Volume One: Cloud Village, A Novel

Volume Two: Ethnographic Surrealism and the New World Baroque

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Abstract

This thesis examines the moments in which the differences between cultures create new systems of meaning, the moments in which people reinvent themselves and their values, and in which a new language or expression is created. James Clifford calls these moments "Ethnographic Surrealism", particularly when ethnography provides a critical distance from one's own culture in order to subvert its assumptions. The creative part of this thesis may be seen as a work of ethnographic surrealism, because it places its main characters, a North American family, on a commune in an isolated mountain in Colombia where their cultural assumptions are denaturalised. Their endeavour is what Mary Louise Pratt called an "anti-conquest". Instead of wishing to convert others, they wish to be converted by the local tribe. The family is unaware that they survey others with "imperial eyes".

This exegesis focuses specifically on the New World Baroque, an exuberant and inclusive style appropriate to a mestizo culture. It first discusses the Latin American neo-baroque, later expanding the category to certain North American works. Then it looks at the genre of magical realism as a subcategory of the neo-baroque. It uses Clifford's conception of Ethnographic Surrealism's juncture between cultures and the notion of a magical realist clash of paradigms to examine fiction about the Other, in particular *The Lost Steps* by Alejo Carpentier (the story of an anti-conquest) and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Garcia Marquez. It examines moments of ethnographically surrealist collage in which images of the culturally familiar and the strange are juxtaposed. Then it discusses North American works which contain an inclusive baroque spirit: the work of Henry Miller and the invented worlds of Ursula K. Le Guin. Ethnographic surrealism shares with the neo-baroque a sense of inclusiveness, proliferation, expansiveness and syncretism.

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Cloud Village

"Respect the delicate ecology of your delusions." Tony Kushner *Angels in America*

Preface

People ask if I have nightmares. I tell them I dream about nothing but my home on the Snowy Mountain. Though it is called the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, I had never seen snow up close before coming to the States. Not even the doctors can explain why my feet and hands stay so cold even after I take a hot bath. Gringo cold goes deeper than the cold on our mountain. When it has settled in, a hot bath fails to reach the bones or the heart.

The Kogi believe that you cannot return to land that you have left behind. Even though I no longer believe in such things, I have never returned.

I was twelve when the paramilitaries came for us. I had never been to a movie, never seen a city street. I had never seen buses or cars.

I was sound asleep when they arrived. When I woke I saw a machine gun pointed at my mother. She kept her composure and repeated their commands. "Pack what you can carry", she said. "You have twenty minutes. We heard machine gun fire. When it was over, what I remember most clearly was the quiet, the quiet of the living with no tears left to cry, no cries left to scream, crouching in corners, under beds, in the forest, in the fields. I wasn't as afraid as I should have been. Not having left the mountain before, I was as excited about the trip as I was afraid. I knew the men's tone was menacing, but I was incapable of imagining any other life, much less having to leave my home for good. And I certainly didn't entertain the possibility of my own death.

It's not that those of us who were born on the mountain didn't hear all sorts of things about the world outside, though our parents tried to shelter us from the bad things, like the war. My parents are from California. My mother used to tell me about the bustle of city streets, fashion, exams and pollution. I had never seen an

electric light. I looked forward to the days we made candles. To me it was alchemy, from substance to light. I listened to these stories the way children in other cultures listen to fairy-tales. Your world was my fairy-tale. And your fairy-tales were my world.

I was especially curious about fashion. Mom told me that women wore something called high heels that hurt their feet. As a small child my feet were always bare, cold and with cracked calluses, so I couldn't understand why someone would deliberately hurt her own feet. The adults wanted our bare feet to have contact with the sacred earth in the traditional Kogi way. But nowadays, many Kogi had galoshes for the rain. I hassled my parents for several months, begging for galoshes. At first my father told me not to be so bourgeois. I didn't grasp what bourgeois meant, but I knew it must be something despicable. Another thing that confused me was that he said galoshes were tainted with the evils of Civilization. He thought he was raising me in a pure world vastly superior to his. He said the white man created Capitalism, and therefore colonialism, slavery, and the machinery of modern warfare. This is why I was so confused and disappointed to later learn I was white, more or less. The Kogi lived, on the other hand, in a state of primitive communism in an ecologically sustainable way that should be a model for the world. Dad may as well have called our village the Garden of Eden, but as a devout communist Dad was strictly against all forms of religion.

Before I understood his lectures, I associated things from the outside world with emotions, not concepts. These were the lessons my parents taught me about your world: galoshes come from Evil; cars and guns are machines that cause fear; traffic causes anxiety; pollution leads to illness, which in turn leads to depression; fashion is funny.

I have kept the brown and white *mochila* bag I packed that day. Even now, it hangs in my bay window overlooking Dolores Park. If I feel sad, I rifle through its contents: a Lorca poem about New York that Fabio gave me and a notebook full of dried flowers, a heart shaped brown seed, and a *tutuma* bowl. The poem, "The dance of death", said:

In the withered, waveless solitude,
the dented mask was dancing.
Half the world was sand,
the other half mercury and dormant sunlight. [1]

That poem, though bleak, never fails to cheer me up.

*

My mother Emma liked to tell me stories about her early days in the village where I was born. She named me Jade for her favourite stone. As a middle name they chose Quetzal for a bird they spotted in the woods the morning after they first got together. It was also based on my father's last name "Vogel", German for bird.

Jade Quetzal, like a Kogi figurine. I would spend my childhood wanting to fly, but like a stone I was bound to the ground beneath me.

My childhood went unphotographed. There is no evidence of it but the few things we carried with us on that day when my childhood abruptly ended. So the reader will have to trust our story.

[1] Garcia Lorca, Federico. *Poet in New York.* Trans. Greg Simon and Steven F. White. New York: The Noonday Press, 1988. 41.

Leaving

There is no lighter feeling than that which comes from leaving your whole life behind and walking free. Everyone should try it once. Your apartment is empty, goodbyes said, bags packed, checked. The plane is taking off, and you watch all that was once your life diminish: your bay, your city, your neighbourhood, your block, your building. It becomes toy sized, making a mockery of all that once weighed on you until finally, mercifully, it disappears.

After the lightness comes a feeling of dead calm. You order drinks, not to take the edge off since you have renounced all stress, but because they are free on international flights.

Emma wanted to leave the United States, because it was a force of evil. People were in constant motion, running fast. Nobody was actually *from* San Francisco, and half the people were on the way to somewhere else. She was sure they were all going insane.

She wanted to go somewhere where people stood still, where people were born and lived and died in the same place. Did such a place still exist? Having moved around all her life, she'd learned that folks in such places would never accept her as one of their own, but she didn't care. She was used to being an outsider.

She feared she was growing old at twenty-seven. Only later did she learn that aging isn't linear; you grow old and young again many times in a lifetime. Each time you rise from the ashes, the gargantuan effort costs you a little more until finally you can't be bothered. Then, and only then, are you old.

The white noise was unbearable, and not just the sound of traffic, or stray broadcasts. She was constantly being bombarded; other people's thoughts slipped in between her own without her noticing: her neighbour's opinions on how she fed her rabbits, snippets of the news or the soliloquies of insane homeless people who loitered on her block. And when her neighbour sprayed for mites, the toxic

fumes wafted through her apartment, stinging her lungs. Her neighbour's cats terrorized her bunnies. Her junkie roommates stole her stereo, so she raised a fuss. Unfortunately, she was one of those people no one listens to. They always thought she was a nice girl. No one listens to nice girls. She didn't want to be a nice girl anymore.

This place was poison. The water was poison, the air poison, the food poison. Sometimes she felt like she was sweating poison. The earth was hotter than it had been in 23 million years. San Francisco had the highest breast cancer rate in the world. At Livermore labs, they were brewing up new ways to kill the most people in the shortest amount of time. Chemicals were in the food supply, Prozac in the drinking water. Every day she heard of a new cancer case. Kids were born without hearts or fingers. This country was a massive death-making machine. The highways were filled with cars coughing up carcinogenic fumes, heating the atmosphere, threatening to kill off the entire planet. Voting for president was a choice between one warmongering asshole and another. It was hard not to become paranoid.

Or maybe, things weren't so bad. The scientists were wrong. The cracks in the icecaps would freeze over. The earth would heal. Maybe.

Or more likely, if she stayed here, she'd become part of the killing machine by the time she was thirty. She'd get a "real job" for some corporation that produces something noxious. Humanity itself was going to die out, so she'd better make her time on this planet count. She felt like the parameters of her vision, her habitual turns of phrase and even her own body were constricting her. She wanted a new language, a new self.

She once read that the original Chumash inhabitants of coastal Los Angeles believed that a flood once destroyed all living things except the spotted woodpecker that flew high above its reach. Maybe the spotted woodpecker would survive the melting of the Arctic ice caps too. She wished she knew how to fly as high as a woodpecker above the banality of her daily life.

As part of her anthropology PhD at Berkeley, she was taking a seminar on small-scale societies. As she was writing her paper on the relations of

authority among the Kogi, she began to dream of their mountain. She was in the ceremonial house chewing coca with the men (forbidden for women, but in this dream she was androgynous) while the *mamas* or priests divined the future by placing beads in water. When she awoke, she was always surprised to hear traffic.

