

THE GIFT

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“Shooting blanks” is how you describe yourself after fertility tests, and I cry for us. You smile, which I don’t understand, and say it’s time for another lineage. We research international adoption, hoping, for our different reasons, to succeed. You rally with your conversational Spanish, your ease with Latin America, and the lies you sustain until you can’t.

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We land in Lima, Peru. The Southern Hemisphere’s winter lurks behind April’s end. Jorge Chávez International Airport, though modern, is sparsely populated. Only after a new on-site bomb squad was in place did the State Department remove Jorge Chávez from the Do Not Travel list. Outside, the cool air smells of smoke. Fog rolls off the Pacific into the surrounding desert while clouds raft over mountains toward the continent’s spine, ensuring gray skies until bright, humid summer returns in December.

We drag our stuffed suitcases toward the taxi driver—a slight, preoccupied man with neatly-combed black hair. *Please*, he says, *this way* and then *No, señores, there is nothing wrong with the taxi, it is pointless to replace windshield wipers for two inches of rain a year.*

From the back seat, you ask the driver about the Shining Path but get no response. Abimael Guzmán, the Maoist movement's leader, remains at large, claiming the revolution will cost a million lives. Village massacres drench the ground at the hands of one side today, the other side tomorrow. We've done nothing to deserve safety except not being born here.

As we cross a concrete bridge to the hotel district, I roll down my window. Below us, a dog chases a skinny boy plucking garbage from the dry, cracked riverbed. The child wears blue running shorts and a dirty yellow T-shirt. While he bends over the refuse, a street lamp obstructs my view. I twist to look back and glimpse the top of his head, then nothing.

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We've chosen to adopt a child from Latin America because of your years teaching here and your love for the place. Early in our marriage, when Reagan appointed William G. Walker ambassador to El Salvador, you said, "Unfortunate name, don't you think?" You thought I'd know about the nineteenth-century American physician, lawyer, journalist, and mercenary who led incursions into Central America, establishing slaveholding colonies, installing himself as president of Nicaragua, and dying by Honduran firing squad at age thirty-six. My law degree, earned in midlife at a university I never thought I'd return to, taught me none of this. You'd learned about Walker when you got your master's in Latin American Studies, earned between piano-doctoring gigs for rock tours.

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In our Lima hotel room, we shove our suitcases against the wall. You sit on the worn, white chenille bedspread. We place our toiletries on the edge of the bathroom sink. The mattress doesn't have much give. There's a knock on the door.

Hola, señor, says the man on the other side. *Me llamo Eduardo.*

Mucho gusto, you reply, gesturing Eduardo into the room.

Eduardo bows in my direction. *Señora.* He provides no last name. We identify him through detailed instructions from our U.S. attorney, Susan Burger, whose international adoption seminars at SUNY Purchase we attended. She's prepared us for this process, which will be legal and uncomfortable: vetting by American social workers, government departments, Interpol, Peruvian authorities. And dense with rules: anti-baby selling regulations, no cash to the birth mother, documents to carry with us at all times.

El dinero, por favor, señores, Eduardo requests.

Aquí lo tenemos, you respond briskly, your Spanish colloquial, mine more suited to undergraduate seminars. We reach into pouches strapped under our clothing. Peru's political chaos has triggered catastrophic monetary exchange rates, so the adoption deals in cash, greenbacks only, as Susan Burger said it would.

Eduardo counts the money without hurry on the bedspread. We stand like teenagers at a strange film, unsure whether it is fiction or a documentary. He places what seems like a reasonable sum into an envelope and returns the rest. While we travel to Cusco the next day to meet our infant son, early adoption proceedings will commence in Lima.

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You're still able to hide your addiction when you go to the hotel lobby for more towels. You return, and I ask if you have your money belt, which isn't in our room. It's in your shoulder bag. We look inside—it's empty. You turn ashen. You'd put it down, you say, for a moment at the coffee bar. Still, we have just enough funds in our possession for this trip. Eighteen months later, I'll know the truth. You're using and have been tapping our joint account. Small withdrawals from the ATM. I will never find out precisely when this started.

