick,” he said, pulling her a few steps toward the bathroom door.

He punched in the code, but knew she wasn’t going to make it. In a last attempt to get her into the bathroom, Carlos swung the door open.
Lili bent over and emptied her stomach onto the brown and white tiles. After three long heaves, she stood and looked at the floor.

She had puked in the entrance without taking a step inside. This meant that the remains of her night out were right in the trajectory of the door; were he to close that door, the bottom of it would slide right into the warm smelly pile of vomit and smear it everywhere.

“I’m sorry,” Lili said miserably, then hobbled over to the water fountain. She took a drink of water, and rinsed her mouth before spitting the remains into a nearby garbage can.

Carlos stood there, too tired and too hung over to think properly. How could he get something to clean up her mess without letting the door close? He looked back out into the hall. Lili was sitting down, holding her head in her hands. Slightly aggravated, Carlos called out loudly to her.

“Hey, Lili. Some help?”

She jumped at his voice, but only turned her head around.

“Do you want me to get Robbie?” she asked.

“No, Lili, it’s fine. Can you just hold the door open for me while I mop this up?”

Carlos thought back to his last interaction with Robbie, his R.A., glad that Lili seemed to accept his decision. Early on in the year, Robbie had convinced his section to hold “themed” dinners every week. This meant that every Thursday, Carlos had to waste thirty minutes of his time trying to find an appropriate outfit before dinner, and that he and Mike were forced to sit with their entire section for an hour, ridiculously dressed in the dining hall. The tedium of the whole affair never failed to completely bore, and annoy him.

During their last section meeting, Carlos had criticized the concept of themed section dinners, and Robbie had not responded positively. In fact, his sarcastic retort of, “Maybe we
should have a Mexican themed dinner next week, would that make you happier?” had offended not only Carlos, but a number of guys in his section, forcing Robbie to issue an apology e-mail to everyone later that week. Carlos could only imagine what sort of pleasure Robbie would get from watching him clean up Lili’s puke, and he was only too eager to deprive him of that joy.

Lili got up slowly, holding her head, and gave him a pathetic look of pain and exhaustion as she took the door from him.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, and started off down the hall to find an old t-shirt to soak up the food and alcohol with.

Mike barely moved when he slammed open their door and began to rifle in his clothes drawer. Carlos glanced over at him enviously, then grabbed a number of old workout shirts and left the room. Looking up once he was back out in the hall, Carlos wondered at the relationship between consciousness, creation, and reality. Was there room for interpretation? How did thought waves translate into action?

He shook his head slightly as he approached the door.

“What’s wrong?” Lili asked.

He just looked at her.

“Seriously?”

“Don’t,” she said. “I’m sorry Carlos. I’ll make it up to you. Just promise you won’t tell anyone?”

“It’s alright,” he said. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank you.”

Carlos threw the handful of t-shirts onto her puke.

“You don’t have to stay. I know you’re miserable right now,” he added, and pressed his
sandaled foot into the gooshy and warm t-shirts, hoping to soak up most of the mess with his clothes.

“Can I just use the toilet?” Lili’s blue eyes looked into his entreatingly.

“Sure,” he responded, taking the door from her.

She stepped over his clothing pile and disappeared around the corner.

After a few seconds of silence, the tinkling of her pee into the toilet bowl echoed against the walls of the bathroom. He stood there, pressing his foot into her vomit, listening to her empty her bladder. It came at a steady pace and Carlos had the brief thought that this was the most intimate moment he had ever had with a girl.

She flushed, washed her hands, then reappeared around the corner right as Carlos decided that he had cleaned as well as he could and that he should definitely throw his shirts into the trash.

“Here,” she said, handing him a number of paper towels.

“Thanks,” he said, and used them to pick up his shirts. Carlos deposited their remains into the trash bin and decided to deny any knowledge of their existence. Technically, he rationalized; he wasn’t the one responsible for them.

“Do you want me to help you?” he asked, as Lili moved away.

“No, I can make it,” she said, turning back then, to grab his hand.

“Thank you Carlos. For your help. I guess I went a little crazy last night.”

“You’re welcome,” he answered, gently pulling his hand away.

“So you won’t tell anyone?” she asked again. Staring this time, her eyes fully open into his.

“I won’t. Now, get some sleep. In a real bed,” he smiled.
She returned his smile, pivoted, and walked down the hall toward her room.

Carlos went back to his own room and fell asleep for a few more hours, waking at the ripe hour of 11:30. Mike had just stumbled back into the room and kicked Carlos with the heel of his foot.

“Alright. I’m getting up. Go without me if you’re so hungry,” Carlos shoved Mike’s foot roughly off his bed and glared at his roommate.

“Fine. I’ll go save us a spot. Just get up soon. Oh and dude, cover your nose when you leave the room. The hallway reeks. I think some idiot puked in the trashcan.”

Mike slipped on a pair of Chacos and left.

Carlos, glad that Mike had been preoccupied with his hunger, sat down heavily in front of his laptop. He lifted the screen and opened an Internet browser, then typed Facebook.com, and was signed in immediately. The first thing he saw was that he had a message.

Someone, somewhere was thinking specifically about him, and this made him feel a little less anonymous, as it did when he got a text, or an email, voicemail, aim, an online chat, or Skype call. He felt more connected. It meant he mattered, and if he mattered, then he felt less alone.

Carlos maneuvered the mouse slowly with his finger, savoring the moment, and clicked on his inbox.

It wasn’t from Darin. It wasn’t even from a friend. It was just a campus-wide invitation to a rally for sustainable water use happening on Ankeny Field at 3pm. The message said to “Take a study break” and to “Bring signs, ideas, and loud voices!” So much for mattering.

Now he was left with a difficult decision. Should he friend Darin? Mike would probably tell him to do it, but after waiting overnight, he hesitated, and second-guessed his intuition.
Then something happened that Carlos would remember for a long time. His hand seemed to act on its own volition. He watched himself move the mouse curser with his finger over to a small button on the left side of the screen that said “Add as Friend.” Above the button was a picture of a red high heel.

“Are you sure you want to add Darin Belladonna as a friend?” the pop-up asked him. His hand clicked “Yes.”

There, it was done. Putting on a sweatshirt and his own Birkenstocks, Carlos left his room in search of Mike.
When she opened her eyes the next day, Darin felt misplaced. She could have been asleep for two days, or three hours. Her sense of time was stripped away by the foreign sounds, and the darkened room. But why had she woken? A sound, soft knocking. Two taps. And again.

“Hello?” Darin croaked from the bed, and sat up slowly, shaking her head. Thick, dark curtains covered the windows, and when the bedroom door opened, Darin squinted to shade her eyes from the bright daylight that came streaming in.

“Amor? You awake?”

She watched Carlos walk into the room, and close the door softly behind him. Darin laid back down, drowsy in the dark.

“Barely,” she yawned.

Carlos pulled the covers back, and slipped under the sheets. Darin turned on her side and let him curl against her back. He wrapped one arm around her stomach. Would he feel a difference?

She leaned her head against his chest, and listened to the even rhythm of their breathing echo around the room.

“You slept for a long time,” he said.

“What time is it?”

“Eleven. Half the day is almost gone.”

She wanted to turn her head to look at him, but she felt too comfortable and remained still. The house was quiet except for a faint humming sound, like a vacuum far away.

“I had a bad dream,” she said, suddenly remembering, but couldn’t recapture the intensity of waking alone in the dark.
“You’re fine now,” he said.

“It was really scary,” she said.

“You shouldn’t be so fearful. Wipe those bad thoughts from your mind. You won’t have anymore nightmares.”

“Maybe,” she responded.

“I came in, last night, after I got back, but you were so asleep. You didn’t move,” he murmured into the back of her neck, then kissed her nape softly.

“I was tired,” she answered, feeling goose bumps crawl up her arms and the bottom of her legs.

His kisses spread, over her neck, along the line of her shoulder, and the length of her arm. He brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed the tip of each finger, then let his tongue slide down the length of her fingers before pressing his lips into her palm.

It felt right, and Darin didn’t fight it. She let desire wash over her like pool water glided over her skin as she strained forward, stretching her arm straight for each stroke, until she was at the end. Of what though? What was the end of this journey?

She rolled over. He gently took her face in both his hands and kissed her cheeks, her forehead, and the tip of her nose before meeting the fullness of her mouth with his own lips. He kissed her temple, and the side of her face before whispering something to her in Spanish.

“What?” she said, not wanting to open her eyes or lose the feeling of his caress.

“Besarte es como ver las estrellas,” he whispered again, slower this time.

“To kiss me is like to see the stars?” she whispered back.

“More or less,” he said, opening his eyes and raising himself up on his elbow.

“You don’t have to feed me lines to try and be romantic,” she said.
“What do you mean, ‘feed you lines?’” he asked.

“It means, well, it’s like being fake. I don’t know how to explain it,” she faltered, and sat up, extracting herself from his arms.

“I wasn’t being fake, Darin. That how kissing you makes me feel.”

“It’s just, not something you would say in English.”

“Oh,” he said.

She didn’t know how to answer him, so she remained quiet.

“Are you hungry?”

“I guess,” she answered, looking at him in the dim light.

They made eye contact but she couldn’t read his facial expression. She thought she felt the faint sensation of nausea coming on, and tried momentarily to will it away.

“I’ll get you something to eat,” he kissed her on the forehead, and got out of bed.

“Can I take a shower first?” she asked, remaining under the warmth of the blankets.

“Sure, amor. Maybe I can join you?”

She froze. “But your dad.”

“He’s not here,” Carlos looked down at her.

“Or Esmeralda,” she said.

Carlos turned and moved away from her.

“I’ll be in the kitchen when you’re ready,” he said, opened the bedroom door, and left.
Chapter 20

Penrose library, Carlos decided during the first week of classes, was his favorite place on campus. He and Mike walked up the twelve stone steps to the front walkway framing the library. Carlos glanced inside and tried to gauge how busy it was.

He had spent the first week of school exploring the four-story building. The bottom floor was underground, dedicated to the archives mostly, but also housed a few display rooms and the “late night café.” The second and third floors housed most of the student activity. The front wall facing Ankeny Field was made of solid glass. Along these walls were study tables, usually the most popular location because of their ideal viewing and optimized procrastination opportunities. There was always a lot to watch at the front of the library, not to mention the whole spread of Ankeny Field; pick-up soccer, ultimate Frisbee, study groups, or even clusters of sorority girls laying out in short shorts and bikini tops.

The fourth floor was less visited and remained somewhat of an enigmatic mystery. It wasn’t accessible from the main stairs and could only be reached by an elevator no one ever used, or a set of back stairs most people didn’t know about. Carlos had discovered the fourth floor by accident when he took the back stairs up two flights, forgetting the main floor was the 2nd, and found himself walking onto the tiny fourth floor, which only covered about a fourth of the actually library below it. The entire floor was one long rectangular room with twelve rows of bookshelves running down the center of it, and four study rooms. The rooms had no front wall, or door, so muffled voices and noises drifted throughout the entire floor unless it was early morning, or late at night. Then there was just silence. Each room had a number of long, wooden tables, a couch, and a few overstuffed chairs, which often ended up being used for naps, rather than academic pursuits.
Most of the library was designed that way—for comfort. But what else could one expect from a library that never closed? There was an almost 100 percent certainty that more then one nap during any given hour was being taken in the building.

Mike veered right to greet a few members from his club lacrosse team, leaving Carlos to hunt for a study spot that would be both productive and entertaining. He passed the silent Allen Reading Room where only the very studious went—even whispers were frowned upon—and walked up two flights of stairs.

He felt like being on the third floor today. There were dozens of study places to choose from, and it offered the best vantage point for people watching. The third floor also had a view of the library’s entrance. A large portion of the third floor was cut out, so that students could lean over a railing and look down onto the second floor. The hole in the floor was framed with a wooden overhang and cushioned benches. On rare occasions he had seen one of Whitman's A Cappella groups, the Testostertones, or Schwa, burst into the library, huddle under the overhang, and sing a few songs, allowing the acoustics of the open ceiling to carry their melodious voices throughout the library.

Remembering the music as he walked past the open landing, Carlos looked for a spot along the row of windows. It was still early, and if they didn’t finish everything before dinner there was plenty of time to come back and continue. He chose a table that was free of backpacks, books, papers, or any other student paraphernalia frequently left on tables as reservation markers. He had been amazed the first time he saw an unattended laptop on a table, but eventually came to accept the level of trust that existed at Whitman, and had decided that it should be the norm, not the exception.

The crime rate at Whitman was virtually nonexistent. Everyone left their dorm rooms
unlocked. They all trusted each other to be good and honest, and although he was sure that some people took advantage of this trust, he knew that the majority respected it as much as he did. The general idea of “open doors” was refreshing, and he sometimes thought about what his country, or the rest of the world, would be like if everyone could trust one another to do the right thing. Wasn’t that the source of most of the world’s problems anyway? Imagine how much faster airplane travel would be with no security check points? He had dreams of returning back to Mexico and spreading that level of trust throughout society. How he might do that, he wasn’t sure, but he thought that holding the belief was a good start.

He put his backpack down on the empty table and looked outside. It was mid-afternoon; sunlight was streaming into the library through the glass windows. A comforting murmur echoed around the 3rd floor as students gathered to study, find their friends, and talk about their weekend adventures. Outside, the campus was littered with groups of students, walking, playing, sitting around in groups, reading, and eating.

Carlos flipped open his Macbook and read the virtual sticky note on the screen:

1. Finish Socrates
2. Write final Core essay
3. Read ch. 12 and 13 for Physics final
4. Do practice physics test

Ideally, he would get to all the items on his list today, but in reality he knew that just finishing the reading before he fell asleep from exhaustion would be an accomplishment. Carlos opened Socrates as Mike plopped his bag down on the table.