In her real life, she lived with Tammi, Chucky and Yardley. They were regular kids who just happened to be unlucky enough to get strung out on heroin. Yardley and Chucky were a couple and still happy to be together even as their grasp on life loosened. They had recently discovered they had Hep C. The stress of this revelation had driven them to add vodka drinking to their daily shooting up.

The commute from her place in the Mission to graduate seminars at Berkeley may as well have been a trip to another dimension. In seminars, she felt as if the fresh and eager faced students could sense she'd found a syringe on the bathroom floor that morning. But, of course, they imagined nothing of the kind. It was beyond their scope. They thought she was a run-of-the-mill grad student, albeit with a blue streak in her short spiked dark brown hair. As a budding Anthropologist, she thought her ability to travel seamlessly between two spheres would be useful in the future, but she had no idea how much.

At a conference, she heard the Colombian Anthropologist Dr. Teresa Campos speak. After the talk, she went up to her with some questions. Teresa had done fieldwork among the Kogi tribe that had so captivated her. Teresa was happy to join her for drinks and tell tall tales about the mountain, jaguars, tapirs, and stolen, sacred gold. Most intriguing was that, like the spotted woodpecker of Chumash lore, the people had run up the mountain five hundred years ago, surviving physically and spiritually, escaping colonization to this day.

Though their coastal cities had been destroyed and their numbers had diminished, remarkably, they survived. They were the only intact pre-Colombian civilization in the Americas. They had never used the wheel or the plough. Their religious beliefs were intact; they had an order of *mamas* or shamans who trained for eighteen years. They thought of themselves as the elder brothers of the world.

The *mamas* said they had received a prophecy so they had sent a warning to the outside world saying that if humans continued abusing the earth and did not stop cutting into Mother Earth with the over-felling of trees and over-killing of animals, and mining, the world would end. They said they knew how to save the world from ecological collapse. This drew Emma's attention.

There was something determined about everything Teresa said or did, even the self-assured way she ordered drinks. So when she said she was building a village, Emma believed her. And when Teresa invited her to join her, she didn't hesitate.

She wanted to not have to struggle anymore. If the sun stopped rising and setting, she would be relieved that nothing was required of her. She was tired of chaos. She had been trying to manage chaos her whole life. She craved solitude and silence. She imagined this village was where she would fit in most in this world.

Unaware that it was a place where she'd seldom be alone, she daydreamed about the mountain constantly with the obsession of an infatuated lover. And when she lay down to sleep, instead of imagining a man, she imagined pure air, peaceful people, and breath-taking natural beauty.

She applied for a grant to do fieldwork in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Northern Colombia the following autumn. Following Teresa's guidance, she flew to Panama City and took a bus to Colon to catch the boat to Cartagena. She arrived in September of 1995.

A new life

Each new place Emma visited after leaving San Francisco felt like a jarring reality shift from the last, as if it were separated like the walls topped with broken glass she'd seen guarding the houses of the rich in Cartagena. Each place hummed with its own sound and moved at its own velocity.

She met up with Teresa, her husband Arturo and a couple of their friends at the Caribbean port of Santa Marta, hiring a jeep for the couple hour journey to the jungle trail. Then they worked their way on foot up a mountain as steep as the face of the Himalaya. They had to take turns carrying Teresa's baby daughter Marcela. From the time she'd arrived in Colombia, there had been constant music, and now there was nothing but the hum of insects.

They walked in silence for long stretches, listening. Once they heard a rumble so loud and unnatural that she stopped walking, bracing herself for the movement of the earth, but no tremor came. Instead, it was a strong wind blowing through the trees and the insects voicing their hostility at the intrusion. And then at dusk, the insects were so loud she could feel the vibrations in her cheeks, like at a rock concert. She was relieved to feel the oppressive heat diminish each day as they travelled upwards into thinner air. Finally, the jungle thinned, and they passed through the savannah filled with circular thatched huts where most Kogi lived. A few of them, all wearing white, greeted Emma and her friends sheepishly. As the trail headed uphill again for the last stretch, she had the sensation she was in San Francisco on a foggy day. Due to its strange misty microclimate, the Kogi called this Cloud country. So Teresa named their future home "Cloud Village".

It was on what they call the *falda* or the skirt of the mountain. They had come here to hide themselves in that green fold of the mountainside as bashfully as children hide in their mother's skirts. This mountain and the community gave her hope for a future when her old life had been doomed by a dead-end society.

She clung to them desperately, much in the way she prayed to God when in trouble, despite her agnosticism.

The village was on a rocky slope that was difficult to farm; the land rose out of the small valley into a thick mountain forest. They had been given the use of several hectares of cultivable land, the worst in Kogi territory, cleared of forest but overgrown with grass. They didn't complain. It was a privilege to be allowed to live here at all. She felt as if she'd arrived on another earth, a more alive one, bursting with millions of mysterious creatures, a dozen suns and a hundred moons.

There were twenty people or so awaiting them. Some wore hippie coconut shell jewellery, bright coloured baggy clothes and long hair. Others were leftist intellectual types with wire-rimmed glasses and Palestinian scarves, looking as if they might burst out into folksy Cuban Silvio Rodriguez songs at any moment. At first, they camped out in tents. It was like summer camp with bonfires at night complete with ghost stories. The men decided that they would scare the women with gory stories, but they scarcely concealed their own fear of the snakes and jaguars. Most of the other folks here were from Bogota, where the only jaguars were gold figures in the *Museo de Oro*.

A guy named Fabio told stories about Kogi slaughtered long ago by Spanish soldiers still haunting the surrounding woods. He was definitely the artistic type. He looked frail, like he wouldn't last long up here. She liked him immediately. So far, she liked everyone. But she'd wanted to come here so badly that she'd be happy no matter what.

She had never noticed that the light of the full moon was so bright before. Perhaps she'd confused it with a streetlight. It was chilly at night at 3,200 feet and very quiet. She was relieved not to hear traffic, televisions or music blaring. The silence soothed her nerves.

She had been right to trust Teresa's abilities. If anything, she was a bit too capable. She woke everyone at dawn to start building the huts. They built on the stone foundations of an abandoned Kogi village. On top of these ruins, they built round huts with thatched roofs and mud walls in the traditional Kogi fashion.

She preferred building huts to the other option: clearing the fields. She had been an architecture major in college before switching to a double major in art and archaeology. Her anthropology dissertation topic was to be: “Gender relations, space and architecture among the Kogi”. The Kogi men lived separately from the women and children and the ceremonial/meeting house was the exclusive domain of men. A system of patriarchal gender apartheid was her worst nightmare, so of course she was completely fascinated by it.

She couldn’t wait for the village to rise up out of the ruins. Right now, the spot exuded a feeling of abandonment; it lacked the grandeur she’d envisioned.

Yet she saw a spark of potential in the hopeful and determined way the new villagers walked and worked. They each carried their own vision around and nurtured it. They felt a private childlike glee doing seemingly mundane tasks.

As they cut leaves for thatch, she thought about how great it was that they were building this community based on ideals that all held in common, even if each person had her own unique interpretation. For now, the common goals were so simple and clear that there was no cause for dissent. And basic social conventions of this new tribe were, so far, easy to understand: do one’s work and don’t meddle in the affairs of others. Later, she’d remember the latter norm and laugh.

At those early parties, she sang her heart out. She had learned a lot of songs in Spanish during her college days. She’d only gone to South American parties, the kind that start with drumming and dancing and end with an acoustic guitar greeting the sunrise. Before arriving here, she had rarely seen the sunrise except after a party. Then, like now, she would usually be one of the last ones standing. Here she wouldn’t turn in until Moncho, the best guitar player in the group, didn’t have the strength to play one more chord. There was an easy camaraderie among her new friends. By morning, in their exhaustion, one person would start a joke and the other would finish it. This felt as natural as the sunrays reaching her eyes from across the solar system. No difference was too wide to overcome.

Teresa and her husband Arturo had recruited a few of their friends: her cousin Dr. Monsalve, Enrique, Pilar, Moncho and Fabio. It was this core group that had first discussed the idea of founding a village two years before. During these discussions, drinking mulled wine in a bar in the posh Chapinero district of Bogota, the central ideas and ground rules of the community were developed.

Teresa got the idea after hearing of the Kogi's prophecy. This is why she wanted to live near the Kogi, but the Kogi had no interest in letting outsiders live in their territory. So she thought of something she could offer them. The Kogi were suffering from a tuberculosis epidemic; she would offer free medical care and antibiotics. The Kogi accepted the offer after much negotiation. She received a grant from a French NGO, including a small stipend for her cousin, the infectious disease expert Dr. Monsalve.

They wanted to build an ecological village of peace and equality. And after they had learned to live sustainably, they would send a few of their most articulate members back out into the world to share the *mamas'* prophecy. Teresa hoped their gospel of sustainability would spread from there. It had to or the planet was doomed.

Since promoting peace was a primary motive of the community, violence would, of course, result in expulsion. Teresa studied mediation techniques that she would teach to the others in hopes of resolving conflicts peacefully. She felt that the technology of modern warfare was partly to blame for the severity and length of Colombia's current conflict, so most industrial technologies were banned. Nothing run by electricity was allowed, not even battery-operated gadgets like radios. Out of respect for the Kogi belief that walking barefoot kept one in sacred contact with Mother Earth, no one would wear shoes.

Emma had learned in her two weeks in Cartagena that in Colombia the use of titles was almost feudal, but up here, the use of Don, Dona and even Senor and Senora was discouraged. And the term "Doctor" was reserved for their medical doctor. In Bogota, Teresa would have been called Doctora, as a doctor of anthropology.