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The morning after meeting Eduardo, we return to the airport where lean young men joke with one another, the words *brigada* and *explosivos* stenciled across the backs of their jump suits. They seem too young to die. Shining Path's menace haunts travel, upends schedules. We can't find the airline counter for our flight to Cusco. People around us argue about connections to Arequipa.

We roam, searching for our gate. Risk is everywhere here, creased into the vigilant faces of baggage workers and airline agents. On the doorway to an adjacent corridor, a heavy chain hangs loosely threaded through door handles. I pull on the chain, you ask what the hell I think I'm doing, and we walk on through toward our next aircraft, past a line of men holding machine guns.

Finally, our plane hurls us through the gray, treeless Andes. Sparse snow litters bald crevasses. A runway breaks through clouds at the timberline. As we touch down in a basin at 10,860 feet, a soft-spoken blond woman asks from the row behind us, "Are you here to adopt a baby? I know the look."

Polished, slender Pedro Torres greets us at the ARRIVALS gate to shepherd us across unfamiliar terrain. In his car, on the drive to the hotel, we learn that he holds an anthropology degree from the seventeenth century Universidad Nacional de San Antonio Abad del Cusco. He speaks English superbly. He is kind. The devastated economy requires him to make a living doing what he's doing with us.

We rummage in our travel pouches for local currency. We ask him about tips, whether we can offer people dollars, and he says, "Don't make these people run to a bank. Don't you go, either. It's not like that here." He helps us adjust to the idea of changing small amounts of cash on Cusco's sidewalks, where we can deal directly with calculator-gripping men adjacent teenaged civil guards toting automatic weapons. At the hotel, after helping us with our bags, Pedro clasps your elbow and says, "Welcome to Cusco. Go lie down."

The high mountain morning numbs our skulls. We're nauseated, dizzy. To combat the altitude sickness, hotel waiters serve pleasantly bitter coca tea that delivers a low buzz but no relief. Trying not to move too much, we wait to meet Susan Burger's counterpart, Cusco attorney *doctora* Hilda Lopez-Morillas. Instead, it's her tall, lean husband, Manuel, who greets us at the hotel restaurant the next day. We find a private table and sit.

Señores, mucho, mucho gusto de conocerlos. Manuel's black mustache lifts elegantly over silver amalgam lining his front teeth. Saying it's our pleasure, you offer to buy Manuel a cup of coffee. He declines and you insist, as is proper. Fatigue extinguishes my spoken Spanish.

Manuel regretfully informs us that our son's birth mother is not quite ready. It's as though some preparation, or some travel, is not yet complete. Also, tomorrow is May 1, International Workers' Day,

which will delay matters. Wishing us well and promising to keep in close touch with us through Pedro, Manuel downs his coffee, excuses himself, and leaves.

We find ways to wait. Pedro takes over with grace, showing us sights, instructing us on the basics of Peruvian apartheid.

“You’ll see classes of people here,” he says near the town of Urubamba, on route to Pisac’s open air market. He’s more comfortable with you than with me. Outside his car window, terraced farms stripe brown mountains. “First, you’ve got your *criollos*, European ethnics who control the country along with a few Asians, like President Fujimori. Then you’ve got *mestizos* like me,” Pedro says, “of mixed European and Indian ancestry. Very common. Middle class. Then you’ve got *cholos*, an insulting word here.” Pedro resents the term, directed at the native population whom elites accuse of fouling the nation’s cities. “You’ve got indigenous people in the countryside. Afro-Peruvians, too. From the slave trade.”

You nod. In line at the Lima airport, where three slender, blond Peruvian women had worn gold and carried designer handbags, you’d turned to me and said, “These women are stupid.” I was too embarrassed to respond—but I sensed your contempt was fueled, perhaps, by your anger about colonialism and something else, deep-seated. Something close to guilt or complicity.

Pedro takes us to restaurants serving huge-kernelled native corn and to a mountainside smelling of herbs and sudden rain. In a squall, two young girls run squealing past us under a poncho, so tightly woven that beads of water run off it into the shallow soil. We open our umbrellas. Pedro laughs good-naturedly from under his baseball cap. In the market, stalls spill out extravagant varieties of potatoes, textiles, chess sets with Quechua designs.