“Why didn’t you tell me where you were going? Oh, dude. Big scrimmage on Tuesday, you should come,” Mike frowned in thought, then began to take books out of his backpack.
“I didn’t know where I was going. Why is it a big scrimmage?”

“Oh I don’t know. We’re playing the Walla Walla C.C. and Dafkinson is making a big deal about it.”

“Oh,” Carlos said absentmindedly while he opened Facebook and scanned the homepage. His sister had posted “pesadillas” as her status and he responded to her post by asking “what about?” That was the most interesting news. One girl in his core class, Jessica Roberts, had written an enthusiastic post about how much fun she had just had, dancing and singing alone in the shower. But that could hardly be considered interesting. Many people needed to validate their good times by making sure others knew about them, especially if it was something they had done alone. Sometimes he doubted the legitimacy of these self-proclaimed good times. It was sad that his generation could not have an experience without thinking “I should post this on Facebook.” He sometimes even caught himself mentally revising status updates during the day. Did anyone really live in the moment? Or were they all just going through the motions of the experience so that they could post that moment on Facebook?

He typed “In library” into his status bar and posted it to his wall, mentally noting that Darin still hadn’t accepted his friend request. Carlos checked his emails, school account and personal, then glanced over a friend’s blog before glancing back down at Socrates.

“Man, I’m still exhausted from last night,” Mike said across the table from him, and yawned so wide that his left eye closed.

“At least you weren’t awake at 8am,” Carlos mumbled, opening up the document that contained his paper ideas for the last Core essay.

“Neither were you,” Mike paused. “Were you?”

Carlos shrugged noncommittally, remembering his vow of secrecy to Lili.
“Were you?” Mike asked again, narrowing his eyes dramatically.

Carlos laughed, leaned closer to his roommate, and lowered his voice so that students sitting at nearby tables wouldn’t overhear.

“What!” Mike whispered back. “It was Lili? Did you guys hook up after or what?”

“After she puked? Disgusting, no way. And besides, it wasn’t like that. I just helped her and she was grateful.”

“It’s because you’re digging this Darin chick. At least for now…but listen, Robbie’s really pissed at the puke. You came to brunch late so you didn’t hear his rant, but he was going on and on about irresponsibility and having a section meeting tonight to find the culprit and talk about good manners, blah, blah, it’s going to be a huge waste of time. You could save us the trouble and just go and explain what happened.”

Mike looked at him.

“But I didn’t do it,” Carlos thought back to his half-asleep, half-distracted attempt at soaking up the vomit and knew that he could have been a lot more thorough.

“I could have cleaned it better, I suppose.”

“Dude, the whole hallway smelled rank this morning. Anyway, you don’t have to tell him the truth, but if you did, or made up some half-truth, the rest of us would be very grateful.”

Carlos stared out the library window as Mike turned back to his laptop. Carlos disliked Robbie, and Robbie disliked him, which made him reluctant to engage him in conversation. On the other hand, sitting through a section meeting with his insider knowledge, wasting time right
before finals when he could be doing something better, seemed like an unbearable prospect. He watched students trudging up the library steps, and noted how their steps got slower as they approached the door. Some of them even looked around for distractions, while others were gathering at the edge of Ankeny field.

“I guess I’ll try to go find him then,” Carlos said, watching the group of students grow larger. “No point in putting it off.”

“I knew you’d do the right thing,” Mike smiled at him. “I’ll watch your stuff, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Do you think I could just send him a Facebook message or something?” Carlos studied his roommate’s face for a sign of reprieve.

“Robbie hates Facebook. Sorry, I know you guys don’t get along.”

Delaying the inevitable, Carlos typed half-heartedly on his Core paper outline for about five minutes. Then, with a sigh of annoyance, got up and made his way downstairs, through the foyer, and out the library doors.

The day was warm, with a light breeze. Walking slowly so as to give himself time to mentally rehearse, Carlos paused at the top of the library stairs and noticed a loud group of thirty-five to forty student on the edge of Ankeny. Some were holding signs, while others were clapping. A number of them seemed to be dressed in different shades of blue. All of them though, were listening to the speaker on a metal fold-up chair. She was holding an orange cone to her mouth and shouting about ways that people could save water. When Carlos focused his attention on her voice he heard:

“If an entire family remained conscious of their water use, if they ran the dishwasher only when it was full, if they used cold water for their clothes washing, if they took baths instead
of showers, if they turned the faucet off while they brushed their teeth, and watered their gardens only late at night or early in the morning, and most importantly, if they adhered religiously to our popular doctrine,” she paused and waited for the crowd to yell back at her, which they did, loudly to a round of laughter—“If it’s yellow let it mellow, if it’s brown flush it down!”—“then the average family would save hundreds of thousands of gallons a year. Just think about these implications and try to change your habits today. It’s the little habits that can make a big difference. And it’s this big difference we need for the quality of our lives, and more importantly the lives of our children and their children to come.”

The voice sounded familiar. He walked down the steps of the library and over to the grass where he could get a better look at the face behind the orange cone.

“Hey, where’s your sign?” A girl with dreadlocks, wearing a purple shirt, and matching sunglasses looked at him reproachfully.

Carlos made eye contact with her, assumed a blank face, and asked in a rapid and thick accent: “Habla usted español?”

The girl gave him a half smile, shook her head no, giggled nervously, and shuffled away into the crowd of students.

He glanced back up at the speaker. Her cone was lowered and she was beaming at the crowd of students applauding and cheering. It was Darin. Of course it was her. He knew as soon as he left the library. Carlos watched her hand off the cone, smile, and shake the hand of the next speaker before picking up her sign and joining the rest of the protesters. The doubt from earlier that morning faded away. His theory was working.

“Sorry section pals,” he mumbled to himself, disregarding his potential conversation with Robbie as he shuffled around the edge of protesters, and made his way toward Darin.
Her back was to him, and she seemed completely absorbed by the speaker who was shouting quotes about the amount of potable water world wide, and how much water was wasted every year. He decided to squeeze himself in behind her, then started listening to the speaker, and cheering at the appropriate moments.

When the next speaker lowered the cone, nodding his head in acknowledgment of their attention, Carlos cheered louder then the rest and saw from the corner of his eye, Darin and the girl next to her, turn and look at him briefly.

The next speaker started talking about sources of water pollutants worldwide. This guy was a bit more subdued, and there was a lot less yelling. During one of the quieter moments, Darin surprised him by turning around and making eye contact.

“Carlos, right?” she said in a low voice, leaning toward him.

“We met in Jewett last night.”

She nodded, then leaned closer. “This is great isn’t it?”

“I’ve always had an interest in water conservation,” Carlos lied, and hoped that Darin would not try to engage him in a conversation that would test that lie. He knew all the key terminology, but when it came to understanding environmental issues, he just didn’t have the energy to research it on his own. He had more important topics to study, such as physics, and the correlation between consciousness and reality. In comparison to the secrets of the universe, environmental studies felt trivial. These activists were trying to improve the quality of one insignificant planet; he was trying to improve the quality of life forever.

After a year of watching students lobby for certain environmental justices and changes, Carlos concluded that pushing for improved environmental conditions was one of the largest contradictions people in the U.S. tried to live. Their whole society was based on efficiency: on
saving time, money, and working to earn a profit—yet they pushed for low energy and water consumption; ways of life that were in direct disagreement with their lifestyles. They wrote letters to corporations, gathered on lawns, had large demonstrations and forced him to take their flyers, but sometimes he thought it was all just a front. It was no secret that people lived for money. If it came to saving the environment, or saving a couple extra thousand a month, he was sure he knew what choice these activists would make.

Darin had drifted back and was now standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

“I’m just so tired of feeling guilty, you know?” she looked up at him, and he met her light brown eyes.

“For what?” he asked.

“For everything,” she said. “I feel guilty every time I waste a piece of paper or I have to throw food scraps in the garbage. Or every time I drive somewhere just to save time, or leave the water running while I wash the dishes. It’s so hard to live completely environmentally conscience. And then what about everyone else. How do you convince them to live that way too?”

_Not with protests._ Carlos had almost come to the conclusion that thoughts were stronger than words, or actions. Changing the way he saw the world exemplified how it could change. Using his consciousness to make that change was the challenge. Yet, if his consciousness was part of a larger collective consciousness that made up the universe, then he assumed that more than one person thinking the same thing would affect reality on a larger scale. There was a lot that needed to change in Mexico; but he believed he could be the catalyst for that change.

“When you put it that way. We all could be doing a lot more.”

Their heads were bent close together. Carlos looked into her eyes as he spoke, feeling as
if Darin was the only person that existed in that moment with him.

“Can you really swim?” she asked, after a couple seconds of silence.

Carlos paused, considering how to answer.

“I’ve always thought swimming was the closest I’ll ever get to flying,” he finally said.

Darin studied his face for a moment.

“Are you free tomorrow night?” she inquired.

“Yes.”
Chapter 21

Naked, Darin stood in front of the bathroom’s half mirror. Scrutinizing her body, she stared at herself full on, and then turning, from the side. It was barely perceptible, the tiniest bulge at the bottom of her belly. Only an experienced mother would recognize it; she shouldn’t have been so sensitive.

Pulling open the plastic shower door, Darin turned on the faucet. She let her hand hang in the stream until she felt the liquid warm to a comfortable temperature, then stepped into the shower, and closed the plastic door behind her.

It felt so good. To be standing alone, under the warm water. She closed her eyes and imagined she was home. It was easy to do—water felt the same everywhere. It ran down her face, drenching her brown locks, wetting her lips. It slid down her shoulders and arms, leaped off the tips of her fingers. Darin ran her hands over her own chest and stomach to spread the water and soak it into her skin.

When Darin opened her eyes, the miniature droplets hanging off her lashes blurred her vision. She could almost convince herself, that they were from the shower, and not a delicate webbing of gathered tears.
Late that night, Carlos became Darin’s Facebook friend.

“It’s official,” he muttered.

“What is?” Mike answered from his bed, where he was reading.

“Darin accepted my friendship. We’re going swimming tomorrow night.”

“She only likes you because you went to that hippie rally. She thinks you care about her causes,” Mike didn’t even glance up from his book.

“I do care,” Carlos retorted.

“Not like her,” Mike yawned and turned onto his side with his back to Carlos.

He needed to study, but Carlos couldn’t resist scanning Darin’s profile page before going back to work.

To click on the red heels and be granted access; it was a privilege. He looked at her Info first. Female: single, Siblings: none, Birthday: April 15, 1991 (only a few months older than him), Interested In: Men, Current City: Walla Walla, WA, Hometown: Olympia, WA, Political Views: Very Liberal, Religious Views: Non-denominational.

Nothing too unusual there. He wondered what “non-denominational” really meant to Darin, and how she would react if Carlos told her about his theory.

Her “Bio” was indecipherable: “I like red shoes,” her favorite quote: “Freedom is just another word for nothing left to hide.” Everything he would expect from a greener. Under employment, she had written, “Lifeguard,” and her schooling was of course, Whitman. It didn’t tell Carlos much, except that she was trying too hard to be unique, but felt mostly average.

Then he read the small font box located under her profile picture: “We are just a time in history; an era that will soon be eliminated by something stronger, smarter, and more adapted to
survival. And then, what will it matter? Who will remember us, but for the remains of bones buried far beneath the waste.”

A quick Google search told him that the quote was self-authored. So she had a dark side. That was just another piece to the puzzle. Which is how he thought about Facebook profiles—little jumbles of the self that if assembled and interpreted right, could be a window to the person in the profile picture. That was the beauty of Facebook: access to the essence of the individual, the private nuances that were normally left to float in the recesses of one’s mind, never voiced, and rarely shared. It was the beginning of a new age.

He moved onto her pictures. She had 467 regular photos, but only two photo albums, the rest were photos of her tagged by other people. One was titled “Trip to NYC,” and the other was called “City Cleanup- Oly town.” He clicked on the first album, which was mostly pictures of buildings, department stores, and restaurant names. Darin was in one picture smiling in front of the Guggenheim Museum. Two older people, a tall man with peppered brown hair, and a short woman with Darin’s face, stood on either side of her.

The other album was full of sidewalks and street curbs at strange angles, young people dressed in jeans, large overstuffed jackets, hats, scarves, and mittens. They carried large trash bags and smiled at the camera while holding random bits of garbage suspended over their open bags, mouths and eyes widened in mock surprise of being caught in action. There were a few pictures of Darin. They all seemed to be self-taken, because in each her face was large and close to the camera lens.

In one she was cross-eyed and sticking her tongue out, in another, cheek to cheek with a blonde girl: her own nose and cheeks apple red from the cold, her skin more white, her eyes more hazel, her freckles more pronounced. Both girls wore fuzzy snow hats with drooping
knitted wool balls on top. Darin’s brown hair splayed out in random strands around her face.

Carlos stared for a minute or so, tempted to leave a comment, but then decided against it.

Her wall didn’t reveal much either. There were the typical study break pleas from friends, the complaints of work, the “Hey, are you going to be back for summer? Let’s get together” type posts that Carlos felt were usually more to display a friendship, than a genuine interest in reunions.

There was one status post that Carlos thought was relevant. It was dated Saturday, April 24th, and it was three words, “sink, or swim?” The posting was dated 4:36 pm, about 20 minutes after Darin had left the pool area. Could that have been in regards to their race? Carlos stared at the three words, urging his mind to make sense of them. But it was late, and he could get no further then some personal or social ultimatum. Sighing, Carlos clicked back to his own profile and wondered what Darin would surmise from his personal eclectic presentation, or if she would even visit his page at all.
Chapter 23

When she walked into the kitchen, Carlos was standing by the sink with his arms folded across his chest.