Weekly community meetings would be forums to discuss plans for the

village. People were encouraged to solve personal problems in private. Decisions were made by consensus. Everyone had an equal vote. In their first meeting, they decided to grow self-maintaining fruit trees such as *sapote*, banana and avocado on their tropical lands below. Only a few simple crops like potatoes, onion and *maguey* were to be grown on the colder higher lands, because no one was willing to volunteer to spend longer stretches of time there.

In addition to their own rules, they had to abide by the rules of the Kogi who had the right to expel them at any time. Their village would be within an indigenous reserve and National Park.

In the first months, she only met a few *mamas*. The rest of the Kogi were as yet out of sight. These selected shamans taught the villagers Kogi rules on the killing of plants and trees. They taught them that drugs were strictly forbidden, except for sacred coca leaves and alcohol. She was disappointed that they had so little contact with the Kogi, but understood the reason. If she had been through all they had in the hands of outsiders, she wouldn't want anything to do with the likes of them either. Sometimes she thought she heard the cyclical trancelike drums and flutes of a Kogi song waft over the hills. She supposed if the Kogi shared nothing else with them but their music that would be no small thing. She had always believed that when someone shares a song with you, a song they have made their own, they give you a piece of their heart.

The first signs of their village began to appear, one hut and then another, until they formed an oblong shape around a clearing. At one end, the meetinghouse was to be built almost like a church on a plaza, so they dubbed the clearing "the plaza". The fields lay behind the meetinghouse. Emma's hut faced the godless church and behind it lay the woods and the main trail up the mountain.

After two months, she moved into her hut. She had expected to feel more settled now but had grown accustomed to living in a cluster of tents with constant bonfires and conversation. Here she was alone with the sounds of the forest. She was relieved to be suspended off the ground in her hammock, safe from snakes.

She hadn't seen a snake yet, but that didn't stop them from slithering into her dreams at night.

In San Francisco, every street was tied to a set of memories, good and bad. Here she had none, so the sights and smells evoked few feelings in her with the exception of the familiar comforting mist. It was different from California fog, hotter and stickier. And this made her feel as if she had no name, no origin, no characteristics, as if even her personality was a blank slate. No one here saw her as folks did at home, as the one everyone relied on in a pinch. She was relieved to be free of her old friends' opinions about her. They'd thought of her as cheap, yet generous. If one friend thought one thing, the other thought the opposite. If one assertion were true, then the other must be false. Yet every criticism seared itself in her brain permanently. She would never forget any of it, no matter how absurd.

Still, she was surprised how much she missed the smells of home and especially the tastes. In those early days before the first harvest, they ate only rice, beans, *arepas* (a corn flatbread similar to a tortilla) and forest fruits. Every vice had been taken away from her, pint glasses of coffee followed by pints of microbrews, and discussions with her friend Tammi during each and every emotional crisis. She was about twenty pounds overweight in those early days, not fat, just a bit zaftig. Back in San Francisco, she'd loved her burritos, sourdough bread, and microbrews. Of course, she shed the pounds quickly here. She would have dreams about treats like strawberry cheesecake, Chinese fake orange duck, sweet *café africano* from café Trieste, or cheese *pupusas*. She knew what Tammi would say now, "What you're going through is geographical kicking. That was what they called it when junkies moved to the boonies where heroin was impossible to procure. "Give it time, and you'll be clean as a new-born baby.

There were only twenty people in the village so far. Emma lived on the slope of the hill. Slightly downhill, Teresa lived with her husband Arturo and cute little daughter Marcela. They were the only family here. Dr. Monsalve and his wife Sandra did not yet have children. Fabio, Moncho, Spazzolino and

Enrique lived without women. Alessandra the Argentine and Pilar had no children.

Teresa's hair was dyed bright red, so you could always see her from a mile away. At thirty-seven she was the grandmother of the community. She might have been a grandmother, in fact, for she had two university age kids in Bogota. But Emma seriously doubted that Teresa would admit to being a grandmother, were this the case. Teresa's daughter looked like her clone; she had the easily burnt pale skin of her mother and medium brown hair. She hadn't inherited Arturo's brown skin at all. It appeared as if Teresa had managed to conceive her by sheer solitary force of will.

Spazzolino and Alessandra, both of Italian descent, were also on the pale side. Alessandra had light brown hair, a rarity in Colombia. Everyone else was to a greater or lesser extent a mestizo, including Emma. With her dark hair and olive skin, she appeared more Colombian than Teresa's clan. She had just enough Native American blood in her Euro-mutt mix to tan well. She was relieved that this helped her fit in. But the minute she opened her mouth, the jig was up. The one who stood out most was Lane, a tall North American with obnoxiously blonde hair. It was impossible not to look at him; he looked so alien to the landscape.

Her uphill neighbour was the man who told the spooky ghost stories, Fabio. He seemed as out of place as she did. He wasn't a hippie or a Palestinian-scarf-donning leftist and neither was she. She liked to refer to these people as neighbours. Having neighbours meant that someday soon this place would feel like home.

After six months in the village, her ears tuned in to the symphony of the creatures of the forest. She named some of the birds in the trees near her house like pets. New friendships with Teresa, Fabio and Pilar filled the void left by the old. To Emma, the mountain fog was the breath of the gods.

Falling

Emma worked at the clinic on Wednesday afternoons. So did Lane, the other North American. She and Lane were so focused on their work that they scarcely talked to each other in those first weeks. Then one day when they were walking in the forest with Teresa and the children, Emma heard Marcela scream. She turned to see a snake scurry in the grass. She started to laugh, assuming Marcela was just being hysterical. Then Emma saw she'd been bitten.

Lane had been walking ahead, but he'd come back when he heard the scream. Emma remembered he was from rattlesnake country. He tied a tourniquet of sorts made from his shirt around her leg. Then he picked her up and said to her in English, "Let's get her to the clinic."

They hurried on in silence. Marcela didn't let out as much as a whimper. At the clinic, Emma gave her an anti-venom shot. She didn't feel a thing. Emma had learned a thing or two from taking care of the poodles at her mother's illegal breeding business. She gave the gentlest shots of anyone at the clinic.

"You know, we make a good team, Emma," he said.

She thought about it. Did they?

She had to hand it to him. He was good in an emergency, and so was she. Everybody at home always said so. She had to grow up quickly in her house with her mother's tendency towards throwing dishes at the wall in the middle of the night in a drunken rage or spending the rent money on booze.

Working with him in the clinic she'd seen another side of him. When someone coughed, he slunk up next to them with a handkerchief. When the doctor needed to give an injection, Lane didn't need to be asked. He prepared the syringe in silence. This puzzled Emma at first. In the village, he never seemed to shut up. He seemed to feel it was his duty to be opinionated about all village affairs. Here, he was almost shy.

One morning as he listened to an old lady's lungs, it dawned on her that here Lane was free from the burden of having to constantly push his ideas about how the village should be run. Unlike Cloud Village where the smallest of

concerns could rupture into a community-wide debate, at the clinic it was clear what was needed; that was why she liked working here best. Perhaps, he liked it too. At the clinic, she even liked him.

After Marcela was taken care of, Lane invited her to his hut for a dinner. He cooked the obligatory rice, beans, *arepas*, *aji* sauce, a salad of edible flowers and pineapple *chicha,* which tasted like the rotting fruit that it was, but with an alcoholic kick.

He lit candles. The moon was a tiny sliver that night. He watched her, anxiously awaiting her opinion of his dinner. He looked as pleased as a housewife who had nothing else to look forward to all day but this moment. She thought the food was surprisingly good considering what he had to work with and told him so.

His eagerness made her nervous. When he talked about his past, he was open and matter of fact. He told her about his parents. They were austere Methodists: German, Scottish, Dutch farmers. His mother had long red hair that made her look as if she had a wild side, but sadly she didn't, not that he knew of. She had to work too hard. She had never danced in her life. His father was shy and even more serious than his mother. Or so he'd been told. His father had worked in the fields the day he died unexpectedly of pneumonia when Lane was eleven months old. There was something endearing about Lane's earnestness.

He had about as much enthusiasm for Paradise, Utah as she had for Rio Linda, California or any of the other dead end towns she'd grown up in. They had that in common. They had both survived small towns. Only she had survived twenty of them.

He said he didn't like small town girls; he liked independent women. He looked at her meaningfully like he thought of her as one. She was supposed to take this as a compliment but resented this phrase and told him so. Why did no one talk of independent men? It implied such women were anomalies. She had read that the Chinese character for "good" was a combination of the character for "woman" and for "child". And the character for "peace" showed a woman under a roof, meaning in a house. In most people's minds, in most countries, these

things went together, whereas *woman* and *independence* were two disparate words that clashed.

He was so surprised at her response that he said nothing. She imagined it was wildly out of his farm-fed frame of reference.

After a few minutes, he told her not to touch the zit on her face; it would just make them break out more. She thought he shouldn't open his mouth and let out overbearing titbits like that; it just ruined the impression he'd made with his good looks. Defiantly picking at her face, she asked him about his plans for the village, his favourite subject.

He waxed enthusiastic about the future of the village. She was more doubtful. "Do you ever wonder if we were crazy to come here?" she asked. "Don't small town kids normally run away to the big city, not some place even smaller? True, she didn't have one hometown in particular. But he did. He could go to the farthest corner of the earth and still smell of sagebrush.