Pedro takes us to the Inca battlefield of Sacsayhuaman in Cusco’s northern outskirts. Ruined fortress walls rise into softening, grassy

terraces. Ancient engineering permits not even a piece of paper to be wedged between the tightly-packed stones. "They destroyed our culture once they conquered us," Pedro says in the vast fields. He's politically conservative, but refers to Spaniards as "them."

Nearby, *campesinos* lead llamas by their embroidered, belled harnesses.

"Give the woman a tip," Pedro says, "to pet the llama."

You do. The woman smiles at you without teeth, then holds her palm out for more. She's no more than thirty-five years old. You and I are both forty-four.

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Time rolls out of order. It's May third, or second, or fourth. There's an agreed-upon delivery schedule, then another delay, followed by phone calls in Spanish that you always take. Finally, four days after our arrival in Cusco, *doctora* Hilda and our son's birth mother are on their way.

We open to a knock at our hotel room door. *Doctora* Hilda stands behind a serious young woman, her black hair braided down her back. She is diminutive, large-breasted, and holds a child in a freshly crocheted, pale yellow and white jacket and cap. She wears a sweater and T-shirt over her layered skirts. Like mine, her feet are too wide for assembly-line footwear. Razored holes accommodate her little toes. We avoid the transgression of addressing her by her first name. We use only the honorific *señora*.

She seems settled over whatever lies within her. There is a chair at the nearby desk and another across the hotel room. She sits instead at the edge of one of the beds and looks down, the baby in her lap, his face serene as a polished stone at the bottom of a pond.

Five hundred years of European domination fill the room. The baby's skin glows. He moves his rounded face, reserved. His fingers

open to the stimulus of sound. Momentarily, his mother removes his hat to readjust it. His raven hair is like young grass after recent rain, bent over, snug to his skull, resilient.

Pale and urban, sitting across from her, you speak in borrowed Spanish, telling her how honored and grateful we are to meet her, and then describe our home, the life we have built together. We begin to understand she may never have received the letter we sent.

I open the deep vault of my memory and roll into it the ruddiness of this mother's cheeks, the serious lay of her lips over her teeth. I try to memorize the ways her baby resembles her.

My God, what will happen to her? To us? I try not to think about Susan Burger's warnings that adoptions can fall through at any time. It's already too late.

Silently, I promise this child: I'm yours, in my deepest blood that runs red-black toward my heart, untouchable, meant to be tapped only by you.

Doctora Hilda says that adoption's a good thing in the United States. That we promise to love this child.

Por siempre, I say at the same time you do.

Por siempre, *doctora* Hilda repeats.

The young mother stands and hands us her baby, securely swaddled, whole and firm. With an abruptness we know is awful, we offer a jacket for the Andean winter. *Doctora* Hilda says quietly, "Don't you want a photo?"

Carefully handing back the baby, we search for the camera, our limbs and voices disorganized. We laugh; we say, *Uno más*. The mother of our son smiles for the first time. We don't say her name. We remember it. Seeing that it's permitted, we kiss her temple. I inhale as my lips touch her hair.

She walks out the hotel room with *doctora* Hilda, who closes the door behind her. You and I turn to each other, the baby between us, and sob.

I don't remember why we think it's time to feed him. Shaking, you prepare a bottle and hand it to me. I tip it toward Mateo's mouth. The top falls off, spewing formula. We shriek, released, while Mateo, his yellow-and-white crocheted outfit soaked, remains stoic. Now he smells not only of soap and a mountainous place we've never seen but also of pre-mixed, fake mom's milk. We don't fall instantly, deeply in love with him because that's already happened. Now, we have to do better.

We start by enduring the nights. Mateo cries, screws up his small lips at the smell of formula instead of warm flesh, wrinkles his forehead, then disappointed and hungry, feeds. Later, you lie down on the bed, place him on your chest and, holding his tiny hand, calm him with the rise and fall of your breath. For four days, we are a family. You embrace me in my bra and slip while I hold Mateo to my shoulder to rock him and catch his spitup on a soft cloth. I sing songs in a chair near our balcony's sliding doors. There are awful rumors in Latin America—that adopting couples raise infants as slaves or sell them on the black market, whole or dismembered for internal organs.