“How was your shower?” he asked.

“Good,” she replied.

“Great,” he said.

“Where’s Esmeralda?” she asked.

“Probably cleaning somewhere,” he opened the old fridge and began listing food options.

“I could heat up what Esmeralda made for breakfast. Eggs scrambled with tortilla strips and sausage bits. It has salsa in it though, so it might be spicy for you. We also have fruit, flavored yogurt, and cereal. What would you like?”

“You’re actually making me something?” Darin said straight-faced, then grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

“You misunderstood me last night,” Carlos replied, then saw her face and shook his own head.

“I know, I’m teasing you. Actually, I really just feel like orange juice. Do you have any?”

“No, but I could make some.”

“What do you mean?”

“We drink fresh juice here. I can squeeze you a few oranges.”

“Oh no. Don’t go through the trouble.”

“It’s no trouble.”

Darin watched as Carlos washed four oranges, cut, and began squeezing them into a large juice container. A fresh citric fragrance permeated the kitchen and Darin thought that nothing
smelled quite that wonderful.

“Did you find your dad last night?” Darin sat down on one of the stools and waited for Carlos to finish the juice.

“Yes, I knew where he was. He only goes to one or two bars usually. It was asking him to come home that was difficult,” Carlos said.

“Why?”

“When my father drinks, he gets happy. It’s hard for me to bring him home, and hard for him to remember why he’s sad.”

Darin began tracing her fingertips through the rough and jagged cuts that remained in the wooden island tabletop; marks left from slicing bread, and preparing vegetables, marks of the living.

“I’m sorry about last night. It’s none of my business. I wish I could help, somehow.”

Carlos sighed loudly.

“There’s so much Americans choose not to understand. It’s hard to explain the real situation.”

He handed her the juice and leaned back against the sink. He looked tired.

“I said I was sorry.”

“I’m not trying to be mean. Do you ever think that Americans don’t see the big picture?”

He looked at her intently.

“You can’t generalize “us” as if we’re all the same type of person,” Darin took a drink of the orange juice, letting the sweet pulp fill her mouth and slide down her throat.

“What happens here is just news to most people, especially Americans; just distant rumors and pictures on the Internet that cause moments of sympathy. But for us it’s different.
These are not just stories, Darin, they are reality. I forgot for a while, at Whitman, what it’s like to live with real danger. Few of you know what it’s like. You walk around waving your signs of protest, but you don’t understand what it is you’re protesting. Coming back here, I remembered because I live it. You asked me last night, why we don’t do anything? I am doing something, but it might take a long time. It won’t be immediate change, and maybe that's not good enough, but it's all I can do.”

Darin watched in silence as Carlos’s face grew darker and he faded away, into his thoughts.

“What do you mean?” she asked, trying to bring him back.

“This world—it’s so screwed up. We’re living with all the wrong things; mistrust, suspicion, fear, hate. I’m trying to change it, slowly, by changing myself. But it’s not immediate, and I don’t know if my thoughts will be enough. Whatever part of me survives after my body is gone well, I don't know if my consciousness will return for a lot time.”

Darin looked away, past Carlos out the kitchen window that led to the street. He wasn't making any sense. Consciousness returning? They already had enough trouble communicating without his esoteric ramblings.

“You're part of that change, Darin,” he continued. “Your my proof that consciousness exists and does affect reality. That's why you're so important to me. I know our lives are intertwined for a reason.”

“How am I proof?” she asked, confused.

“Since the day you jumped in the pool, and raced me, I've kept you in my consciousness. I believed I could bring you into my world, and I have.”

“You brought me into your world? What about me? I’ve made choices too,” Darin sat
still, with her juice in one hand.

“Yes, you’re part of it. But I can only see reality with my eyes. How you experience life will be completely different. And I know now, what I can do.”

She didn’t like the way he spoke about her, as if she was his plaything to be experimented on.

“You think you’re in control of everything?” she asked.

“In my life? Yes,” he answered.

“Well at least one of you do,” she mumbled and looked away.

“What do you mean by that?” Carlos answered, the pitch in his tone rising.

The realness of it all, and what it meant, the implications it had on her life, felt too much to bear. Darin felt her face get hot, and she clenched her fists tightly in her lap.

“I mean that you have all the money in the world, that your family is pampered with two houses, a driver, and a live-in maid, and yet your dad doesn’t work. I mean that your mother was murdered, and all of a sudden your family is hiding out. At least my parents work for everything they have, and make an honest living. At least they have nothing to hide,” she said brazenly, then stared stony-faced.

As he shook his head, tiny veins appeared along the edge of his temples and over his forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “That was wrong of me.”

“Maybe you’re right,” he said.

“I’m angry, I don’t want to be your experiment.”

Carlos walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her.

“But Darin,” he hesitated.
She didn’t speak right away. Then finally,

“Carlos.”

“Yes, Darin?” He pulled away from her, to hold her face as they looked at each other.

“Nothing. May I have a glass of water? I’m thirsty. The juice is so sweet,” she looked away.

“Of course, mi amor, of course.”
Carlos walked onto the pool deck and took a deep breath of the chlorinated air. It was soothing, and he felt completely relaxed. Grabbing two kickboards and two pull buoys; Carlos set the swim accessories at the head of lane two. It was 7:50, which gave him just enough time to warm up before Darin arrived.

He sat at the edge of the lane with his legs submerged in water and thought that this was the strangest date he had ever been on. Neither had specified it was a date, but Carlos knew that it was.

With the soothing sensation of chlorinated pool water lapping at his legs, and the humid air enveloping him, Carlos let his senses melt into a languid drowsiness. His face stretched in a large yawn and he thought that his exhaustion might be better served with a nap, than an exacerbating swim workout.

Contrary to his normal routine, Carlos eased himself into the pool, allowing his body to adjust to the temperature drop while he bobbed and t阅读水 for a few minutes. Once completely submerged, he backed slowly into the wall, bent his knees, and used the balls of his feet to push him, spring-like, into motion.

For ten minutes Carlos circled the pool slowly, lengthening each stroke, feeling the muscles in his arms stretch and contract. He liked the way his fingers tips brushed across the velvet water top, and the smooth silkiness of the water on his face. His slow swim became a type of hypnotic therapy as his mind heightened, while his stress about finals, and questions about Darin, dulled.

He remembered the types of questions he used to ask as a child: about ghostly visits, the powers of super heroes who could read minds, and what happened to people when they died.
Older now, he knew his real question was ‘where did people’s consciousness go after their body died?’ What was it made of? His parents never wanted to talk about his enquiries. His mother was somewhat sympathetic, but his father always dismissed him abruptly, and he soon learned not to ask.

The summer before he left for Whitman, Carlos had begun to do real research on his own, to finally find answers to the questions that plagued him. It had felt satisfying, and he knew he would continue to pursue them. Then, while in Seattle over winter break, Carlos had happened across an idea that struck him as so intriguing he had begun to keep a journal in order to record his thoughts. He knew this idea would be the starting point for his dissertation. He was still three years away from graduating, but there was no doubt in his mind, the next step in his education was a PhD in physics. He had even started researching the schools he wanted to apply to.

As he trailed his fingers over the surface of the water, Carlos returned to his idea: if consciousness was part of reality, then technically, like matter, it could never be destroyed. Wasn’t the presence of life proof that consciousness was forever existing? If the answer was yes, imagine what implications it held! If people knew they were destined to live again and again, perhaps they would work harder to create a better world. This is what Carlos wanted to prove. If there was truth in the immortality of individual consciousness, then somehow it could be shown with the scientific method. And he would send his findings to every corner of the globe. Perhaps Facebook was the medium he would need to reach the world.

Carlos stretched out his hand and let his palm lightly hit the edge of the pool. Resting one arm on the curb, he took off his goggles. It was 8pm. Letting go of the ledge, he treadsed water with his legs and stretched his arms while facing the locker room door.

Restless, Carlos finished stretching, then put his goggles back on, and sunk under the
water. He began counting slowly to thirty, made it to twenty-seven, then kicked up to the surface for air. As he face broke through the water, he saw a lifeguard standing at the head of the lane looking down at him.

    “Are you trying to drown yourself?” she asked.

He ripped his goggles off and grabbed the pool’s edge.

    “You’re a lifeguard here?” he asked.

    “Of course,” she said. “All pools are my second home. Are you ready? You’ve been warming up for long enough, and I’m off-duty, as of now.”

Carlos watched Darin tug off her tank top, pull down her shorts, and push her belongings away from the edge. She sat down and dipped her cap into the water, then stretched it over her head, pulled on purple goggles, and stood back up.

    “Where are you going?” Carlos asked, sinking lower into the water.

    “Always head first,” she said, and then dove. The residual splash from her entrance hit Carlos on the shoulder. He watched the drops of water slide off his skin as she glided away.

Taking a deep breath, he ducked under water to follow her.

    They swam a 300-freestyle warm-up. Carlos stayed behind Darin the whole time, and knew by her pace, that it wasn’t going to be an easy two hours. The workout Darin had taped to the back of her Klean Kanteen had few scheduled breaks. Set after set of 200’s, all strokes: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke, fly, then IM’s.

    After an hour, Carlos was exhausted, but he was keeping up with Darin, and he knew she was impressed. They had just finished the last of five 200 IM’s on 3 minutes 30 seconds. Holding onto the gutter they paused to catch their breath. Carlos watched Darin unscrew the cap from her Kanteen. She tipped her head back to drink, and as she did excess water slid down her
glistening neck. She lifted herself out of the water slightly to replace her water bottle, exposing wet bare shoulders and slender arms. They made eye contact as she lowered herself into the pool. Carlos knew he had been caught staring, and averted his eyes. Between soft pants for air, an awkward silence settled over them.

“Are you okay?” Carlos asked.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” she turned to face him.

“I don’t know,” he responded.

“Is it okay?” she asked.

“I think so,” Carlos answered, tentatively.

“Are you sure?”

“Are you?” At that moment, his hand, which he had allowed to float freely in the pool, accidentally brushed against Darin’s side, high on her ribs right below her breast. Carlos tried to play it off as if it had never happened, and kept eye contact with Darin, while making sure his arm drifted far enough away that he could avoid another incidental brush.

“Well, we should do it then,” Darin said. She was looking at him strangely.

Carlos began to suspect, as he sometimes did in English, that the conversation they were having was all nuances.

“Yes, I agree,” Carlos responded, bringing his goggles down from his forehead to secure around his eyes. The sounds of people talking, children screaming, and the soft splashing and lapping of water echoed around them. He dropped his shoulders down into the water. Darin continued to stare at him with the same strange look. It was pensive, yet calculating, as if she was figuring out something in her head.

“Right now?” she asked.
“Unless you’re tired? We can finish another time,” Carlos asked, partly relieved.

“Yes, another day, I’ll plan it all out, and let you know on Facebook,” Darin pulled down her own goggles and secured them around her eyes.

“Okay, ready to finish the workout?” she asked.

“But I thought, you just said?” he mumbled.

“What? Are you too tired to keep going?”

“No, but I thought you were?”

An almost imperceptible frown creased Darin’s forehead.

“That’s not what I said. I’m never too tired to swim. We have a 200 free sprint on the 60. That’s in five seconds,” she added looking at him.

He nodded as Darin pushed off the wall, streamlining under the water and away from him. Carlos suctioned his goggles into his eye sockets with the palms of his hands, took a deep breath, and pushed off the wall into his own streamline.

The water flowed all around him, almost intangible, in between his toes, over his elbows, through the hairs on his arms and legs. He broke into his freestyle stroke with frantic kicks and hurried breaths. Struggling determinedly to keep up with Darin’s sprint pace, swimming gave him the distraction he needed to disregard their last conversation. It probably wasn’t that important anyway.
Chapter 25

For central Mexico in early July, it was not as hot as Darin had expected. After telling him that she didn’t feel so well, Carlos suggested that she sit outside with her water to get some fresh air and relax. He had left her for a moment to get his cell phone, and as she sat, she wondered at life’s unpredictable turn of events.

“Isn’t life funny?” she said, as Carlos stepped back outside and closed the door behind him.

They were sitting out in the white courtyard with painted blue flowers. It smelled like a recent rain.

“What do you mean?” Carlos responded.

“You know. How everything in life is so random. All of it left up to chance. I was just thinking about how you never know what’s going to happen to you next. I suppose only the lucky have good lives,” Darin looked over and smiled at Carlos, wanting to get into the habit of sharing her thoughts with him.

“Do you honestly believe that?” Carlos stared at her intently.

She noticed a crease form along the middle of his brow.

“What do you mean?” she replied.

“That only the lucky live good lives. Is that what you really believe?”

“I don’t know,” she answered, and sat up straighter while taking a drink of water. “I guess I do. I thought it was just common knowledge.”

Carlos let out a half chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“There’s no such thing as luck. That’s what’s funny.”
Darin creased her face into a contemptuous glare. How was he so damned sure that luck didn’t exist? No one really knew what was truth, and what wasn’t.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked, then paused. “I’m sorry. Let’s change the subject.”

“Okay, fine,” he said, looking down at the ground. “Then tell me a story, something from your past.”

“I don’t know,” she hesitated.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I can’t think of any. Well, there’s one, but it’s weird.”

“Don’t worry Darin, I’m not going to judge you,” Carlos kissed the side of her head.

“Okay,” she smiled at him. “Well, my mom used to tell me this story. And she told it so many times that I began to feel as if it were my story, instead of hers. Did you know I was born in water?”

Darin studied Carlos’s face as he shook his head.

“Well I was, it’s called a water birth. My parents were hippies, and they try alternative methods for everything. They think that’s why I’m so obsessed with swimming. Anyway, a year or so before my Mom got pregnant she was traveling with my Dad in Italy. It was the summer before their freshman year at college. They stopped for the night in Perugia, this little town in central Italy, near Rome.”