He looked perplexed. "Why? What's wrong with coming here?"

"Nothing."

"This is the most exciting thing I've ever done. Would you really want to go back?"

He was right. This was probably the most exciting thing either of them would ever do.

"Come here. I want to show you something. He took her hand, and they walked to the "plaza" and lay down, looking up at the stars. It was as if she had only seen the sky in two-dimensions before. The stars seemed to reach out towards them.

She knew she wasn't in love yet, merely subject to the pull of gravity. She was falling, but any number of things could break that fall, a temper, sloppy inconsiderate kisses, or obsessive jealousy, to name a few. If she discovered any of these things before she loved him, her emotional natural killer cells would devour him whole. He would be a memory. No feelings would survive. If she discovered these things after she loved him, she would be doomed to unhappiness or forced to run away to a monastery in the peaks of the Himalayas

to forget him, to a place just as hidden as here but so carefully tucked away that he could never find her.

Men, though commitment-phobes at first, were later as difficult to get rid of as an incurable disease. Once having been imprinted, they were like tiny goslings mistaking a laundry basket for their mother. It's not their fault. Bless 'em. What infuriated her was that they couldn't see this; they believed in the stereotypical image of themselves as manly, strong and independent, because this is how everyone treated them, no matter how weak they were; whereas, a woman could swim the English Channel in the winter with no wetsuit and still be treated like a pretty little thing.

Lane seemed too sincere to be for real. She kept on waiting for the catch. Maybe he beat women or was utterly incapable of expressing his feelings. Maybe he was a secret misogynist posing as a pseudo feminist. Maybe he liked to torture small animals. Maybe he hated children. Maybe he was mean and vindictive or twisted and tormented. At the beginning of a relationship, she could always spot the first signs of a man's madness and diagnose its exact nature. Though she was accurate in its type, she was always far off base as to the gravity of the situation. Their madness would always be far more sinister than her wildest imagination could have cooked up.

*

She and Lane became inseparable. The more they made love, the more a fog of forgetting rolled in, veiling her memory of everything and everybody that came before him.

They didn't believe in marriage. But after about three months of sharing a hammock, they went on a honeymoon of sorts to Tayrona National Park, an hour from Santa Marta. They trudged through arid tropical forest for three hours before reaching a sea that looked like jade crossed with sapphire.

Of course, Lane made friends with all the European backpackers within the first couple of hours, abandoning her, his not so blushing "bride". She flipped

though the book on Colombian ornithology she'd picked up at a book exchange at a Santa Marta hostel. It was in Swedish, so she looked at the beautiful coloured illustrations and amused herself by making up an alternate text in her head, that the yellow-bellied bird with the red stripe only mated with total strangers or that the blue bird with purple shimmering wings nested exclusively in caves where trolls dwelled ever since a curse was put on them three thousand years ago.

When Lane got back, they went out to dinner and ate the same things they would eat for the whole trip. He ate a whole fish with *patacones*. She ate the typical rice, beans and *arepas*, morning, noon and night, the only vegetarian food available besides fruit. But the tropical fruit was glorious and made up for the rest. She usually gorged on *churros* with hot chocolate or sweet avocado shakes when in Santa Marta, but there were no such luxuries here.

On the second day, he got up at six to hike to the Pueblito ruins while she hung out with the other backpackers and drank all afternoon, swimming and sunning, as happy as the sea lions she'd liked to watch as a kid at Seal Rock in San Francisco, only much warmer. In the evening, she sang around the campfire to the guitar played by a bald British telephone repairman, as Lane drank and chatted with all and sundry. He never sang. Sure, he was tone deaf, which wasn't his fault, but it got on her nerves that he had an intellectual approach to music. He thought certain music was interesting because of its unusual patterns. He spoke of it as if it were a series of algorithms. He didn't choose music based on the feeling that arose in him like most people. What kind of person didn't feel music? It worried her.

On the third night, they went on a night swim. He didn't want to make love to her on the beach, preferring the mosquito netted bed. If he couldn't let himself go in paradise, then when could he? On the mountain, she told herself he was just preoccupied with community problems. He just needed to be away in order to loosen up. But here, he already had a new community to worry about. He helped a random woman named Inge with her infected cut. He was full of judgmental opinions on Florian and Anke's marriage though he had just met them hours before. Not even on their "honeymoon" would she play first fiddle.

But she was reassured, knowing he needed her more than she needed him. It was strange that he didn't have any truly close friends on the mountain besides her. He didn't think it was seemly to talk to his friends about personal things. For this, he had her and only her, whereas she had Pilar and Teresa. She told them things she wouldn't tell him in her wildest.

They had predominantly spoken to each other in Spanish in the village, but here they began to speak to each other in English. In the casual cadences of American English, they grew closer. It was as if they'd been previously composing music in one key and now they could not only easily switch keys, but scales as well. After that, English became the secret language of their intimacy. They got along perfectly that week, taking long walks and sunning themselves till their skin looked like cured leather. Hers turned brown and his golden. She swam for hours, while he read. Somehow they never felt hung-over, though they drank beer every night.

Tayrona was a nature refuge; it felt like an emotional refuge as well. Though everyone knew paramilitaries lurked somewhere within its boundaries, real problems couldn't touch them here. Of course, the village was a refuge too, but now that she had responsibilities there, it no longer felt like one. Anyone who had lived in twenty towns in her first eighteen years of life knew all about the lightness of novelty wearing off. And she knew she couldn't expect anything different from her relationship.

A year later, she would give birth to a baby girl named Jade. A year after that, Teresa would give birth to a second daughter named Diana. And there were five other children on the other side of the plaza. The village would grow to forty adults after two years. Then the village would stop growing. They knew for the village to have a future it would need more children.

No one had ever died here. Without their bones rotting in this land, what possible claim could they have on it? When she thought of it, she got a cold feeling of dread, for death was inevitable. Death would have to eventually balance out birth for this to become a true village like any other.

Fabio the *Fabulista*

Now when I think of my mountain, I think of all that it was not. I carry the world to it. I fill it with the absence of the city. I see its negative. Then it was an entire world, my world, filled with adventure, legendary creatures, a clanking typewriter, hot chocolate and secrets. And Fabio, the engineer of our adventures, the owner of our only typewriter, was my Spanish teacher.

It was the duty of every adult in the village to teach us something. Teresa was, like my parents, an anthropologist at large. She and my father carried a notebook at all times. The rest of the village made fun of them for this. They were our "social science" teachers. Alessandra was our craft teacher. She taught us how to spin cloth and weave, make pottery and jewellery. Alessandra was short with light brown boyish short hair, but she stood with a tall confidence. She couldn't care less about protecting us from the evils of the city. She told us stories about Buenos Aires, like the one about a man who grabbed her in a bar and how she followed him out to an alleyway and kicked him in the balls, or the one about the people she met working in a soup kitchen for the poor: homeless, drunks and upstanding little old ladies whose pensions had been cut. She taught us the tango, singing the songs herself. She had been living in Otavalo, Ecuador for the six previous years before arriving here, welding stones onto silver and selling the jewellery to tourists. That was where she'd met Teresa. Alessandra was always making cynical cracks. She was from the fancier side of Buenos Aires but as tough as any gaucho.

Arturo was our painting teacher. He also had the distinguished position of being Teresa's husband. People's chief complaint about this was that he didn't have to do as much work as other people. He was a famous painter back in Bogota. He fashioned an easel out of branches and painted on cloth or bark when he ran out of supplies.

Enrique was our science teacher, and Moncho was our Music teacher. Everyone was our farming teacher. Doctor Monsalve, Teresa's cousin, let us observe in the clinic he ran for the Kogi and called these "health classes".

Spazzolino was our carpentry and Italian language teacher. He liked to pull on his long beard. Back in Italy, he had been a sculptor so he became our master carpenter. He was called in to help out on any roof repairs. He planned, oversaw and helped build our meetinghouse. He had the largest house with four rooms, though he was single. And when there was nothing to be repaired, he carved wooden statues. The front of Spazzolino's house looked like a collection of totem poles built in reverence to his personal pantheon of spirits, though he was a devout communist and atheist.

He was lonely in his hut, so he never turned us away, whereas our own parents were much busier and more distracted. Once in a while he would go into a manic carving rampage. Then he scarcely recognized us. I imagined he'd been chased by Olympian athlete demons. They had swum all the way from Sardinia to Santa Marta and then climbed the mountain on foot. Then they continued onto the *paramo* over the mountain and down to Tierra del Fuego. By then he would become his normal oddball self again, catching butterflies with us, as long as we freed them as soon as we got a good look at their bright tropical colours. Eventually the butterflies would fly down to Tierra del Fuego and plead with his demons to return to our mountain. The demons were happy to comply, rushing back to torment him further, and then he'd stop catching butterflies for a while.

When I was little, my parents spoke to me in Spanish only, thinking it would make it easier for me to adapt. And in those early days, they had no intention of teaching me to read because this wouldn't be necessary in the new society they were building. This is especially strange since my father loved to read and write. I watched him write in his notebooks for hours on end.

At the tender age of three, thanks to Teresa who gave me pen and paper, I devised my own alphabets, for Kogi, for Spanish, for birdsong and for my own made up languages. Noticing my obsession for secret codes, Teresa taught me to read Spanish, and then she told my mother who began to teach me to read English on the sly. So in a way, I insisted my mother tongue be returned to me, never mind that it was not the tongue of most of my ancestors. I always felt

English was mine. That I still sometimes speak with my own unique syntax to this day, especially when drunk, has not diminished this feeling.