Then, we're required to leave Mateo with Pedro and his family for several weeks, hopefully not months, while the adoption moves through the Peruvian system. The country's political climate ricochets between paranoia and defiance.

"Can't one of us stay?" we ask Manuel.

"Better not," he says. "There is provision in the law. You both have urgent business needs? Family needs? It is permitted."

You say, "Are we an impediment? We don't want to leave him."

I ask how long it will be and Manuel tells us, "Longer if you stay."

Soon after, we cross the Torreses' small garden with everything the baby might need while we're gone, and money for more. The

Torres women tenderly take Mateo into their arms. Pedro promises he'll play Beethoven on his stereo for our son. It's terrible to leave. It feels as correct and wrong as when Mateo's mother handed him to us. We join legion parents whose children can be snatched by others' power.

You close the bathroom door that night, presumably to allow your heart to break in private.

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We wait in New York City: arriving at work by 6:00 a.m., reviewing legal documents, filing motions, running your piano tuning business, depositing our paychecks, visiting friends. I live on the wrong side of a mirror, toting my briefcase into air-conditioned elevators. On the other side, where I belong, I climb mountains to become Mateo's mother. We shop at baby furniture stores. Susan Burger cautions repeatedly that everything can fall through.

Then she invites us to her Long Island office to plan our return to Peru.

"Fly there alone. You'll attract less attention," she tells me. "Your coloring's a better bet than your husband's."

By "better" she means darker.

"I don't want to go alone," I say.

Without hesitation, you buy us two plane tickets.

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After you're gone, I'll understand that, by this point, you're throwing sandbags against the flood of harder cravings, perhaps carefully upping your use though I have no way of knowing, then or now. Meanwhile, you purchase easily because on the backs of unseen

thousands, the drug is cheap. You hold my hand on our second trip below the equator, disappearing as seldom as you can stand it.

We fly south for eleven hours.

Plane travel remains chaotic. Arriving at Jorge Chávez for an immediate connection to Cusco, we carry diaper- and formula-filled suitcases to the end of a corridor where an airline agent stands shaking his head and making a “no way” signal. Our plane is already on the tarmac, doors closed. You thrust a twenty-dollar bill at the agent and the moment he takes it, we all run outside, our suitcases hammering our shins and ankles, the agent waving at the aircraft and beckoning us to follow. Rolling stairs materialize at the passenger door, which opens. The cargo doors split the belly of the plane. Walking past the engines, we hoist our suitcases up to men who have appeared out of nowhere. We ascend the stairs, nod to the agent, and quickly settle into some empty seats. No one takes exception.

In Cusco, the Southern Cross dominates June’s sky. *Inti Raymi*, the Inca New Year and sun festival, approaches with the winter solstice. Our hotel room is very cold during the Andean nights. Sleep is hard, no matter how many blankets we pile on ourselves. You go to the lobby to get more. You take a long time.

Our daytime schedule is regimented. Adoption authorities accept only your masculine name on remaining attestations. We aren’t allowed to have the baby in our hotel room.

“We’ll arrange visits in Pedro’s company,” Manuel says. His mustache barely moves. “The police are treating us like *narco-traficantes*. This hurts Hilda. She’s an honest lawyer.”

At the Torres home, Mateo is no longer a newborn. He’s more like the instantly recognizable person he’ll always be. We’ve missed all this. His eyelashes are coming in.

“He’s so handsome,” I say, holding him in my arms.

“Yes,” Pedro says, “and he loves Beethoven.” Seeing us is a hard thing for him and Carmen. God knows how it will be for them to entrust us with Mateo, dubbed “*El Rey*,” The King, by Carmen’s father because the baby runs the household, not to mention all sleeping arrangements. God knows how it will be for Pedro and Carmen when the child leaves them for good. We speak under the weight of their feelings.

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It’s time to hatch Manuel’s “*plan de James Bond*.” On the appointed day, we’ll take a cab to the airport. Pedro and Carmen will drive separately with Mateo and stay in the parking lot until just before the exchange occurs on the aircraft.