“You were supposed to tell a story about you, not your parents,” Carlos interjected.

“Hush!” Darin grinned at him. “I’m getting there. Anyway, so they stop and stay in a cheap hotel. That night, my mom claims she had the strangest dream of her life. She dreamt that she was watching two people, a young girl and guy, playing together near a river. She said she knew the girl was going to die, that she would be murdered, and she saw it happen. The guy got
mad, and pounded her face in with a rock. Then he pushed her body into the river, and ran. Well, then the girl died, and met my mom.”

“What do you mean?” Carlos asked, his eyes intent on her face.

“I don’t know. This is the weird part. So after this girl “died,” her spirit met my mom’s and they were talking, and the girl was really sad about being dead, and my mom told her to wait, and to come back and be her daughter. She swears to this day that I was that girl, and that she witnessed me in another life. Another reason why she wanted the water birth, to give me an easy transition,” Darin laughed nervously and looked at Carlos, trying to gauge his reaction.

Carlos’s eyes were wide, but as he opened his mouth to answer, his cell phone rang. Darin watched him hesitate before flipping the phone open. He held up one finger at Darin as if to indicate he would be returning to his thought, then stood up and began speaking in Spanish.

“¡Papá! ¿Qué te dije? Darin lo merece. Es que te portaste mal anoche. Queremos ir a México.”

He had walked a few paces away, but Carlos’s voice was rising, and Darin could tell that he was upset. At his father? That didn’t make sense. Why was her name getting dragged into it?

“Hoy, Papá.”

Something was happening today? Darin could hear Señor Solano through the phone. His voice seemed to be louder than normal.

“¿Por qué siempre estás preocupado? El carro no importa.”

Darin listened to Carlos exchange a few more words with his father, and wished she understand more Spanish.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, after Carlos hung up and sat back down next to her.

“It’s fine,” he said. “You might want to get ready to go though.”
“Go where?” she asked.

“Mexico City. My father wants to take us to dinner. We might spend the night. Pack a bag, just in case.”

“Are we staying at your house?” she asked.

“And bring a swimsuit,” Carlos looked away. “The hotel will probably have a pool.”
He signed onto Facebook as soon as he got back to the dorm. Mike was gone, which meant that Carlos could stay in his clothes; let chlorine and dampness permeate the room without complaints.

Carlos clicked “home” and scanned the status updates briefly before searching for Darin Belladonna. He had hoped for an insight into her mind, something that would explain what she was thinking or feeling, but her status was the same. How disappointing. Carlos wrote “pensive” in his own status bar, but left himself signed in and clicked to a new browser tab to check his email.

How much of his day was spent staring at a fluorescent screen, clicking random links and remaining mind-numbingly entertained by inconsequential videos or blogs, various articles, and eye-catching advertisements? Was it healthy? He usually concluded that it wasn’t, but he could also counter all the negative points with positive ones such as learning, networking, sharing information, and connecting with the people he cared about. There was still something concerning about it—the sense of connection through a screen; it felt very un-human.

Carlos opened up a blank document to brainstorm for his final Core essay. His topic was the philosophy of violence. None of the philosophers they had studied in class: Nietsche, Rousseau, Kant, Descartes, or Plato had delved deeply into the nature of human violence and he thought that if he cited their lack of interest in the topic, he could use that as leverage for his argument—that violence was innate. Carlos believed that all living humans felt driven to commit acts of violence. The question was: if violence is just human nature, should there be consequences for violent actions? He thought his teacher might find a loophole in his argument, but he was going to try to cover it with the idea that just because a person could do something,
didn’t mean he should. He wanted to play on the whole morality issue, which seemed to be popular with the famous philosophers, and then would add in a quick summary and be done. Literary papers, while interesting, were not worth a ton of his time. He preferred the comfort and solidarity of numbers, and dedicated the majority of his time to their world.

Carlos typed one last thought onto the brainstorming page and sat back to let the idea sink in, then minimized the document to browse Facebook. The homepage showed recent status and comment updates by the minute, so there was usually at least one new interesting post. A brief scan however, returned nothing valuable.

Sighing, Carlos leaned back in his chair to try and decide if he liked Darin, or if he liked how she was proving his theory. Whether it was romantic or not, he did feel drawn to her. To him, it seemed like a magnetization had brought them together for a specific purpose, and he had to take advantage of that. It was difficult though, she was like the whiteness of the wall in front of him; devoid of color, but there all the same. White hot and spreading.

A noise brought his attention back to the computer screen. It was a click, mixed with the contact sound of a water drop hitting a liquid surface. Someone had sent him a chat message on Facebook. He maximized the Internet browser and felt a peculiar sense of serenity when he saw her name. She had typed, “hello, sry bored,” which made Carlos wonder if her consciousness was aware of the desires of his own.

He put his hands on the keyboard, paused for a moment to consider what to say, then decided to go with the classic: “Hello Darin, how are you?”

D: Good, trying to study. Can’t focus, feeling tired now 😃

C: Finally! I thought you were super woman, never running out of energy.

D: Lol, no, no, you just made me nervous. I didn’t want you to think you could beat me!
C: Ah, what!? I can beat you. I was being nice 😊...why do I make you nervous?

D: mmm…

D: dunno, you seem mysterious I guess. I can’t figure you out. But I want to 😊

Carlos chest constricted as he typed back, “I feel the same way.”

There was no immediate response from Darin. Carlos tapped the side of his neck with a pencil, unable to focus. Had he scared her away?

He turned to look out the window toward the backyard of Anderson: The volleyball net, the half basketball court, lush green grass and a jungle of green leafy foliage in the background. How serene it all seemed, so calm, so un-indicative of his complicated life.

Then the sound, that tiny drop of water with a click, and calming release. He breathed in deeply.

D: Then we might be a good match. That’s 2 things in common 😊

Carlos counted approximately twenty seconds before answering her.

C: whats the first thing?

D: swimming! Duh!

C: haha, you’re right. What else do we have in common?

D: we both go to Whitman. So you gotta be semi-intelligent.

C: lol, we can only hope, what else?

D: its your turn!

C: alright. Well I have a sister, do u?

D: no, I’m an only child…

Carlos couldn’t think of anything to say, though he was bursting to ask her everything.

He felt comfortable with the online chat medium, and Darin seemed approachable. He wanted to
learn everything about her so that their next face-to-face meeting would be easier. She was friendly and open over chat, and he was beginning to lean toward romantic interest.

Without noticing it, the light outside had faded. He switched on his desk lamp and stared at the computer screen. Adrenaline rushed through his limbs—something was developing. The buzz of his cell phone on vibrate distracted him briefly. He looked at the screen and saw Mama on the caller ID. He couldn’t chat distractedly; he needed all his concentration. Carlos hit the ‘ignore’ button and turned back to his laptop.

D: r u still there?

C: y

D: Im going on a coffee study break. Promise you’ll be on fb later 2nite?

C: promise, ttyl

She signed off, and he was suddenly alone. Carlos clicked on his status bar and wrote “water logged and lovin’ it,” then published it to his profile page. How would his friends respond to this cryptic message? Hopefully they would be confused, he needed some amusement while he waited for Darin. A minute later he got his first comment, from Mike in the library, “wtf. I gotta hear bout this! Lol”

It was almost 10:30 pm. Early in the night. How long would he have to wait? Half an hour? An hour? What if she never signed back on? He would be disappointed if a sudden rift in their newfound intimacy were created. He typed intermittently on his essay for the next forty minutes or so, but distracted himself by frequently returning to Google, to research human consciousness. He thought his queries were all tied to greater questions of physics and he had in his room, along with the required texts for his classes, books he had bought online, such as The Elegant Universe, God and the New Physics, The God Theory, The God Particle, and The Divine
One of his favorite quotes was from *The God Theory*. He had rewritten it on a 4x6 card and taped it to the wall above his desk. He looked at it now: *Consciousness is the primary stuff of reality. Consciousness is able to shape and direct matter. Consciousness, in fact, has created this universe...*p. 67. No matter how many times Carlos forgot the quote and then re-read it, he was always moved. It was the second sentence that interested him the most: *Consciousness is able to shape and direct matter.* But how? What process did his consciousness use to shape or move matter? Darin wasn’t his first, he had tried many times to focus on a wish or desire, but there was no consistency with the results. He thought it had something to do with that small nagging voice of doubt, quiet but perceptible, which kept him from truly believing in what he was trying to do. He knew that this doubt was his downfall. If he couldn’t believe wholeheartedly, then how could he expect his consciousness to shape reality? His consciousness could only *do* what he believed it could do, what he *knew* it could do, and if he didn’t really believe in its abilities, then he was certain he would see no results.

Take tonight for example. He had been thinking of Darin since she signed off from Facebook; trying to affect her reality by consciously thinking of her, trying to make her think of him and feel the connection. But so far, and now an hour had gone by, there was no sign of her. Perhaps he was being too hard on himself. She had originally contacted him; that must mean something. Besides, he knew from experience, that when his consciousness did manage to manifest something he had focused on, it was generally not in the way he had expected or planned. One time, he had spent a few weeks thinking about getting new swim goggles, but never committed to buying them. On a random Wednesday, a girl from down the hall had approached him with an extra pair that her parents had bought her. After a few trips to the pool,
she realized she hated swimming. Hearing from someone that Carlos swam, she thought it would be better not to waste the goggles, and had offered them to him as a present. Carlos barely knew the girl, and had been surprised and pleased, only realizing a few days later how his thoughts had positively affected his life.

It was completely dark now, and a distinct patter against the window told Carlos that it had begun to rain. He scanned his Facebook homepage again for a new status, interesting quotes, or comments. He was about halfway down the page when he saw it, Darin’s status update. It was marked one hour ago, why hadn’t he seen it? He had been so concerned with her coming back online that he hadn’t gone to her actual page, the communicative essence of herself. The message was so simple: “be back at 11:30.” It was after 11:30, so she was late, but that wasn’t the important part of her message. She was coming back, returning to him. Suddenly energized by a rush of endorphins, Carlos worked diligently and without rest until he was called to her again by the click of a falling water drop.
Chapter 27

Before leaving with Raúl, Darin asked Carlos to turn on the family’s old computer. He had pointed out all the Spanish characters, so that she might avoid them, in case she wanted to write any e-mails or messages.

He had said they would be back in an hour, and that she should be ready. Before he left, he bent down and kissed her on the lips.

“Don’t forget, you still owe me a story,” she said, smiling.

“I won’t,” Carlos replied. He kissed her again, and then he was gone.

Darin opened three browser tabs: one for her Whitman e-mail, one for her personal e-mail, and one for Facebook.

She checked her Gmail account first. There were eight new e-mails; but none of them were very interesting. One was from her Dad, two were dictionary.com word of the day e-mails, one was her monthly on-line bank statement, and one was from a South Sound job list serve she had signed up for over Winter break in anticipation of the coming summer. The rest were junk, or spam e-mails that she deleted without opening.

Disappointed that there weren’t any Facebook notices, Darin clicked on her dad’s email.

Hey Sweetie,

Hope you arrived okay. Have fun, but be safe. Send us a message when you get a chance.

We love you.

Love,

Mom and Dad

Darin bit her lip, urging away a sudden onset of homesickness. She typed a short message back to let them know she was okay, and moved onto her Whitman e-mail. There was only one
new message from her friend Bethany, who was on her way to Alaska and had massed e-mailed her contact list to let them all know she would be without access to the Internet for the next month. Darin felt slightly envious. She used the Internet incessantly when it was available, but found that she didn’t miss it much when it wasn’t.

Then onto Facebook. Darin gave herself a mental order: she had ten minutes to browse. She had found that without the self-enforcing discipline she was liable to waste hours on Facebook, browsing from profile to profile—even of people she hardly knew, judging their accomplishments, comparing their attributes to hers, skimming through people’s pictures, and scrutinizing her own. Darin sometimes felt an abhorrence yet simultaneous addiction to Facebook. So she compromised by limiting her browsing time.

The homepage was semi-interesting. Most people were posting about the sun in Seattle, and how much they were enjoying their summer days. A few people were complaining about being at work. She updated her own status to “Marvelous Mexico!”

Darin heard a pleasant click coming from the computer, and saw a Gmail chat message from her mom.

T: Hi Darin, are you there?

D: Hi mom, are you at work?

T: my lunch break, how are you darling?

D: I’m good, we’re going to Mexico City today, in a little bit

T: Oh, fun! Make sure to stay by Carlos though, you know the pickpockets are bad in the city.

D: I know mom

T: Are you two okay? How did he react to the news?
D: I haven’t told him yet 😊

T: What! Why not?

D: It’s hard, I don’t know how

T: You’ll find a way, but do it soon.

D: Okay mom, well I have to go get ready. We’re leaving soon.

T: Okay, I’m glad I got to talk to you!

D: me too, tell dad I say hi.

T: I love you

D: I love you too, bye.

T: bye

Darin signed out of her Gmail account, and her Whitman account, then returned to Facebook. She typed in Carlos Solano, and stared at his profile. Besides his relationship status change, there was very little recent activity. Darin seriously doubted, then, that she would ever be able to tell Carlos about the baby to his face. She didn’t know how to speak to him without creating misunderstanding.

Her mother would absolutely not approve, but she didn’t have a choice. Clicking on the “Send Message” button, Darin started typing. She thought it would take a few minutes to mentally compose what she wanted to say, but it came easily. After the message was finished, she hit ‘send’, closed the browser, and went to pack for Mexico City.

_Dear Carlos,_

_I need to tell you something. That night together meant more than you or I could have imagined. It’s changed my life, and it might change yours. Carlos, I’m carrying a baby—our baby. I’ve tried not to care, or get attached to this child, (it’s too early to know the gender), but I_
have. I want to keep it, even if it means losing Whitman, my friends, and my foreseeable future.