Our lessons would have been quite different if my folks had kept up their radical notions about what we shouldn't learn. I am glad they changed their minds. Giving lessons was one of Mom's favourite things. She taught us English and Art. She would bring us to the meadow behind the meetinghouse to paint flowers on paper she'd brought specially from Santa Marta. Diana painted all the flowers yellow. Mom encouraged her to branch out, but she refused. "You told us to paint it how we see it, and I see all the flowers shining like the sun.

She usually ended our lessons by roping us into helping her cook lunch. Tiny brown birds would land on my shoulder whenever I cooked, occasionally dive bombing into food I was preparing. I had to shoo them away before my mom saw them. She'd be sure we were all going to die of the plague. She always made sure food was washed in boiled water with chlorine drops. Dad was more careless about sanitation. Mom said he could get away with it because he had an iron stomach, but he shouldn't expose a child to a whole host of potential horrors. She said he took more care with the running of the village than the raising of his own child. He said that it was as important for me to grow up in a wholesome community as it was for me to eat healthy food.

She believed, along with most of the other adults, that we should have a childhood free of the weight of the full responsibilities of adulthood. But, Dad, Teresa, Arturo, and Alessandra were concerned we would never be able to survive as adults in this new society unless we fully understood how each part of it functioned. They also needed more help with chores. I always did my animal keeping and was attentive with my lessons, but we hid from Teresa to avoid extra work. Then she instituted new classes, practical classes, so that we could learn all of the skills in the village. Since the adults had abolished the clock, she couldn't set up a class at a specific time. The best she could do was say, "after lunch" or "after your Spanish lesson". If she wasn't specific enough, we could still evade her. We learned soap making, roof thatching, and weaving first. During a

weaving lesson, I told her I wasn't going to live here when I grew up. I was going to live in the city.

"Trust me. You don't want to go there," she said.

"Why not?

"People are always stressed out and in a hurry. And they're not trustworthy. "

Since our village was built on a slope we never spoke of left or right, only of up or down. At night, things shifted downwards so that in the morning we would walk around our hut, putting objects back in their place especially the cups, bowls and fruit. The books leaned while fruit sometimes rolled out of a bowl as if it simply wanted to explore of its own accord.

Fabio was our uphill neighbour. He had floppy hair, not hippie style; it was what happened to short hair neglected for months. If someone had recently made the jaunt to town for supplies, he'd give me hot cocoa with cinnamon and milk from his goat named Adelita. The cocoa made my desire to go to town more acute. Our village had voted unanimously that children were not allowed to travel to the city. Even adults could only travel in the traditional Kogi way, on foot along their ancient stone walkways. I think this made them feel better about all the little compromises (vices like cigarettes and hair dye) they made with their original vision of our village as a sanctuary, untouched by Western civilization. They never seemed to question the fundamental flaw in the idea, the fact that they'd brought *themselves*.

Fabio would bring us contraband from the city, bright orange soda or caramels, and make us swear never to tell the other adults. After a trip to town, he would smoke Marlboro Reds and drink endless sickly sweet black coffee at his table fashioned into a desk that held his prized possession, a black Olivetti manual typewriter. It was one of the only metal things allowed, along with knives and machetes. When no one had been to town, he gathered up his old butts and emptied out the bits of tobacco and rolled new cigarettes from the dregs. When the dregs ran out, he'd smoke coca leaves. He prized his "imported" coffee as well. We weren't in the right microclimate for it, and we couldn't trade for it

with the Kogi who didn't drink it at all, preferring their Coca leaves except for funerals when they must stay awake for nine days and nine nights.

Fabio taught my best friends Marcela and her little sister Diana, me, and the rest of the kids over five. Marcela and Diana were a single soul divided, one with all the brains and the other with all the heart. The other kids were from the other side of the village and tended to stick together. The three of us formed our own clique. Fabio made us believe each of us was his favourite. All of us agreed he was our favourite teacher, because he told us stories. Though he talked incessantly, he rarely talked about his former life in the big city. He would say that the past didn't matter; it was an illusion. The present was the only real thing. "And what a beautiful day it is," he'd say, even if it was raining. Listen to the birds, he'd say, even when they were silent. In those early days he was full of smiles and hope. No matter what was happening, he would smile, unless he spoke about writing.

He was also our unofficial fishing teacher. We often walked the few kilometres to the lake fish for hours. One day when I was six, he told us about the biggest fish he'd ever caught up there. It was so heavy he thought that his line was caught on something. When he finally managed to reel it up, he was surprised to see it was a baby shark that had lost its way. He jumped away from it, not sure what to do. He grew more fearful as it thrashed away. Too much a coward to grab it with its hands, he gently kicked it back into the stream. As he was telling us this story, he caught a fish. He reeled it in as if it was heavy, and we were afraid it would be a shark. Of course, it wasn't. It was something stranger: a giant blue starfish. It was as if he had reeled it in by the sheer force of his imagination. I looked closely to see if he'd been using some sort of trick or sleight of hand like the magicians he'd told me about, but I found nothing. I could see in Diana's wide eyes that she didn't doubt it for an instant. Why should she when it was right in front of her eyes? After that, I didn't say he told us stories. I said he caught them. I'd tell my mom, "Listen to the story Fabio caught us today. I called him, Fabio the *fabulista*.

Sometimes I saw the stories Fabio told me. They played out before in the sky in vivid colour and embellished with details Fabio had overlooked. “Stop daydreaming,” Dad would say, “There’s work to do”. At times I couldn’t be sure if the visions were real or not. At first, I asked people if they’d seen them, but this alarmed them. They would tell my mom who constantly checked my forehead for fever and made me stay close to home.

That day when he brought us back to his place for cocoa, he confessed that he had once been a writer. He presented us with a book, his novel he said. They were the galleys of the novel he’d sold and received an advance for only to have the publishing house fold before it was published. “That’s *Locombia*,” he said, shaking his head. Then he took out a pile of typewritten paper, his short stories. Diana demanded to hear one.

So he read that once there was a young couple that had tired of each other after a few short years. One day, the husband went out to buy some sugar for their coffee. By the time he reached his front door on his return, he was filled with excitement to see his wife. He hadn’t felt this way in quite some time. He was shocked to see she had salt and pepper hair. “Why is your hair grey?” he asked. She laughed and said, “Why is yours?” He went to the mirror and saw that his hair was even greyer than hers. When he got back to the table, he looked at a newspaper. Twenty-five years had passed. He looked at his wife more closely. He could see her young face in the older version. He got up to kiss her, and she said in a business-like voice, “But your coffee will get cold.” Then he saw the same bored look in her eyes she’d had when he’d left for coffee twenty-five years ago. He knew for her nothing had changed.

When I asked Fabio what he was writing now, he looked down at his coffee. “I can’t write here,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“I don’t know. My wife always told me it was a waste of time. As long as she was around to complain, I could easily write. Now that I’m alone, I don’t know what to say. It’s like I’d be writing to myself.”

“Why don’t you write something for us?” He brightened at this idea.

"I will," he said.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

I would later wish I hadn't made him promise.

*

Unable to travel down the mountain, the girls and I would escape upwards. If the adults were too busy to notice, we would hike up past our cabin to our lookout. We had stumbled across the abandoned cabin one day on one of our wanderings. It became our secret hide out. From the lookout, we could see a valley below. For a few moments, we had what we most coveted, open space and perspective. We would sit in silence and breathe the pure air that none of our neighbours had breathed; we were alone. Above the valley and below the snow peaks, we now had a context in which to place ourselves. We mattered.

Since it was difficult to steal away to our lookout very often, Marcela and I took up climbing trees. Once we forced Diana to join. She got stuck. We had to call my father to rescue her. At our lookout, I was liberated from my customary tightness, a feeling akin to claustrophobia, only it differed from that of the city dweller. I had never entered a small, enclosed space. The wind passed freely through our huts. It was not my personal space that was small but my world.

That is why we enjoyed Fabio's stories so much. Unable to travel in body, he allowed us to travel in soul.

Animals and Death

I can't recall my first birdsong. That would be like remembering my first word. I called the birds my cousins since my real cousins were far away in California. This was before I heard my first recorded music. So it's only natural that I started singing the birdsongs. Later, in California, my chorus teacher told me that I had perfect pitch. I guess that is why my birdcalls were so convincing, even to birds.

I raised Blue Paws from a pup. Dad brought her for me from the city one evening when I was five. She was a black and white border collie. Dad said he chose her because the breed was so smart and good with herding. The next morning bright and early, she trampled over Arturo's newest art project, covering her paws in blue paint, making her easy to name. I soon learned these kinds of shenanigans were her raison d'être. This endeared her to me and the girls, because she got away with stunts we could only dream of. I gave her some warm goat's milk. That evening and every night thereafter, she came to sleep beneath my hammock.

Dad said when she got older she could be our eyes and ears in the woods since she had sharper senses than ours. This got me to wondering if she saw the world in her own way. How was the grammar of their secret thoughts constructed? Was it more like Kogi, English, Spanish or totally different like the aliens in distant galaxies? Could dogs talk to each other through telepathy?