It happens. Not on the first day, when we’re packed by five a.m. only to have plans cancelled mid-morning. Nor on the second day, when we’re told not to pack until given notice, which never comes. On the third day, we receive the go-ahead. Arriving in the airport parking lot, we see Pedro and Carmen behind a dark blue Volkswagen’s windshield. Carmen embraces a white-blanketed bundle. We keep walking. Airline agents usher us onto a black vinyl sofa in a large freight space leading directly onto the tarmac. Men throw stacks of parcels onto a forklift. An open doorway reveals a ready airliner, stairs rolled up for boarding. The last passenger ascends. *Doctora* Hilda and Carmen appear and walk past us. We don’t see Pedro.

Carmen carries Mateo, her black lashes grazing his cheek, while *doctora* Hilda nods for us to follow. We rise and gather our carry-ons. At the top of the boarding stairs, *doctora* Hilda and Carmen stand beside flight attendants near the cockpit. Carmen shows us the warm bottle she’s tucked into Mateo’s blankets, whispers

instructions, and hands me our son. She chokes back tears and turns away. *Doctora* Hilda smiles, then holds Carmen's elbow to help her descend the stairs while attendants secure the aircraft door. There are two empty seats. We take them. The pilots lift off immediately from the runway at timberline, toward Lima.

"So, you got a *cholo*," the white-fingered doctor says in Spanish a few days later. We're silent. We need his signature for Mateo's visa. He probes our serene child, then fills out forms. The taste of racial humiliation goes a long way. We hustle onto Lima's sidewalks, walking on opposite sides of the street to distance Mateo from you, his blue-eyed American dad.

Below the barricaded U.S. Consulate's second-floor window, armed guards challenge our new young guide, Emilio, who's delivering our finalized documents. We meet him downstairs.

"Come to the car. *Vengan*. We'll talk there."

The trusted driver, Emilio's uncle, looks through the windshield to absent himself from our conversation.

"Listen. I'll have the rest of the papers soon. The guards will admit me as far as the front door. There's barbed wire, they're serious. Watch for me."

Inside, waiting for Emilio, we hear an official inform a couple that they've failed to establish termination of the birth father's rights. Our stomachs seep acid.

Emilio returns. We meet him in the demilitarized space downstairs. Thanking him quietly, we give him a large tip.

"We'll drive you to the airport when you're booked home. *Claro?* Don't tell police you speak Spanish. They'll demand money. Maybe fifteen thousand. Don't pay."

"We can't," I say.

"Just don't speak Spanish." He reenters the war zone that is his country. It's hard to breathe when officials inside review our case, the after-image of Emilio's back barely faded.

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Throughout the day, Mateo smiles luminously, cooing as we pull tiny shirts over his head. At night he screams.

When passage home is booked, delayed, then rescheduled, we carry Mateo through a muted airport toward a midnight departure. Advised not to use the bathroom, I change his diaper on waiting room seats. You fumble to help me as an older couple nearby whispers, “gringos.”

Boarding starts at 11:30 p.m. We carry Mateo openly this time, past the aircraft’s hull. His blanket frames his face. His eyes glitter, alert. Two women on the flight crew smile, then return to their checklists while chilly cabin air hums through the vents. The doors are sealed shut. After we’ve strapped our seat belts and secured Mateo in my arms, you lean toward my ear and whisper, “You’re a mother now.” The engines growl. Gravity drags our bodies, then lets go, flinging us across the equator, safe in the night sky.

At Miami’s port of entry, a dull morning veils high terminal windows. An immigration official inspects our papers and Mateo’s, which set forth that he is an adoptable infant with automatic permanent resident status. The man looks up and says, “Welcome home.”

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We begin tracking Mateo’s bowel movements, his burps after each meal. Proud and dazed, we share our adoption story with New York friends while Mateo’s intelligence absorbs it, stores it somewhere. He fills out and grows strong, his smile sweetening; he learns to clap; pulling himself into a stand, he threatens to skip crawling and instead go straight to walking. I prepare his citizenship application. Your piano-tuning appointments seem to take you all over the city.