Do you want to be a part of our lives? I hope you say yes. I’ll understand if you say no.

Darin
Chapter 28

He saw her sign on at 11:50 pm. At 11:55, she sent him a message.

D: Hey!

C: your back

D: yes, did you miss me?? 😊

C: Yes, of course, so much

D: I knew it, ur in luv

C: maybe haha

D: how’s the homework?

C: its great! I got a lot done in the last hour. I liked your status

D: u got my msg! glad u liked it. I wonder what other people thought

C: idk, probably they were confused

D: good, I like confusing ppl 😊

C: I can tell

D: what do u mean?

C: nothing bad, u seem like a cryptic person. Your profile pic, mannerisms. some people are easy to read, not u.

D: well, apparently I am. u already figured out I like to be cryptic. I guess I don’t trust ppl. Not right away.

C: I hope u will someday trust me

D: maybe I will, if ur lucky enough 😊

D: hey. tell me a secret

C: can I trust you with secrets?
D: haha, I hope so

C: ok, I plan someday to publish a physics paper that will change the world

D: really? Wow, big aspirations. I like that 😊

C: now your turn

D: no, no secret telling is just for you!

C: hey, that’s no fair!

D: okay, okay, hang on let me think

C: K

D: this is kinda weird. Don’t judge

C: I won’t

D: I have this awful fear of being killed

C: what do you mean?

D: I mean, I always feel like something bad’s going to happen to me. Like I’ll get run over, or stabbed, or shot. I can’t stop the thoughts. I scare myself sometimes.

C: that’s horrible! You should try to control them

D: my thoughts? No-one controls those random thoughts

C: well, maybe we should

D: yea, maybe. Okay, now tell me something you wish you could change about your life

C: hard one.

C: I guess I wish my dad was more open with me

D: wat do you mean?

C: idk, sometimes I feel like he’s not telling me something important

D: hmm, maybe you could ask him?
C: he’s a closed off guy, but you’re right. ok, you?

D: this one’s easy. I wish I had a sibling

C: really?

D: ya, well my parents are great, but I had a kinda lonely childhood

C: I get that

C: can I ask you something? Since we’re being truthful?

D: okay…?

C: promise u won’t make fun of me? sometimes my English still fails

D: promise

C: in the pool today, u were talking about something. When we were resting. I thought it was the workout, but then I wasn’t sure, like maybe it was nuances, or, idk. Help?

D: oh god.

D: I’m embarrassed. U didn’t get it?

C: no, sorry 😔 what did you mean?

D: I don’t want to say

C: now u have to

C: darin?

C: what were u talking about?

D: u really want to know?

C: yes

D: ok, sex.

C: what? I don’t understand.

D: I was talking about sex, in the pool. I thought that’s what u wanted.
D: Carlos?

D: omg, now I feel like an idiot

C: no, im sorry, just surprised, my English must be worse than I thought. I had no idea

D: really? I could have sworn u insinuated it…never mind. R things gunna be awkward between us now? My fault 😔

C: hey…calm down. Awkward is a social construct

C: do u still want to?

D: want to what?

C: in the pool, u know

D: u still want to? It wont be romantic or spontaneous now tho

C: of course, duh lol, and we’ll see about the romance

D: 😊

D: oic haha, ok, let me talk to my friend. I think she can steal the keys for us

C: when?

D: tomorrow night? Maybe, but I’ll let u know for sure

C: I’m still kind of in shock.

D: don’t think that I’m some kind of slut tho 😊

C: darin…why would I think that?

D: I dunno. we barely know each other…

C: we have a connection, I feel it

D: I think ur right…

D: I should probably get back to hw

C: so soon? 😊
D: sry!

C: ok, I’ll be on FB tomorrow. If you wanna talk.

D: ok, gnite carlos

C: buenas noches darin

Carlos sat back in his seat. There was a thin film of sweat on his palms.

It had been a while since he’d had sex. Nine months in fact. He had been caught off guard arriving in Walla Walla, but once he had gotten used to American customs and social signals, he had refrained because, besides Lili, he hadn’t met anyone he liked enough. When he had found himself in a situation that might have presented the opportunity, he always decided not to take advantage of it.

Carlos heard the click and handle-clack of the dorm room opening, and wiped his palms on the sides of his pants.

“Hey!” Mike called out, then threw his backpack on the end of the bed, and walked over to his desk. Carlos turned back to his own computer screen. He went to his Facebook status and typed in “today’s misery is tomorrow’s ecstasy,” then pressed the “Share” button. Would Darin get the message; would she agree?

“What’s going on tomorrow?” Mike’s voice cut into his mental reverie.

“What?” Carlos turned to look at Mike, who met his gaze. He had always considered telepathy to be a potential form of communication, but from Mike?

“Your post. You just wrote it.”

Carlos gazed past Mike and saw the Facebook homepage up on his computer screen.

“Oh,” he responded trying to keep a blank face. He had not planned on being verbally confronted about his status. Receiving written comments were different, he could always take his
time with writing: erase, revise, reword until it was the perfect mixture of cleverness and ambiguity. Moreover, typing to a computer meant he didn’t have to show his face. No-one could read him or interpret those giveaway gestures that tell too much. But talking about it? Talking was unpredictable, too immediate. It didn’t allow for the protective screen that online chatting did.

“Oh my God, something happened between you and Darin. Tell me,” Mike said.

“How did you know?”

“You averted eye contact, which you always do when you’re hiding something. And you’re kind of flushed, like you’re excited. And, since you’ve been obsessing non-stop about Darin all week I can only assume this something has to do with her. So tell me, why are you going to be in ecstasy tomorrow?” Mike pulled his chair around, folded his hands behind his head, leaned back, and flashed Carlos a very self-satisfied grin.

Carlos scowled back at him.

“She wants to have sex with me.”

The thud of Mike’s chair hitting the ground caused a round of retaliatory thumps from the room below them.

“But you two barely know each other?”

“I know, it doesn’t make sense to me either. But, would you say no?”

“Probably not, but still, maybe she’s a huge slut or something. You gotta be careful.”

“If she’s a slut, we would know about it. Reputations spread fast here,” Carlos read Mike’s face and could tell that he was struggling between being extremely happy for him, and extremely jealous.

“Awesome man, let me know how it goes,” Mike said, and turned back to further scan the
Facebook homepage.

“You don’t think I should do it?”

“Just be careful, you know?”

“Yeah,” Carlos replied, then turned around to click through Darin’s profile, wanting to get to know her a little better before tomorrow night.
Chapter 29

She decided to dress casually in faded blue jeans, a green tank top, Dansko clogs, and a light blue Northface Windbreaker. Her hair was parted down the center of her head and set in two plaits. Darin normally chose not to spend more then ten cumulative minutes a day on her appearance, but she felt that this day was special.

Lip-gloss and mascara were on; hair was done, her overnight bag was packed. The only thing left to do was load her purse and she’d be ready. Although hesitant, she decided to take her red Coach handbag, It was small enough that it was sure not to attract much attention. Her parents had left numerous warning articles about theft and abduction in Mexico City on her bed stand and in her Gmail inbox. She had tried to ignore them, but often caught herself scanning their contents anyway. Darin felt well aware of the risks American tourists faced, especially the wealthy ones. But, she reminded herself, she wasn’t really a tourist, and she definitely wasn’t wealthy.

Into the purse she fit her tiny wallet with ID and a couple hundred in cash. She would need to exchange her dollars for pesos. She put in her small digital camera, her cellphone just in case, and a tiny map of Mexico City she had printed before she left home. On the back of the map, she had listed a number of tourist attractions that she wanted to see. Darin didn’t know how costly any of them were, but she had written Basilica de Guadalupe, the National Museum of Anthropology, Palacio Nacional, Templo Mayor, and the famous Zocalo plaza. Hopefully they would be able to go to one or two places. Lastly, she squeezed in chapstick, and sunglasses.

Five minutes before they were supposed to be leaving, Darin decided she was ready to go, and sat down on one of the twin beds. It was strange, not being on Facebook every few hours, or texting her friends. She felt oddly disconnected from the world, but realized the
disconnection was liberating in a sense.

Advertisement cars were driving by and from the open bathroom window she could hear various voices. Sunlight dove into the room in streaming rays, and the house itself was oddly quiet.

She placed her right hand over her belly, and gently rubbed it in a circular motion.

“We’re just a little lonely, aren’t we?” she whispered softly.

The light knock on the door made her jump. Darin got up from the bed and opened the door.

“Oh, Ale,” she said quickly.

“Carlos wants know if you ready?” Ale said slowly over-pronouncing each syllable in her thick Mexican accent.

“Where’s Carlos?” Darin asked.

“With his father. You ready? Yes?”

“Yes,” Darin said.

She felt like she could only partially communicate with Ale and this frustrated her. Not being able to speak with a flawless fluency, not understanding the world and the language around her left Darin feeling only partially whole. It was as if she wasn’t completely human, but just a shadow of thoughts and ideas isolated within the singular avenue of her mind, forced to deduce meaning through perception, association, and context. She had never considered how language and understanding could create both extreme camaraderie and extreme isolation. It was like swimming in static, where meaning was all but lost and everything was cancelled out by her own voice, which floundered aimlessly in her head, trying to understand.

Grabbing her red purse and overnight bag, Darin rushed out of the room in chase of Ale
who was already down the hall.

Darin followed Ale outside, closing the door behind her. Ale leaned back toward the house and locked it with a silver key. The warmth was refreshing, like being wrapped in a blanket just taken from the dryer, sliding naked into bath water, or, she imagined, floating in the warm liquid of a womb.

“We wait,” Ale explained, and looked distractedly around, smoothing her hair while ceaselessly checking the front of her skirt for wrinkles or microscopic bits of lint and dirt.

Curious, Darin took in her surroundings, wanting to get a picture of Huamantla in the daylight. While the main roads they had passed in the city center were paved, it seemed the residential ones in the smaller neighborhoods were not. The dirt had a reddish tint to it and was hard and compact. There were cement sidewalks, but they were cracked and uneven, sometimes resembling small rock crevices or cliffs. The houses still shocked her; they seemed plain and small from the outside, so uninviting. But she knew, from the spread of surprises behind the Solano’s plain walls, that there were beautiful homes inside. She wondered what these walls were hiding.

“Are you excited?” she asked Alejandra slowly, too tired to try and translate into Spanish.

Alejandra turned to look at her. Her eyes searched Darin’s face, then she leaned closer to Darin.

“Tengo miedo, porque—” she whispered, but cut her sentence short as the family’s silver Land Rover stopped in front of them.

Darin recognized Raúl, who got out and opened the middle door for both of them. Señor Solano and Carlos were in the back. She and Ale sat in the middle seats, leaving Raúl alone in the front. Miedo, where had she heard that word? It sounded familiar, but she couldn’t remember
what it meant.

Carlos smiled at her as she got in, and gently rubbed her shoulder.

“You look beautiful,” he said.

“Thank you,” she answered.

“¿Listos?” Raúl asked, looking at them in the rearview mirror.

Carlos nodded to him from the back.

As Raúl turned the car west toward Mexico City, Darin suddenly remembered. *Miedo* in Spanish meant fear.
Chapter 30

When he woke the next morning, Carlos couldn’t remember where he was in place or time. For a brief moment he believed he was home in Mexico, that the filtered sunlight streaming through their plaited blinds was Mexican sun, and the bed—his bed. Why couldn’t he smell mom’s cooking? Then, like a tsunami comes crashing onto land, Carlos fell from his semi-conscious state. The facts of his present situation tumbled in bits and pieces, then realigned themselves in one shocking moment of realization.

Carlos sat up. Today he was expected to perform, in a pool, a detail he discreetly omitted from the conversation with Mike last night. His physics exam was at 2:30, and although he had been studying randomly for the past few days, he felt unprepared. His cell phone glared 8:30am, ungodly early, but remembering how his day would end had sent adrenaline shooting through his body, and he felt strangely awake.

It wasn’t cold in the dorm room, though Carlos shivered as he put on his sandals and walked quietly past Mike’s sleeping shape. He opened their door, and shuffled ten steps down to the bathroom. Yawning deeply while relieving himself, Carlos emerged from his stall and blinked to clear the bleariness from his eyes. Across from the row of seven stalls stood four sinks and a large mirror that spanned from the ceiling down to mid-wall where the counter began. He looked at himself and felt, as he sometimes did, that he was trying to remember who he was. As if he needed to reintroduce himself to his own image. If his consciousness survived after his body died, this would mean he had lived other lives. Maybe at times, he really did need to remember who he was.

He tried to imagine what Darin saw. His dark skin and black hair stood out in the sterile white of the bathroom’s décor like a foreign object. Was he just someone she could use to make
herself more distinct? Shaking the thought from his mind, Carlos left the bathroom abruptly to pack his backpack, check Facebook, and head to the library. She hadn’t written him, yet.
Chapter 31

They had been driving for forty-five minutes when Darin started to worry about the small white car. Sitting in the middle seat, she took advantage of the rearview mirror, and the front windshield for entertainment during long bouts of Spanish conversation. They had already gone through town, and were now on the highway that led them back to Mexico City.

She had first noticed the car about ten minutes after they left the Solano residence. It stayed a few lengths behind, but made the same moves as the Land Rover. Once they got onto the highway, it changed lanes every time they did.

Ale and Carlos were laughing about a chicken joke, when Darin turned to him to address her concern.

“Carlos, do you know someone who drives a white car?” she asked quietly.

“What, amor?” he asked, still smiling from the joke.

“A white car,” she emphasized. “It’s been behind us for a while.”

“¿Qué dijo?” Señor Solano asked.