Blue Paws and I did so well with the herding and milking of the goats that the girls and I were entrusted with the chickens as well. I especially enjoyed checking for new eggs. I imagined each one was golden, like in Fabio's story. Blue Paws, on the other hand, was not allowed near the chickens. It wasn't so much that she tried to kill them in earnest but that she seemed to enjoy scaring them out of their wits.

My animals became like my long lost extended family: my grandfather the wise capuchin monkey, my sister Blue Paws, my aunt the screeching bird. There was no substitute though for my missing grandma with the red hair.

I liked to pass the time by finding animal shapes in the clouds. I liked watching the insects and studying their patterns so much that I built little cages for some of my favourite forest spiders and beetles and set them up outside our hut. Mom made a fuss at first, but I cried and my new friends stayed. Mom said I was a little sick in the head, because I relished dropping in insects for the spiders to devour whole in a dramatic swoop. Other kids had television; I had spiders who could carry a hundred and seventy times their own weight.

Sometimes we took the high path out of the village, past the fields, through the forest, to our secret cabin. We went whenever we stole liquor, or Teresa's glasses, or hid when we'd been caught for one of our antics. We liked to watch the animals. Once we even saw a jaguar there. She walked by slowly, methodically, making no alteration in her path. Little Diana cried. When the jaguar was at a safe distance, we told her stories about flying unicorns to cheer her up. She believed in them and why shouldn't she have? Fabio had told her stories about jaguars and now one had pranced by.

We weren't in Jaguar habitat, but then again, it wasn't originally the Kogi's home either. The Jaguar must have been driven up the mountain in the same way: to avoid being hunted down by men with guns.

If my friends were busy, Blue Paws and I liked to chase yellow butterflies through the woods. When Blue Paws dreamt, his legs swam in mid air. I was certain he was dreaming of chasing butterflies with me on a sunny day, or maybe, he dreamt of his mother and brothers and sisters. I too dreamt of lost family. So I knew that in the privacy of dreams one could find disappeared loved-ones.

Children in other parts of the world had pets. I befriended the animals that wandered from the forest into our backyard every evening at dusk. There were dwarf squirrels, *dantas* (a kind of tapir, a greyish brown animal that looks like a cross between a deer and a pig) *paujil* (black and white large birds) and howler monkeys. I had names for each one of them, as individuals, not only as members of a species. The monkeys tried to distract me, so they could steal food. I grew to respect them. They were crafty and above all had a good sense of humour.

The animals would scuttle around our hut at night sniffing. Sometimes I felt they could smell everything there was to know about us. Sometimes I could feel their mocking gaze.

*

Wildflower was my favourite goat. She had a silky grey coat that I liked to brush. She followed me around hoping I would surrender an extra morsel or two. She only listened to me. Not only was I good with human languages. But I had a knack for animal communication like Dad. Wherever someone had a problem with an unruly animal, they came to me to sort it out. I would have a tête-à-tête with the offender, and we'd always find a solution.

One morning, Wildflower refused to eat her potatoes. Later, she refused to join the other goats on our daily pilgrimage to the meadow. With no old people in the village, I had no experience with death, so I didn't know to be worried.

When I got home from herding the other goats, Wildflower was dead. I spoke to her like I always did, asking where she wanted to be buried. I felt that she wanted to lay to rest in the meadow, her favourite place. I gathered up the girls and Dad and Blue Paws, and we went there right away. Diana lit a candle and said a prayer to her own personal god Sharunga, and Marcela sang a song. I appeared composed, but my mind was blank; I could neither pray nor sing nor speak. I wondered if Wildflower could see us and if she was satisfied with her funeral. Did animals become ghosts? I hoped she wasn't saddened that I couldn't cry for her short life. She had been a loyal friend.

Maria

Not long after Wildflower died, Diana got lost in the cloud forest for a few hours. All the following week, she was frantic, saying she needed to go to back. It was further than the adults allowed us to go on our own, but we sometimes hiked up there, always bringing a picnic.

She was getting on our nerves. Marcela yelled at her, "What's with you and the cloud forest anyway?

"I have a friend there," she said.

"Oh, I see. When we were frantic looking for you, you were socializing. Who was it? A Kogi?"

"I don't know," she said.

"How can you not know?'

"Because she's dead. A ghost. I don't know if she'll talk to you though, because she's shy."

Diana continued to talk incessantly about her shy friend Patricia who liked forest fruits. And she was invisible, Diana explained. Though we were sceptical, as she told us more about Patricia, we got curious. She said Patricia complained of all the noise we made in the village. She had been listening and knew everything there was to know about us. Apparently, she was a spying ghost who thought we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously.

Marcela and I were eventually drawn into Diana's talk. We told each other we simply wanted to go back to the cloud forest to see where Diana had gone that day. But I found myself daydreaming about the ghost, inventing voices for her, wondering if she'd be friends with us too. Where was she from? How did she end up here?

We often strained to hear her. Instead, we heard branches rustling from birds taking flight, leaves rustling from snakes and lizards taking a stroll. The forest buzzed, but there was no sign of Patricia. It was as if our spying ghost had overheard us and was deliberately hiding.

Sometimes, I felt she was silently supportive. At others, she mocked my clumsiness or naïveté. Sometimes, I felt she wanted me here; at others, I was certain she wanted us to leave. Even if Patricia were a figment of my imagination, I was sure that at least some residue must remain from the lives of the people who once lived here. This must be the reason each place, each meadow, peak, and neck of woods, had such a unique feeling to it. I may not have left the mountain, but I had climbed to the snowy peaks and wandered into the tropical rainforest. Every valley and peak and wood had more than just a distinct ecological niche and microclimate; it evoked a distinct emotion, as different from the others as a note in a song. And once in a while if you listened closely in the dead of night, the notes on my mountain played one minor chord. The sadness it evoked startled me. I had always thought it a happy place.

I found the girls and asked them if they'd like to go back to the cloud forest. Marcela was excited about our "quest" as she called it. We couldn't speak until we were out of earshot, not even to ghosts. We knew that if we got caught, we'd be in big trouble. When we'd returned it had been nearly dark and our parents had been angrier than I'd ever seen them.

I breathed a sigh of relief as we entered the cloud forest as if its opacity would protect us. It was hot, and the clouds clung to our skin. Diana took my hand. We walked slowly, hoping to hear a voice, but we heard nothing but the birds. We reached the lake disappointed but happy about our picnic of goat cheese, eggs, *arepas* and fruit.

Then we heard her. At first, she just hissed and then she whispered, "Hello Diana," in accented Spanish. No one moved but Diana, who jumped up and walked in the direction of the voice. Not wanting a repeat of last time, we followed, leaving our precious picnic behind. We didn't see the ghost anywhere. Diana called for her. "Hello!" said the voice. Diana led us further into the woods.

Then Marcela turned around and looked up. "Look," she said.

A small Kogi girl was waving back at us from high up in a *mastre* tree. She climbed down to greet us, laughing the whole way, evidently pleased to have tricked us. Diana looked like she was going to cry.

"How did you learn to climb that high?" I asked, thinking she could teach me a thing or two.

"Watching the monkeys. It's nice to finally meet you. My real name is Maria, but I thought Patricia sounded spooky." she said, laughing. We knew she had another name, a Kogi name she wasn't allowed to share with us.

"It was fun talking to you the other time," she said to Diana. "I hope we can be friends." At this Diana cheered up. She was a little older than Diana but much closer to her age than we were. Maria was to be our first and only Kogi friend.

As we walked back to our picnic spot, I noticed she walked with a slight limp.

"Which village do you live in?" asked Marcela. "Pueblo Viejo," she said, "on the other side of the bridge. From then on we hung on her every word for she came from the forbidden village.

"Sometimes, I climb trees near your village and watch you. I wanted to climb down and play, but my parents wouldn't let me. So next time, we'll have to meet here or somewhere secret, somewhere your parents can't find us."

Marcela and I looked at each other. "I know a place," I said, thinking of our secret cabin.

Maria wore an orange flower in her hair. Diana asked her where she got it, and she promised to bring us to the spot where she picked it in the jungle below.

"Who are your parents? I asked.

"Cabildo Roberto and Andrea."

"We know your father. He comes to get antibiotics sometimes," said Marcela.

"I know. He told me about you. He tells me all kinds of things about your village, so I had to come and see for myself. He made you sound like fun kids to be friends with. I followed you from your village last time."

"How come we didn't hear you?" asked Diana.

At this Maria laughed.

"I hope you don't mind," she said. "But I have questions for you about younger brother." Younger brother was what they called all outsiders, for they considered themselves the elder brothers of the world.

"That's okay. We have questions for you too."

Maria nodded. "Well, do you know how airplanes fly?"

I told her I'd always been puzzled by the same question. "If airplanes can fly, why don't they flap their wings?"

And I asked her in return, "Do you know why the baby mamas in training are kept in darkness for nine years?"

"So that when they finally see the world they will be awed by Creation. So that they never forget how wondrous Mother Earth is...And why are there so few children and no old people in your village? And why do you wear bright coloured clothes?"

We had never really thought about these things. We had no idea, so we answered with another question. "Why do you wear white clothes?"

"That way they are pure, like Mother Nature…" And why does the *mona* have two men?" *Mona,* or monkey, was a name for people with fair complexions.

At this, we all burst out laughing. Alessandra shared Fabio's hammock from time to time, but Spazzolino was her true partner. How could we explain?