Finally, I have the morning off from work to travel with Mateo to a federal courtroom at the southern tip of Manhattan. Expecting you to arrive soon, we settle into a row of polished wood benches. I wear a wide-brimmed red hat and red dress and have duded out Mateo in his best leggings and quilted jacket. We join Asians and Europeans and Africans and Latin Americans and Islanders and cousins and uncles and wives and refugees who are about to become Americans alongside us. You appear in the upstairs gallery, your turquoise tie neat under motorcycle leathers. I turn to you, remembering the sweetness of our beginning—when you prepared hot baths, pouring warm water over the sides of the tub so my back wouldn't touch cold porcelain.

We all rise on the bailiff's instruction. From his high-backed chair, Judge John Martelli asks us to be seated. His duty today reminds him of his own immigrant grandparents, whose hope he sees in our faces. Mateo's strong, fat legs straddle my hip. His head smells like heat rising from mountain rock. He's still and focused, seemingly ready to join in something so important to me, I'll physically battle anyone trying to interfere.

"Please rise and raise your right hands," Judge Martelli says. We do, clothing rustling, air rushing into nostrils. I grasp Mateo's plump right hand, little inside my own, to swear on his behalf:

I absolutely renounce and abjure all foreign princes, potentates, states, or sovereignties, though I am fourteen months old. I will support and defend the United States against all enemies, and when I grow up I will bear arms when required. I take this obligation freely, without purpose of evasion. "So help me God," I say for our son. Having never so sworn to my country before.

I kiss Mateo's hand as cheers whoop around us. People weep and embrace. Mateo shrieks and tries to grab my hat's brim. I tickle him, then hand him a small toy from my bag. He throws it down

and lunges for my hat again. Turning toward you, I see you're clapping and laughing, joyful and somehow released.

"Look, there's Daddy!" I say.

Mateo twists, looks, then re-deploys against my hat, his fat legs pummeling my hip. Fast, I hand him a squooshy ball he can mangle. I bump into an African woman who kisses my cheek. Happiness wrecks our faces.

Everyone files toward the clerk's desk to pick up naturalization papers. I locate the pen inside my purse to sign a document bearing a photo of Mateo on my lap, his wild baby hair spiked against the background of my white blouse. Now, I hold him securely at my side and, on this certificate to keep in a safe deposit box for him and his children and his grandchildren, I sign *Mateo*, U.S. citizen, and the Quechua, Greek, and Scottish names you and I have given him. Next to my signature, I write: *by me, his mother*.

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A country band of your friends plays that night at a party in our loft. Telegrams printed over a background of stars and stripes arrive from relatives welcoming Mateo to "this great country." The band announces a special tune because he has been "accepted into the United States of America." Mateo sits on my lap, unperturbed, while people sing and dance and talk a great deal. He's had a nap. The crankiness will come eventually.

Later, I turn out the light over his crib. The World Trade Center's towers, visible from Mateo's small window, stand like sentinels between him and harbor waters south. Between pages of the memory album I'll never complete, I tuck the Torreses' phone number alongside a photo of the young mother I worry about, who does not wish direct contact.

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With me thankful and unaware, you're asleep, your performance done. We've immersed ourselves in trust: of Susan Burger, Eduardo, Manuel, *doctora* Hilda, Emilio, the dear Torreses. A new lineage is in place. The cost you keep to yourself. I can't yet see your psychic and physical pain. Methadone has not yet drained your face of color. I have not yet arranged for Mateo always to be in our trusted nanny's care while I'm at work. I have not yet run in my high heels to cover the fourteen blocks between my office and our loft to intercept you, convince you not to ride your motorcycle to your tuning gig, give you money for a cab, tell you that, yes, today is Wednesday and to come right home. To start failing at my job as I shore up the crumbling ramparts of your treatment while keeping our family together.

We have a family. You're not yet overdosed, but alive, possibly dreaming. You've believed for a time that I love you and need you. So much later, I'll remember that.

I turn to halfway shut Mateo's bedroom door. I leave it open enough to go to him should he turn in his fresh, profound sleep.