“Nada papá,” Carlos answered and gave Darin an imperceptible shake of his head.


The car was plunged into silence. Of course, their mother. How could she have been so careless?

“Y qué vamos a hacer en la ciudad?” she asked, wanted to make up for her last comment.

“Vamos a comer en el Café Tacuba, un restaurante muy popular,” Ale answered, but looking worriedly in her direction.

“It’s an old traditional restaurant,” Carlos explained. “It’s been in downtown Mexico since the early 1900’s, delicious food.”
“I see,” she said, wanting to apologize. She looked back at Carlos, and noticed that Señor Solano wasn’t even paying attention. He had adjusted his body so he was up against the side of the car, peering out the tinted back window.

He gave a command to Raúl, who increased the speed of the Land Rover.

“And, um, what else?” Darin asked, with little expectation.

Ale and Carlos began to argue with their father in Spanish. He responded gruffly. The only thing Darin understood was “dinero.”

Amidst the stretch of dry desert land, she could see the tops of buildings ahead in the distance.

“I don’t understand,” she said aloud to no one. She thought this might be the end, her death premonition coming true. Enclosing her tiny stomach with both hands, she apologized mentally to her unborn child. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry.*

Señor Solano finally yelled them into silence. Darin could see the white car in the mirror. It had increased its speed, still tailing them.

Ale started to cry.

“Carlos?” Darin asked softly.

He took her hand. “It’s going to be okay, mi amor, don’t worry.”

“Who are those people?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and looked over at his father who stared out the window.

“Why are they following us though?” she asked. “Can’t they see we’re good people?”

“There’s no such thing as transparency when it comes to people,” he answered, with a sad, straight face. “We all see what we want to.”
Chapter 32

The classroom was heavy with the silent breathing of 45 physics students and their impending final exam. Carlos set his backpack down next to a desk by the aisle and wondered why he bothered to bring his books and study notes. Whatever knowledge he possessed was not going to miraculously be augmented by note scanning five minutes before it started. Nonetheless, he brought them every time. It was perhaps, an act of superstition, or a physical representation of what he knew. A comfort, when he began to doubt his own preparedness.

The shuffling of papers, general rustles, and whispering ended as soon as the physics professor entered the auditorium. The desks in the room were arranged theater style so that each person looked down onto the professor, his desk, and whatever presentation or lecture he was giving. Carlos sometimes pictured himself as the professor, walking onto his own stage, to teach the brightest young minds at some prestigious college what it really meant to understand physics. He would live in a small college town, and make an honest living for his family.

The professor divided the paper test into five stacks then gave the person on the end of each row one stack. When the Professor handed Carlos a stack of Test “E’s,” he could smell the stale coffee on his breath and saw his pink and scabby scalp through the few gray strands still left on his head. It was strange to be so physically close to someone who had taught him three times a week for an entire semester. Like other teachers he had had, Carlos realized he never thought of Professor Sherman as a person: someone with a life, a balding head, maybe a family, and troubles of his own. It was easy to come to class, and then leave without giving a second thought to the life of the spouting knowledge machine who marched into the classroom, taught you what you needed to learn, and marched out.

That wasn’t the kind of teacher Carlos wanted to be. He was going to make a difference
like a human being. He would give his students glimpses into his life. Maybe that way, they’d care a bit more.

Not that he didn’t care. He had found this course stimulating. They had covered a range of topics in General Physics 156, from electricity and magnetism, to circuits, optics, and finally ended with a brief look at special relativity and quantum mechanics.

He found QM fascinating. From what he’d read, scientists knew what quantum mechanics told humans about the world, but no one seemed to understand why, or how it told us what it did. How could the greatest science minds not understand a theory that they applied to different problems everyday? It seemed many of them relied on an idea of knowing that wasn’t all inclusive; that the only important aspect of quantum mechanics was knowing what it told them; understanding why was irrelevant.

Maybe they were right; maybe society today didn’t need to understand quantum mechanics. But Carlos did. What he’d studied so far indicated that every single interpretation of quantum mechanics inevitably led him to some aspect of consciousness. What further irritated him was that so many physicists were searching for unification theories to explain all interactions in existence, yet none of them seemed to include consciousness—the only thing that allowed them to contemplate and formulate their theories to begin with.

“You have 2 hours. Begin.”

The professor’s voice broke into his thoughts, forcing Carlos to look down at the test and comprehend the words that swam before him. He wrote his name on the top of the paper, with his student ID number and date, then jotted down a few equations at the top of the page so he wouldn’t have to remember them later: the de Broglie-Einstein relations, the equations for harmonic oscillators, interference patterns, Planck’s constant, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty
Principle, and Shroedinger’s Equation, just in case. Shifting in his seat a few times, Carlos finally lifted his pencil to answer to the first problem.

1) A space ship approaches Earth with a speed 0.60C. A passenger in the space ship measures his heart beat as 70 beats per minute. What is his heart beat rate according to an observer that is at rest relative to Earth?

Starting with special relativity. That made sense; the professor had practically drooled over it during his lectures. The equations he needed were already on the first page, and he reviewed them briefly before working out the solution. He knew there were two observers, one in a spaceship, and one at rest relative to Earth. He also knew that each observer would measure differences in space and time. What he didn’t know was whether a heart rate referred to a difference in space, or time, which meant that he would have to solve for both.

He used the Lorentz transformations. After spending a couple of minutes scribbling numbers, Carlos had two answers, only one of them corresponded to a multiple-choice answer. He filled in the empty hole next to ‘C’ and moved on.

2) A beam of electrons with of wavelength of 7.5 x 10^-6 m is incident on a pair of narrow rectangular slits separated by 0.75 mm. The resulting interference pattern is projected onto a screen 10.0 m from the slits. What is the separation of the interference maxima in the resulting interference pattern?

The famous double slit experiment. Luckily Carlos had known this would be one of the questions on the test, and had reviewed its complications earlier. It was a fascinating experiment, and the implications of consciousness and the observer were hard to ignore. Would he one day, be able to publish an experiment that changed the way scientists looked at the world? It was his goal in life. He wrote down the equation he needed.
Sometimes Carlos forgot he was doing math and imagined he was learning a new universal language of symbols and numbers that would help people make sense of the world. A language that would actually communicate with clarity and elegance. Not like the written and spoken languages of today; all nuances, presumptions, and hidden agendas through implications. No one communicated anymore. They all just hid behind technology. But math, solutions, and equations were finite. If he could solve a problem, then he would have the answer. Problem to solution. It was simple. There were no hidden meanings in the understanding of how numbers and mathematical symbols represented the world.

Everything could be broken down into parts, and had meaning: $\lambda$ was the wavelength of the light; $d$ was the separation of the slits, the distance between A and B in the diagram to the right; $n$ was the order of maximum observed, $x$ was the distance between the bands of light and the central maximum, and $L$ was the distance from the slits to the screen center point. Carlos felt like he had opened the door to his home and was walking inside to greet each member of a family he knew intimately, cared about, and loved.

It was simple now; he just had to label the information he didn’t know: $\lambda = 7.5 \times 10^{-6} \text{ m}$

$= 7.5 \times 10^3 \text{ nm}$, with $d = 0.75 \text{ mm} = 7.5 \times 10^5 \text{ nm}$, and $L = 10 \text{ m} = 10e9 \text{ nm} = 1e10 \text{ nm}$. How many people on the planet could communicate with numbers? He guessed percentage wise, not many. It was easy to forget that education wasn’t spread evenly over the globe. The world outside of Whitman, he had to remind himself from time to time, was much different.

How would life change if everyone spoke in equations? What if he could figure out the life equation, the God Theory. What would change then? Carlos wanted to take time to imagine a world where human existence was a known, provable thing, and the meaning of life could be
neatly packaged in an equation. Envision the sweetness, the complete and utter satisfaction, of holding the world in his hands: everything written out on paper, with consciousness at its core. That came later though. For now, solving the problem would have to do.

   Considering at what point the interference maxima occurred, Carlos knew that $n= 1$. So he was just solving for $x$. Simplicity. $x = \frac{L \lambda}{d}$. By plugging in the values, Carlos found that $x = 1.0e8 \text{ nm} = 10 \text{ cm}$. The anxiety he felt faded completely away as he filled in the circle next to ‘A.’ Just fifteen more questions to go.

   Physics was his everyday language; a translation to the world that he saw, and felt, tasted, and heard around him but still didn’t understand, not at its most basic, fundamental point. If only he could capture it’s meaning in numbers, then he might finally feel a sense of calm, and know that he truly understood something. It all cumulated at the point of consciousness, he was sure of it. Without consciousness, there would be no life. The two were interchangeable, and because of this, Carlos realized, consciousness must be everlasting.

   He turned the page of his test and began reading the next question. He knew then, that numbers would one day rule his world.
Chapter 33

Ten minutes later, Darin braced herself against the window as Raúl turned unexpectedly off the main road. A small street sign indicated they were on Viaducto, or Rio de La Piedad. She tried to pay attention to the landmarks, rather than the white car that turned off with them.

The traffic was heavier now, and Raúl slowed down, sometimes coming to complete stops before starting back up with a jerk. Darin kept her eyes on the sides of the road and noticed a large round structure with raised reddish triangles along the roof. *Palacio de los deportes* was printed in large letters outside the structure and Darin surmised it must be some fancy sporting arena. There was a nice looking garden that Darin looked at briefly, and a Holiday Inn Hotel right along the street. Raúl drove them around a four-way loop, and circled right, onto San Antonio Abad.

She glanced into the mirror to try and locate the white car as the Land Rover came to a complete stop.

“¿Qué pasó, Raúl?” Señor Solano barked from the backseat.

Raúl mumbled something back that Darin could not understand. She looked to Carlos for clarification.

“He says he doesn’t know, that the cars have just stopped,” Carlos explained.

“Maybe you could call the police?” she whispered.

Carlos looked at her and shook his head, “I told you already,” he mumbled, and turned back to look out the rear window.

They inched their way forward as a few cars turned off onto a side street, and Darin thought she saw a crowd of people up ahead, marching across the road and blocking traffic.

“It looks like there’s a gathering up there,” she said in English.
Raúl turned on the radio and the family listened intently to the news being broadcasted over the airways. When the announcer began speaking about the Distrito Federal, Raúl turned up the volume.

Darin focused on the radio but she only heard a few words that she recognized like agua, derechos humanos, and protesta. After the broadcaster switched topics, Señor Solano cursed under his breath. Ale turned to speak to her father, and Darin turned to Carlos for answers.

“What’s happening? I couldn’t understand everything the announcer said.”

“People are protesting the water shortages in some parts of the city. It’s a conservation tactic that the city has been using, but some people aren’t happy about it.”

Darin looked in the rearview mirror again. The white car was there, watching. She didn’t know what to feel. Without the facts that had led up to this moment, Darin experienced conflicting emotional reactions within her. One part of her wanted to cry, like Alejandra, and fear for her life and the life of her child, another part of her though, tried to soothe that fear with rationales like it might all be a coincidence. More than anything though, she knew she couldn’t fully interpret the world around her without absolute command of the language. She would always be a step behind, lost in a sea of Spanish.

Their vehicle inched forward as cars impatiently left the main road. Darin now had a full view of the demonstration. It wasn’t as big as she had initially thought. There were 150-200 people marching up and down sidewalks and in the streets. She could see a few of the signs. One of them read: “Agua limpia para todos,” another stated, “Agua para todos, todo el tiempo.”

How could Mexico City be running out of water? She thought they had a few decades before total panic began to ensue. Why weren’t they using this time to figure out how to conserve, so they would never run out? She imagined her little son or daughter crying from
thirst.

“Why isn’t there enough clean water for everyone?” she asked.

“Darin, please,” Carlos answered. “This isn’t the time.”

At that moment, the police managed to box in the crowd, and were waving cars through. Raúl jetted the car forward just before demonstrators broke into the street again, halting traffic.

Darin whipped her head around and watched as the crowd swarmed in front of the honking cars. The white car hadn’t gotten through.

Señor Solano was watching too.

“A la derecha,” he said sharply to Raúl, who complied at the next street. “Vamos al Holiday Inn. No van a buscarnos allí.”

Darin saw Ale and Carlos look at one another, but neither protested their father’s decision. Everyone started to breathe easier. Darin’s own body relaxed. Raúl began whistling softly.

“But water saved us. It is the time,” she whispered to herself, moved by the protest’s implications.

“What?” Carlos asked her.

She looked at him, but he didn’t meet her gaze.

“Nothing,” she said.
That afternoon, after finishing the test, he received Darin’s much-anticipated Facebook message. As a lifeguard, it hadn’t been hard for her to get access to the pool. She explained that she knew the right person, and on the pretense of fulfilling a girlhood dream, was given the access code to the building. Her message had said: “Success. See u at 12. Bring…nothing.” It was both flirtatious and serious, and Carlos wanted to believe that he understood the implications of what he was about to do.

He occupied himself with dinner, then had a few beers in the dorm room while watching “Clash of the Titans,” which Mike had downloaded from the Internet. They both had final papers to turn in, but Mike believed in preemptive celebration. Suddenly it was 11:30 pm, and he felt glad for the alcohol in his system.

“Where are you two meeting?” Mike asked, while downing the remains of his Pabst after the movie ended.

“Her dorm room,” Carlos lied.

A knock on their door saved him from further explanation, and for a moment he was happy to see Robbie despite their shaky history.

“What up Rob-man!” Mike grinned from his bed and held out a beer to their RA. “Want one?”

“No. And make sure I don’t catch you with open bottles out in the hallway,” Robbie’s face, unchanged, turned to Carlos.

“Carlos, I need to talk to you.”