*

The Kogi lived in their world, and we lived in ours. We were forbidden to cross the bridge into their territory, so no one but Teresa had ever seen it up close. I felt like they'd sooner invite a group of Martians to visit than invite us. In a way their world was further away than Santa Marta where the adults went regularly and came back with stories. At least that's how it was until Maria came into our lives. She built another bridge especially for us, though an imaginary one. One we were allowed to cross at will. It did not only cross over to the Kogi village, it went

down to Santa Marta as well. Maria had lived in the city for five years. She was the first person we'd met besides Fabio who told about the city honestly, without trying to convince us how evil and corrupt it was.

Maria's father had finished high school. He was the only Kogi to have ever done so. Aruacos and Wiwos had gone before, but never a Kogi. Actually he was half Kogi and half Aruaco, another reason he'd always felt removed from the community. So when an uncle from the Aruaco side of his family offered to take him in and send him to school, he was more than happy to oblige. Upon finishing, he'd returned home and married. Then his uncle told him about a special scholarship for indigenous students at the university, so the whole family moved to the city. Sadly, they had had to return home when Maria's grandma became ill, so he never finished. At first he thought that people back home would think it a great honour for him to have attended university at all, but soon he learned it was a great curse. Everyone thought he was putting on airs. Maria had left when she was three, so she barely remembered the place. Now the other kids thought she was weird. I wondered if kids would think I was weird if we went back to California.

To make matters worse, Maria was set apart by a limp, a result of a scooter running into her one day while she was drinking an avocado milkshake in the marketplace. When she first moved back to the village, she was excited to tell the Kogi kids about the city, but they listened with resentful silence. They thought she was bragging, so she learned to be quiet. She was really happy that we liked her stories so much.

Her dad set up a little schoolhouse to teach the kids. The adults were divided in two camps on the issue. Half were grateful for the opportunity and half thought that he was out to destroy their culture with the ways of younger brother. Of course, he had been the most outspoken supporter of Teresa's proposal to let us found a village here in exchange for medical care. He had been making trips to Santa Marta to get antibiotics donated from the indigenous commission for tuberculosis patients, but these were never enough for the growing number of cases.

*

Tip tap went the water dripping from the roof and the trees, as if they were crying a lament over the rain's departure. The chickens came out in search of puddles to drink from. And my parents went back to work. It was time to find Marcela, Diana and Blue Paws and sneak away.

We decided to take a narrow and brambly path we'd never taken before. On the way, we ran into Maria who had been on the way to pay us a visit. After an hour or so, there was a small clearing and a raised mound topped with a wooden cross, a Christian grave. Diana thought the grave was from a pirate who had lost his way. She wondered if he'd left any treasure nearby. I couldn't imagine who might be buried there. The Kogi in this area had never allowed missionaries to come here. What other outsiders could have passed through here? The grave couldn't have been too old or the wood would have rotted away by now.

Maria said that the grave might belong to the man with red hair and a face as white as the moon. The children had said he was a ghost even when he was alive. He was so white, because he came from a snowy place like the top of a mountain where the people had bleached out to fade into the landscape. He said people there liked to blend in above all else. Maybe this was why his eye was skilled at distinguishing the smallest detail out of place. He could see the tiniest fish from the far side of the lake. Once when the village was suffering famine, he saved the day by pulling a whole school of fish out of a puddle. After that, he was always regarded as a hero.

That night I dreamt a man crawled out of the grave and came to our village asking for food and a place to string his hammock. He slept at our place. Then I caught him trying to kill one of my goats. I screamed at the top of my lungs, and he scurried back where he came from into the forest.

I couldn't tell my parents about the grave without admitting we'd strayed so far from home. But I asked them who it was that used to live here, and they

said only Kogi had ever lived here. I asked if any were Christian, and they said there hadn't been any conversions on this side of the mountain. They didn't know if the Kogi had left the village on their own or if they'd been killed by the Spanish hundreds of years ago. Dad had asked *mama* Andrea, but he evaded the question.

*

Dad had a way with plants and animals, having grown up on a farm. I took after him in this. He talked to them, and it was as if they listened. His crops grew higher and fatter. The birds seemed to sing sweeter songs in his presence. I wasn't as good at listening to him. I didn't like to be told to do anything without being told why. People called me spoiled. I didn't care. Later I would remember this and laugh. Compared to North American kids with their Nintendo games and happy meals, I was tough as nails.

How cold was it in Utah in the winter? I would ask. And he would tell me about nose hairs freezing when he breathed in and about plugging in cars so the gas wouldn't freeze. I had never seen a car, but this sounded pretty dramatic. The only frozen thing I had seen was the snow and ice on the top of our mountain. He told me that in winter his world would be enveloped in white that blanked out even the memory of colour.

Once when Dad returned from a week in the city, he seemed tired and weak. Mom asked him what was wrong, and he said he was getting over the flu. The next day, Mom discovered he had a scar. At first he wouldn't fess up, but soon she wrangled it out of him that he'd had his gallbladder removed. She found this hard to believe. He'd never once winced in pain. Mom asked me if I thought he had other secrets, and I said I didn't know.

Until then I'd assumed I'd known everything there is to know about my father's present life. His past in the United States was another question. But the village was so small. How was there any space for keeping secrets?

Everyone had their own way of creating private space so that we could all get along. My parents had agreed to keep separate houses, staying together at times and separate at others. Fabio had his writing. And Alessandra had her painting and jewellery making. Spazzolino had his cooking. There was a tacit understanding among the rest of the community not to bother any of them when they were absorbed in creative tasks, unless it was to be a taster for Spazzolino's sauces. Even then, no chitchat was allowed. Dad was constantly running around the village, doing chores or giving advice. As small as the village was, it would be impossible for one person to know where he was or what he did at all times.

After his secret surgery, Mom watched Dad more closely. He didn't seem to notice, or he didn't want to admit he had given her cause for concern. Once I got Dad alone, I asked him why he hadn't told us. He said that he didn't want to worry us unnecessarily, and besides, medical problems embarrassed him. His Methodist mother, who had never danced in her life, had found it unseemly to give in to pain.

This was the first time I'd ever thought of my Dad as fallible. I didn't feel as secure after that. If something bad could happen to him, the strongest person in the village and therefore the world in my mind, no one was safe.

I wondered if I could grab hold of the moment the present became the past, so I tried to see if I could catch the instant the candle went out that night. I saw light then total darkness. I wondered if everyone experienced life like this, missing the fluidity of the moments in between.

The Creative Itch

Fabio's fervent return to writing reminded Emma of her days in the student studios at Berkeley. Whenever she heard Fabio typing away, she was filled with nostalgia for the smell of turpentine. She wanted to paint again. She had been sketching in pencil on Lane's writing paper, keeping her drawings in a special box, but she missed the vibrancy of colour.

One chilly morning, she told Lane of her plans to buy some painting supplies on her next trip to Santa Marta.

"If we were going to buy luxury consumer goods, what was the point of coming here?" said Lane.

"What's the difference between that and your writing paper?"

"Painting requires more supplies", he said. "They cost more."

He walked out. He thought the matter would rest there, but he was wrong.

Emma had been warned about the lack of amenities, but what she hadn't expected was the emptiness that crept into her heart where street life, the voices of strangers and the brashness of recorded music had been. She adjusted to the mosquitoes, the mud, and the backbreaking work, but here she was watched at all times by others, her actions considered and scrutinized by all. Sometimes she wondered whether an idea was her own or if she had borrowed it from another villager. She craved the anonymity of a crowded street on a foggy day.

For seven years, the village had lived in isolation. Folks made jaunts to Santa Marta, but no new visitors had made the trip up in all that time. Emma had been content, but lately, during the clear mornings the bright colours seemed washed out under the strong sun, becoming as bleak as any San Francisco fog. She saw only the dominant trees and earth, filtering out the pinks, purples and oranges of the flowers and butterflies and the brilliant blue of the sky that the sunshine presented like a gift at her doorstep daily.

Though she'd once cursed her life in California, she treated certain memories as precious salvaged relics like pirate's treasure: swimming in the frigid Ocean waters, eating burritos at Taqueria Cancun, or marching in protest as if her voice

actually mattered in the world beyond her intimate circles. But hard as she tried, memories of all the little joys in her prior life were enveloped in the green gloom of her present.

After returning to California, she would wonder why she hadn't left then. And then she would remember that the place had been too small for such a big thought.

A week after the argument with Lane, she compromised and bought herself an artist's sketchbook and a set of coloured pencils out of her secret savings. "A woman should always have a stash of cash her husband doesn't know about. Always remember that," her mom had told her.

With her new pencils, she now drew the hills in colour. As she reinvented their contours and adjusted their colours making them her own, she began to see them differently. Where before she'd seen only monotonous green and brown, she once again saw the blue of the butterflies, the purple of the flowers, all of the colours in her pencil kit, even those that weren't there. She used layers of shading to make an orange butterfly teal green or a red flower deepest magenta. A landscape that had once seemed bleak was now bright and lush.

She noticed no one ever spoke of leaving, but she wondered if others were secretly homesick like her. No one had mentioned their 'outreach' plan in ages: to teach people about their lifestyle so that they might learn to also live sustainably.

She was fed up with hoeing and planting and thatching. And instead of being satisfied with drawing, she awoke to the desire for another new project, one that reached beyond the village. She decided to start a website, so they could tell people about their little experiment here. She presented the idea in the next meeting. Teresa and Arturo grumbled at first, of course, saying the idea was antithetical to the entire purpose of the village; it broke its basic tenets about technology; and the Internet was invented by the U.S. military, no less. But when Emma had a new idea in her head, she got juiced up on adrenaline and didn't let go easily. She and Lane had that in common. She told them that there was no question of having computers up here anyway, because they had no electricity.