“Ah, dude, it’s almost the end of the semester, can’t you let anything slide?” Mike started laughing and lay back on his bed.
“Is this important Robbie? I’m trying to study right now,” Carlos lied again, not wanting to ruin his night with an argument, or a punishment. Had Robbie found out about the puke? Plus he needed to leave for the pool in 20 minutes.

“Like crap you are,” Robbie answered. “Yes, this is important, just step outside.”

“I don’t care if Mike hears, what’s up?” Carlos looked back at Robbie.

“Fine. Your father called the school. He’s been trying your cell phone but couldn’t get through. Somehow he contacted security, and they called me. It’s important. He says you need to call home right now.”

“Really?” Carlos frowned as an old familiar jolt of fear coursed through him.

Robbie turned to leave, then hesitated.

“You can come talk to me later if you need,” he said, glancing back, before closing the door.

“Man, I hope everything’s okay,” Mike said, with a sobering voice.

“Me too,” Carlos looked down at the floor. “Hey, I’m going to go outside to call. I’ll let you know what’s up.”

“Are you sure dude? I’ll come with you, if you want.”

“No, it’s alright. I’ll just go to Darin’s after, don’t wait up. It’s probably nothing.”

Carlos felt around in his backpack for his cell phone. He pulled it out and realized he hadn’t turned it back on after his physics test.

Walking rapidly down the hallway, the two flights of stairs, and out the entrance to Anderson Hall, Carlos stepped out into the night. It was warm. Not Mexico warm, but pleasant, with a slight breeze and minimal cloud cover. He could see the orange glow on the skyline from the State Penitentiary, and as the sky darkened away from the made-man lights, millions of stars.
There were only a few people out. One couple he recognized sat together in the middle of the courtyard, murmuring. Derek from F-section walked toward the Hall in full athletic gear, hair still slightly damp from sweat. Whitman students took all forms of study breaks, at all hours.

Turning on his phone, Carlos meandered over to the side of the building. He pressed 1, and his phone began to ring. They usually didn’t use their cells to communicate; the Internet was cheaper. But Robbie had said this was an emergency.

He listened to the ring harmonize rhythmically with the rush of blood that pulsated throughout his body; imagining the possibilities. Someone was hurt, Ale was in trouble, another one of his relatives in Juárez had been killed. Carlos shook his head to suppress the violent and damaging thoughts. Two rings, three. Why didn’t his dad answer? Four rings, five. Nothing. The phone went to voice mail and Carlos hung up, frustrated by the timing of this mystery emergency as another urgent matter surged closer. The clock on his phone said 11:48. Starting into a brisk walk, Carlos made his way toward Baker Ferguson.
Chapter 35

When Señor Solano announced that they were ordering room service, instead of going to the restaurant, Darin could tell Carlos was furious.

“Darin y yo no vamos a comer pinche room service.”

Darin watched him glare at his father, who didn’t seem too concerned with answering.

“No me importa mucho,” Darin said softly.

“¿Me escuchaste, papá? Darin y yo vamos a salir,” Carlos said, with his arms crossed over his chest.

“No,” Señor Solano turned to look at his son.

They had reserved a suite, with adjoining bedrooms and a common area with a small kitchen. Raúl was in the second bedroom. Darín turned to Ale for support. She made eye contact with her and gave a small shrug of sympathy, but didn’t try to speak on anyone’s behalf.

“Sí, papá,” Carlos answered, and began a longer response in their defense, which Darín didn’t understand. Whatever he said seemed to work, because after he finished Señor Solano nodded.

“Con Raúl, sin chistar,” he said, and left the room.

Grabbing her hand, Carlos led her into the elevator without waiting for Raúl. Darín could tell he was trying to calm himself. She didn’t say anything on the ride down.

Once they were in the lobby, Carlos wrapped his arm around her waist, and kissed her cheek.

“¿Cómo estás, mi amor?” he whispered in her ear.

“Confused,” Darin said.

Carlos stopped, took her head in both of his hands, and gently touched their foreheads.
together.

“I’m sorry for this afternoon, Darin. Whoever those people are, it has nothing to do with you, or me. We have five more days together, and I didn’t want to spend one in a hotel room. Is it okay with you? I want to show you Mexico City. I want to really be with you.”

“Yes,” Darin whispered, suddenly desperate to know Carlos, to be intimate with him, and feel connected to another human.

She leaned forward, and he kissed her on the lips right as Raúl appeared behind them. Together, they walked out of the lobby and onto the street. Whether the white car had intentionally followed them or not, Darin admitted to herself that she felt safer knowing Raúl would be behind them the whole evening.

They took a taxi to the center of the city and on the ride, Darin decided that Mexico City was uniquely beautiful. It had a modern feel, something she hadn’t expected based on the slow, ranchero images she associated with Mexico. The buildings were large, tall structures that littered the city in random locations. There were flashing lights, long paved roads, and everywhere cars, taxis, and metros. Most impressive though, were the people. She saw blondes with blue eyes and tan skin, black people, Asians, white people, Mexicans, Europeans; she even heard a few Australians when they stopped in a coffee shop for water and a coke.

Carlos held her hand, stroked the small of her back, kissed her cheeks and lips. With her decision made, and the pressure of having to tell Carlos gone, Darin felt happier than she had been in months. If he said yes, would they build a life here, in this city? Or would they go back to Washington? Maybe she could convince Carlos to move away from his family, to the states, where they had clean water, and it was safe. It would be the two of them, creating their future together. Surely he would see things her way once she explained.
They walked hand in hand down Eje Central, through historic downtown, where the museums and palaces were. Carlos promised her that he would convince his father to take them to the Museo Nacional de Arte, Museo de la Ciudad de Mexico, and the Palacio Nacional.

Carlos bought her a gordita from a street vendor. Its rich flavor, the sweetness of the fried corn cake mixed with lettuce, salsa, and a spicy meat Carlos called chicharrón prensado invaded her mouth, and burned her tongue and cheeks. But the spice had an intense flavor to it, and she was compelled to give Carlos deep long kisses, to suck the same hot sweetness from his mouth. She returned his smiles, sought his embraces, laughed with him, and forgot her present preoccupations.

“Amor, do you like this?” Carlos held up a bracelet made of blue glass beads so light they almost looked white, like crystals in the sun. They were strung together with a single silver chain that refracted glimmers deep into the glass of the beads.

“It’s very beautiful,” Darin murmured.

“Then it’s yours,” Carlos turned back to the street vendor and in rapid Spanish, challenged the price the woman had originally proposed.

“No, Carlos, you shouldn’t. It looks expensive.”

“Not that expensive,” Carlos handed over a hundred and fifty pesos, thanked the woman, and bent to kiss Darin’s wrist before fastening the bracelet onto her.

They walked around the perimeter of Alameda Central Park where vendors with carts and stands littered the sidewalk with their trinkets and touristic paraphernalia: rings, bracelets, anklets, purses, t-shirts, skirts, shot glasses, key chains, postcards. Darin was overwhelmed, and walked slowly, not wanting to miss anything. She bought a silver toe-ring for her mother, and a key chain that said “Mi corazón está en México,” for her father.
It was the beginning of dusk. A shadow had fallen over the park even though the horizon was lit with vague oranges, hazy pinks, and streaks of yellow. Every now and then the general murmur of the lazy browsing crowd was broken by a young girl’s shriek of laughter, or the deep-throated protest of a teenage boy. In the middle of the stands, there was a fountain, with a stone woman standing on a pedestal. The rim of the fountain seemed to serve as a hangout for the local youth.

As they strolled, Darin kept glancing over at them; the children—they seemed so young—in the middle of the park; girls with tight black miniskirts, sandals and tank tops, their boyfriends hanging protective arms around their necks, sharing cigarettes, joking and smiling, genuinely unaware of the world around them. Some of them must be around her age, or older, but she felt as if she could no longer relate to them. Unlike those children, she knew the world now; she had lived through its potential for danger, she could imagine its violence.

“Can we sit? I’m tired.” Darin tugged gently on Carlos’s hand and he motioned to Raúl, who walked a few paces behind. Carlos guided Darin to the nearest empty park bench.

With legs and arms pressed together, Darin clasped Carlos’s hand and looked out over the park. Carlos leaned in and kissed her neck, then the side of her face. She turned toward him and met his lips, which felt soft, hot, and firm. She could taste his moist breath in her mouth. It was like falling into something warm and trusting, like complete forgiveness.

“I want more of you,” he whispered.

She could feel the heat of his breath on her neck.

“Tell me your story,” she whispered back, wanting to understand who he was at his core, to not get lost in the physical. She rested her head on his shoulder, waiting, and watched two teenage guys corner a young girl by the rotunda. Her developing breasts peeked out the top of
her shirt. The three of them were sharing a cigarette, and Darin averted her eyes when one of the boys purposefully grazed the top of her chest with his forefinger. She looked back, and saw him take one last pull, then flick the cigarette to the ground. Imagining her future daughter, Darin suddenly felt furious. How dare he, didn’t he know they were both still children? She wanted to scream at them, to remind them to enjoy their youth and innocence, but she remained quiet.

Their hands were still intertwined. Darin could tell Carlos was distant, thinking, wondering how to tell her something that should be easy, but proved challenging.

“Earlier, when you seemed sad, or lost…Yesterday, in the car,” Carlos paused.

The park was alive with night sounds, the passing of cars, honks, tires on the street, people’s voices mixed into a low melody, the buzz of insects, the call of street vendors. When they spoke, people walking by turned their head, just slightly, to look. The harsh consonants and hard vowels of English led the melody of the park in a cacophonous dance; breaking up rhythm, heavy, like a stone thrown in a still pool.

“There’s something that I’ve come to know, that I should have known forever, or maybe I have and now I’m just remembering. But since my mom died, I’ve done even more research. It’s what keeps me going.”

“This doesn’t sound like a story,” Darin tried to lighten the mood, fearing a fall into Carlos’s dark memories, something that she wasn’t prepared for.

“I know, but it’s something I want to tell you,” he answered. “Because I believe that it’s true, that it can be proven by science someday. I want to prove it.”

“Okay,” Darin said. “What is it?”

“The mind, Darin,” he answered. “Consciousness.”

“What about the mind?”
“It’s everything. Consciousness has created everything, what you experience, what you don’t experience. It’s how life came into being. Consciousness creates thoughts, and they matter. They are matter.”

Carlos sat still, looking as if he expected her to react to the brilliant insight he had shared.

“Mind over matter? Do you know how old this idea is?” Darin felt the high she had been on falter and recede, as the reality of her situation crumbled. How could they communicate if she didn’t understand him? “I’m sorry if I sound unsympathetic,” she continued. “I know you’re still grieving for her, but how is this a secret?”

“You don’t understand,” Carlos moved his body slightly, and sighed. They were no longer touching.

“Carlos,” she faltered, torn between begging for forgiveness and laughing derisively.

She watched him take a deep breath.

“What I’m saying Darin, is our minds, our thoughts are directly responsible for everything that happens to us in life. We literally think our way through life and create our own experiences with thought. And the more we’re aware of what we’re doing, the easier it is to control our days and what happens to us. You know whenever you’re scared of something, really scared, and you fixate on it for days, for years? And then one day, it just happens and it’s almost a release because you knew it would someday and that’s why you were so scared? That thing, whatever you were scared of, it happened because you thought it, you brought it into being. Our consciousness creates reality.”

“So you’re saying, nothing happens from pure chance? Or luck? Is that what you were talking about earlier? You’re saying that I’m here because I thought myself here and that your mom was murdered because she created the death of herself in her mind? What kind of crazy shit
is that to believe in?” Darin got up and started to pace in front of him, back and forth, absentmindedly brushing her flat palm across the top of her belly.

“I don’t understand why you’re getting so upset. This should be liberating news,” he paused. “The story you told me earlier, I believe it’s true. That your mom was granted a glimpse of your past life. Our consciousness is responsible for life, it’s everlasting. Knowing that we come back has helped ease the pain of losing my mom. I believe she’ll live again.”

“Oh, Carlos,” Darin sat back down and put her arm around him. If this were how he needed to grieve, then she would support him, no matter how strange his ideas were.

“People need to change Darin, or they’ll just re-live the same attitudes and life patterns. It’s all about change and learning, progress and moving on.”

Darin leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Will you tell me about your mother? I’m sorry I never got a chance to meet her.”

Carlos kissed her forehead.

“She was beautiful, and kind. She was the first one to teach me how to swim,” he said.

“My mom loved water, like you, we spent hours in the pool together when I was little. Don’t worry about meeting her; I’m sure you will. I just know she’ll come back to our family. We all love each other so much.”

“What are you saying?” Darin asked, suddenly feeling sick.

“I think my mom had an incomplete life with us. She’ll want to come back and be here again. Maybe she’ll be Alejandra’s first child.”

“God, you really believe this, don’t you?” Darin looked at Carlos.

“Darin,” Carlos took her face gently in both his hands, so they were staring at each other, eye level. “I know it. I’ve seen the power of my own consciousness change my life. I brought
you into my life, didn’t I? Think about it, without awareness, none of this would exist. How can you think the awareness just goes away after our body dies? My mother’s physical form died that night, when we met in the pool, but her consciousness is alive and well. Maybe she’s already growing in someone else, and we just don’t know yet.”

“But Carlos, that’s crazy,” Darin felt like pleading.

“No, Darin. It’s not.”

Darin jerked her face from his hands.

A loud rock song in Spanish began to chime. Carlos grabbed his cell phone while looking at Darin, who avoided eye contact.

“¿Bueno?”

Darin heard a voice yelling in English through the phone, “Dude! Dude! You will not believe this. You’re gonna crap your pants. I just found out that Lili is a lesbian! Ha ha, can you believe it! That’s why you could never get any! A lesbian, ha I’m in total shock—!”

“Mike!” Carlos’s voice cut through Mike’s and halted his rampage of shouts. “Good to hear from you roommie,” Carlos looked back at Darin, who stared for a second, shook her head, and turned away. Then Mike said something else and Carlos burst out laughing.

She started making her way alone, down the sidewalk, sidestepping people. She walked for a couple of minutes with her head bent down, avoiding eye contact. When she finally looked back, Raúl was only a few steps behind her.

“Is it?” she whispered in response, then turned back around.
Chapter 36

He arrived at the athletic center, but Darin was nowhere to be seen. The door was propped open with a pair of goggles. Reaching down, Carlos grabbed them and slipped inside, closing the entrance quietly. Impressed by the silence of the center, he noticed the walls of the foyer seemed far away and removed, as if they had lost their sense of solid shape.

Shadows cut from the floor to the ceiling in strange angles, intersecting one another to create slivers of darkened silhouettes. Amazed at how the absence of sound and light could change a place, Carlos felt this was somewhere he had never been. This was future in the making. He walked quickly, darting through the shadows.

In the locker room, without light or sound, he could smell the pool. Its musty, chlorinated air wafted onto his skin and made the hair on his arms stand up. Would he be able to perform tonight? How would they breathe? He shook his head, deciding that brooding over technicalities was not going to help him. He must concentrate on one task at a time.

Taking his phone out of his pocket, Carlos flipped it open for light. He shone the translucent blue ray around the first aisle of the locker room and set his stuff down on a bench. When he took off his shirt he realized that he was already shivering.

“Cálmate,” he whispered.

He stripped off his pants, his socks, and his shoes, and it was then, as he was standing in his swimsuit, that his phone rang. Carlos jumped as the screen on his phone lit and the vibration sounded loudly against the wooden bench. The screen read “Ale.”

“Damn it,” he muttered. It was already midnight; Darin would be waiting. He sighed and sat down on the bench, flipping his phone open at the last ring.

“Ale, ¿qué te pasa?” He tried to make his voice sound light, waited a few seconds for her
to respond, then said again, and this time with a tinge of aggravation: “¡Ale!”

Then he heard it, and the sound made him freeze, as if a tranquilizer was suddenly coursing through his veins. A sob, a deep sound choking up from the depths of her throat. One, and then another.

“Ale, ¿qué pasó? ¿Qué está pasando? Por favor, ¡háblame, dime algo!”

“No, no, no,” was all he heard. For a minute, Carlos listened to the alternating sounds of her crying and low, intermittent ‘no’s.

“Ale, porfa, por Dios, dime,” Carlos begged her, wanting to cry himself. He was torn between sympathy for his sister’s obvious pain, and a growing panic that Darin would leave if he took any longer.

“Mamá,” Ale finally whispered.

“¿Qué? ¿Mama? ¿Qué pasa con ella?”

He had to end this conversation. He would be home in a week. Couldn’t his mother wait?

“Acaba de morir, Carlos, está muerta.”

Muerta: a word with such weight that the hand holding his cell phone started to shake with a weakness he didn’t understand. He put it down on the bench.

To his sister, he said nothing.
Chapter 37

They returned to the hotel and found the suite empty. Darin panicked momentarily, but realized that everything was in order: their bags still placed nicely against the wall, and beds made.

“I’ll text Ale, don’t worry,” Carlos said.

“I wasn’t,” Darin lied, and sat down on the couch. She wondered if she had to pay for Internet at the hotel. Too many thoughts were racing through her head; she needed to talk to her mom.

Carlos’s phone sounded, and Darin watched him flip up the screen.

“She says they’re down at the pool.”

“Swimming?” Darin looked up at Carlos.

“Let’s go,” he smiled.

She changed hurriedly in the hotel bathroom, while Carlos put on his suit in the room.

They walked down together with Raúl still trailing them.

The pool deck was large. There were two enclosed bodies of water, one looked like a small hot tub, and the other was a regular pool designated to play. The deeper end of the pool hosted a short diving board, while on the shallow side there was a small volleyball net and a few colorful balls floating on the surface.

Ale and Señor Solano were playing volleyball, and both smiled as Carlos called out to them.

“Oigan, muchachos, vengan!” Señor Solano yelled back.

Ale waved to her and smiled, while Señor Solano said something to Raúl, who sat down on a nearby pool chair.
Besides the Solano family, Raúl, and herself, the pool area was empty.

Darin waved back, and stripped off her shirt and shorts. She turned to look at Carlos who was doing the same, and realized then, what had bothered her about his story.

“Carlos,” she began tentatively.

“Hmm?” he said, looking at his cell phone.

“Carlos,” she repeated again, with more urgency, suddenly overwhelmed by a need for him to listen.

“One moment, mi amor, I’m just sending a message.”

The distance between her and Carlos became unbearable. No matter how hard they tried, she felt as if they had never really connected. There was a barrier she couldn’t explain.

“No, now,” she said, and frantically snatched his phone from his hand.

“Darin, what the—“

But she threw it, as hard as she could, into the pool.

“What is wrong with you?” he cried.

“We are more important,” she said.

He turned back to look at her, his eyes serious, almost sad.

“I want to tell you something.”

“What Darin? What is so important it couldn’t wait?”

She knew he was angry, but she didn’t care.

“What you said in the park. I don’t know if I believe it. But something about it doesn’t make sense.”

He softened. “Tell me,” he said.

“You claimed you affect your reality with your consciousness. That your thoughts change
your life. But what about my thoughts? That would mean my thoughts change my life, but change yours too.”

“Then,” he said slowly looking at her. “We would all be responsible.”

His face was strange and distant.

She thought he had never appeared more beautiful, and grabbed his arm; willing to meet his sacrifice with her own.

“Promise me something.”

“Anything, Darin,” he said, as they made eye contact and he came out of his reverie.

“Delete your Facebook tonight, here, in the hotel. And I’ll delete mine. We need to talk.”

He gave her a quizzical look, “Alright, after we swim, I promise.”

She smiled at him, and grabbed his hand.

“Want to race?” Carlos looked over at the deep end with a nod of his head.

“Do you want to lose?” Darin answered, then hugged him, feeling her apprehension and fear from earlier dissipate.

Carlos smiled, then threw his head back and laughed.

She walked slowly to the edge of the pool, turned, and gazed down at the surface of the water. There it was, like always, her reflection translucent and wavering: an otherworldly image of herself. Cocking her head sideways, she saw Carlos, staring.

With a burst of speed she wouldn’t have expected, he ran straight at her, then pushed her into the water with the force of their bodies. They hit the surface together with a splash, and sank.
Chapter 38

There had been times, at the point of orgasm, when Carlos forgot who he was. Like a God, he felt light, unused and clean; he became a man with no past. These were the moments he continually sought after, a sort of weightlessness, and unawareness of self, though he could never communicate this to his partners. How could he tell her, that when he came, for a brief second he lost all knowledge of who she was? That he knew what it was to be God? Sex was sold as a loving act between two people; it wasn’t an act of the divine. No one would understand that.

He saw her standing at the far end of the pool, looking down into the still water. A strange yellow-green light cast about the large room and contrasted with the random, undulating water shadows on the ceiling.

She was naked. Of course she was naked. In all his fantasies and daydreams she had been in a swimsuit. But now, seeing her bare and pensive he realized that this was right, the only way. The moment seemed delicate and soft and he was afraid that if he touched her, she might crumble and break. He imagined the pool deck shattering into little pieces, exploding and taking him along with it.

She had not seen him, and he hesitated. He should not be here, not like this. He could turn now and leave, avoid her for the rest of finals week. Never have to face this potentially disastrous, potentially wondrous experience. He was shaking inside, but his hands had steadied. These were the moments where timelines collapsed.

He needed to cancel out what he knew, to forget everything during that brief second where it all went blank and the world was an explosion of good, and brilliant lights spreading throughout his body. Reaching to his waist, Carlos pulled off his own swimsuit, and began to walk the length of the pool to where Darin stood waiting. His bare feet made no sound, and he
glided silently through the humid air without a word, barely breathing.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her. The long, thin limbs. Her creamy, translucent skin. She seemed captivated by the water. By what? He had to know. He wanted to scream at her, demand an explanation. But nothing came out. Carlos began to run swiftly toward her; it was the only way he could communicate. Running because it felt like he was being torn apart. Running because he didn’t have the strength to walk. By the time she looked up he was there, arms stretched out, crashing into her hot, soft body, propelling them both into the waiting pool where the slap of skin hitting water was only heard as an echo by the walls; Darin and Carlos were already inundated, the rush of water bubbling in their ears.
Chapter 39

She was swimming as fast as she could toward the end of the pool. Swimming to beat Carlos, to prove that it was all worth it. She could see his limbs splashing at the side of her face; feel the water hitting her mouth, and cheeks like warm snowflakes. Her eyes burned, and her hair splayed out in a suffocating blanket around her.

She must win. Her hand hit the edge of the pool. She bought her face up and out of the water with a start. Carlos was there too, but they both knew he had lost.

“Rematch?” He squeezed out, in between breaths.

She nodded, taking in large gulps of air.

They both floated there, breathing, holding onto the edge. It felt so good to be in the water. She was happy, like a child. Carlos grabbed her hand as the intensity of their breaths faded back to normal.

“I have to tell you something,” she said.

“There’s more?” he kissed her lips and laughed.

“There’s more,” she looked at him, this time serious.

“You can tell me,” Carlos said.

But she couldn’t, she couldn’t make her voice speak the words, and so sinking under the surface, Darin pulled Carlos down with her. Her eyes stung, but she kept them open. His image was blurred, but he was there, eyes open as well. She took his hand and slowly placed it on her stomach. Then she pointed to herself, to him, and finally to his resting hand.

His eyes widened, and she became suddenly weightless, as if in a womb. She thought perhaps the water of the world was a womb they all rested in. Each person being reborn again and again, carrying each other, creating the fragile connection that was continuously broken.
because no one ever remembered.

He pulled her up, and held her.

“De verdad, Darin?” he whispered in her ear.

“Yes,” she answered. “De verdad.”
Chapter 40

Submerged, he pulled her down. The water was freezing, but her skin, so hot. He enveloped her in his arms so she couldn’t escape. They couldn’t breathe. Was she fighting him, or seducing him? He couldn’t tell, and after moments of struggle, they broke through the surface of the water, gasping for air, coughing, and taking in deep breaths. Their splashes echoed deep into the pool deck, bouncing off the walls, intensifying with time. Darin started to say something, but he covered her mouth with his lips. Their first kiss. He wanted to sink into her, and forget. Her legs were kicking, fluttering, trying desperately to stay afloat, trying to pull away from his kiss and breathe.

If he didn’t do it now, he would break. He would melt into this water, let his body drop to the very bottom and never come back up. If he didn’t hold onto her, he would drown. She fought him, clawed at his back, kicked his legs but didn’t say a word. Reaching down, he pushed her apart, then drove himself up inside of her, forgetting everything as they sank down again.
Chapter 41

She wrapped her arms around his neck, resting on his back as he treaded water toward Señor Solano and Alejandra.

“Papá!” he yelled out. “Papá!”

And she knew that he was happy. Señor Solano turned toward them as they neared the volleyball net.

“Sí, mi’jo!” he yelled back, and smiled.

They entered the shallow end, and Carlos bent his knees to let her down. Her feet hit the bottom of the pool, and she began to wade toward her new family.

When Carlos yelled, “Papá,” a third time, something in this voice had changed. There was a hysteria that Darin didn’t understand. She pushed a few wet strands of hair away from her face, and saw Raúl stand, as a man ran at them, his gun pointed, and steady.

She tried to jump, to dive away but the water, hot and thick, arresting her body. Ale shrieked simultaneously as two loud cracks reverberated off the walls like thunder. Darin felt Carlos lung at her as she fell back in the pool, the side of her head pounding in pain, and thought this is my life. All she could see was the swell of red. All she could feel was a searing heat.
Chapter 42

An explosion of warmth and liquid spread as it shot inside and the threat of drowning shook them. They shuddered, and experienced a hottest cold, living for a moment in the blackest void where possibilities avoid the touch of time and everything is simultaneously impossible, and possible. They were suspended in a moment still falling, falling into the free captivity of water, the giving liquid that keeps Earth alive, and whole, and during that moment, everything stopped.

There were choices to be made: to come back, or move on. And as they descended deeper, they knew they must decide.

They dropped into the pool the way rain falls into a lake, or tears fall into a puddle, or a downpour falls into an ocean. They dropped and their weight tore at the fabric of space, their mass bending and pulling the universe not unlike the way the sun, or the moon, or the heaviest planet light years away, or you, or I, bend space too. Their drop into the water created white waves that splashed over their heads and rippled throughout the entire pool, the way thoughts ripple out of consciousness weaving together to shape reality. Those waves created more waves until they were all one overlapping body of water shaping the pool that contained them. Then Darin and Carlos were one body of energy and thought, mind and matter. And together, they knew what to do.
Curriculum Vita

Sahalie Hashim was born in Olympia, Washington. The first daughter of William Hashim and Rosalie Saecker, she graduated from Yelm High School, Yelm, Washington, in the spring of 2003 and entered Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington in the fall with a Diversity Scholarship. While pursuing a degree in English Literature, she worked at Penrose Library on Whitman’s Campus, and held an internship at the Department of Ecology in Lacey, Washington during the summer of 2005. During the spring of 2006, she studied abroad in Toledo, Spain and fulfilled requirements for a Spanish minor. After receiving her bachelor’s of arts degree in English Literature from Whitman College in 2007, she worked part time as an editorial assistant at SuperConsciousness Magazine. In the fall of 2008, she entered the Masters of Fine Arts creative writing program at the University of Texas at El Paso where she taught Introductory creative writing courses, was the editor of Rio Grande Review, and taught English composition courses at El Paso Community College.

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