She could write everything out on Fabio's typewriter and then use internet-cafés in Santa Marta. The whole point of the village was to set an example for others.

Teresa spoke first, "What if people figured out where we were and every hippie from Canada to Tierra del Fuego showed up? It'd be a nightmare, and the end of life as they know it for the Kogi."

"Point well taken. I won't mention Colombia much less the name of the mountain, and all names would be pseudonyms. We could write monthly newsletters in both English and Spanish," she said.

"I've been worried about our isolation too,' said Teresa. ' I've been mulling over the idea of having workshops on sustainable living with city kids."

Emma told her it was a great idea, and she'd help out. About half of those present immediately offered to help as well.

For a group of self-proclaimed luddites, folks were surprisingly abuzz with questions about the Internet. She and Lane were the only ones to have ever used it. The village was founded before it came into common use in Colombia.

In the next weeks, people came to her with ideas. Now that she wrote the newsletter, she had a role of distinction that had nothing to do with being Lane's partner. He thought people looked up to him, because he was so involved in every project. This was only partially true. What gained him the most respect were his farming skills; after all, without him, these *gomelo* city kids would have starved up here.

She was greatly cheered up by the fact that she could reach the outside world now in a meaningful way. Of course, she had written her friends. She even wrote her mother letters without a return address. She wanted to have the last word for once. Newsletter writing day became a special event for her. She went to Fabio's to use his typewriter, and he served her coffee.

Lane usually had his hands in planning and executing every project in the village. When the new well was dug, he helped. When someone needed to repair his thatched roof, he stopped by to lend a helping hand. And most of all, he was a grand dreamer, engineer of many of the failed plans of the community. The more crazed an idea, the happier he was. When there were no projects, he would feel

he had lost a grip somewhere along the way. Without his obsessions, he became a wilted version of himself.

Indifferent to the buzz over the website idea, he became listless and idle. Nothing would cheer him up. Was it because everyone was preoccupied with *her* project? Emma could see it depressed him to be left out and she wanted to have this project to herself. He needed a new idea. She remembered the book he had once wanted to write, telling the story of the village as an example of sustainable living. This would spread the Kogi's message to the world about the impending ecological collapse.

One morning over coffee, she said to him, "Hey, Lane, what about your book idea? You could reach even more people than the website that way."

"You know," he said, " things have slowed down right now. Maybe this is the right time. I've missed reading and writing since I gave up my studies." They had both come here on grants but had long since dropped out of graduate school.

After much excited talk about the idea during the next couple weeks, he began writing, borrowing Fabio's typewriter. She liked his long fingers; he typed as if he were playing a piano concerto in a grand hall. He noticed her watching and seemed to make an effort to type more elegantly.

At first, she was happy. He spent more time at home. She'd bring him hot lime and honey. The days passed comfortably. He cut his workload down, working only as much as the others (except Teresa). "I have to work harder," he had said, "because we're foreigners. She knew it was also because he considered himself some sort of leader, though there were supposed to be no leaders here.

She placed flowers on his desk every day. He didn't complain as he normally did when she cut flowers. He usually said she killed them unnecessarily, uselessly.

He was so focused on the project that she had to remind him to take his *mochila* of tools in the morning. Lane needed ideas to order his mind, because it was filled with a stealthy chaos. Only Emma and Jade knew it. When he entered the community-meeting house, his focus was total, but he didn't know how to

change his lens when he got home. After a rousing meeting, he would come home and look at them as if he had blurry vision.

Emma adapted well to the Spartan conditions since she'd grown up in a household that ran on a wing and a prayer, but she liked the feeling of the sun on her newly washed hair, the colours of the mountain parrots. She wasn't frivolous. She believed sacrifice was necessary for the future of the community. She just thought the village would be a happier place if they spent less time in meetings and more time enjoying the beauty that surrounded them. She liked to go to Spazzolino's and gorge herself on his special gnocchi. She liked the tranquillity of working alone while Lane fed off of the energy of others. She was a solitary hunter, feline. He was a hunter too. But like a coyote he needed his pack.

*

Since Lane was busy working on his book, she took a trip to Santa Marta alone. A dress in a window caught her eye, the sort of dress that would be seen as flashy on the mountain. It matched the turquoise necklace she'd bought herself in Cartagena when she first arrived in the country, before she'd known such things were considered extravagant expenses here. She didn't hesitate. The saleslady let her put it on immediately. She wore it all over town. She had a spring in her step as she passed the shrimp cocktail vendors on the *malecon*, the stunning trannie prostitutes on a backstreet, a youth carrying a boom-box playing *vallenatos*.

However, before she went back to the hotel to meet Teresa, she returned to the shop asking to use the change room. The lady remembered her and commented on how the turquoise complemented her tan well. She changed back into her black mini skirt and black tank top, her usual uniform, feeling the happiness seep out of her.

She hid the dress away until one Saturday night two months later when she was drunk. Everyone was dancing around the bonfire when suddenly she had the urge to wear the dress, so she went home and changed.

Folks cheered. Fabio and Moncho whistled. They all went back to dancing as usual, except Lane. He could never master the steps. Sometimes at a party, she'd notice him with a far-off intense look as if he were planning out what he was going to say at the next community meeting. He drank less than anyone in the group.

When she sat down to take a break, a sullen Lane asked her, "Where did you get the dress?'

"Why?" she asked.

"Because that's not the kind of dress you would have been caught dead in back the States. It's too tacky."

She nodded. That was true.

"I can't believe you spent good money we could have used for the village or for antibiotics."

"It made me happy."

"And it's not like you have anywhere to wear it."

"I'm wearing it now."

Now he raised his voice with a tone of disgust. "Sometimes you're so indulgent."

Her guilt dissipated as quickly as it had come. Now he had gone too far. Was this because she liked *churros* and chocolate a little too much? "And you're so boring!" she said.

At this, he flinched and got up to leave. She thought about saying sorry, but stayed silent. He was so sanctimonious. But she wondered, was he right?

*

Over coffee the next morning, Lane said he felt less isolated now that he was working on the book. He thought of his future readership like the students he would have had if he'd finished his degree and returned home, his phantom students.

As time went on, as he had less time to be involved in projects, he began to feel distanced from his fellow villagers. He spent less time on the mundane tasks that brought them together even more than their common ideals. He no longer had time to socialize. He missed his friends. Now, he was only contributing as much as slackers like Fabio, Arturo or Pilar. He found the thought that he was now a parasite repugnant. Still, Emma goaded him on to keep writing. What was the point of this community if no one out there knew about it and if no one would ever emulate its example?

She thought this was why he hit a snag in the project, though he claimed it was because he needed more information about a certain ritual than the Kogi were willing to share. To pressure them into giving more information would be contrary to his principles. “The Kogi have been meddled with enough,” he said.

So he dropped the book and went back to his old schedule, working in the fields until dark, coming home too exhausted to have a real conversation. Instead, he nit-picked over a spilled glass of water, a neglected dirty dish, not being able to find his shirt or her cooking. Technically, this wasn’t his house. He still had his own hut, though he only stayed there once a week. He grumbled to assert his presence.

To her relief, after three months of gruelling physical work and meddling in everyone’s business, Lane began to work on his book again, obsessing over the missing details about Kogi ritual.

*

They were in Santa Marta, and Emma was on fire. She wondered if this is how prisoners felt on their first day of freedom. The blue shirt on the kid hanging out of the bus door, the hot sun on her skin, the sweet taste of an avocado shake, the sound of salsa, all got under her skin. She was restless.

That night when she put on the turquoise dress, he looked at her strangely but said nothing. They went out dancing with some local anthropologists.

When she walked into the club, heads turned. That certainly didn't happen in the village. They sat down, ordered drinks and began the usual chitchat. One man invited her to dance, then another. She had learned to dance salsa at Club Caribe in Oakland where men from all over Latin America were her eager teachers. She tried to teach Lane the steps for the hundredth time, but he still couldn't get the knack of it.

One of the dancers was better than the rest. They danced for a half hour. He could move her around the dance floor so smoothly, and in Colombia one dances *pegadito*, hip to hip. The music was blaring.

Back at the table, Lane was quiet.

On their way home, he turned to her and raised his voice. "Why were you wearing make-up?" he asked.

"It cheers me up," she said.

"You're just trying to fit into a commercial idea of what women should look like. It's contrary to everything we're trying to do in the village," he said.

"You're just being jealous," she said.

"Sometimes I wish you were ugly," he said, before storming off and leaving her alone at night on the Santa Marta streets. She wondered if he would be happier if she wore a burkha.

*

After this, doubt and confusion about Lane stuck in Emma's head like a bad song she couldn't shake. Then he did something far worse.

Pilar came down with a cough that wouldn't go away. Her beautiful round face looked gaunt. She stopped flirting at parties. Emma stopped by her hut one day. Pilar showed her the medicinal herb that Teresa had given her.

"But is it working?" Emma had noticed that folks up here worshipped herbal medicine like a god, both when it worked, and when it didn't.

"It did at first, but I'm getting worse again. Aguardiente helps. She poured one shot for each of them.

Pilar didn't say anything, and she always had something upbeat that had nothing whatsoever to do with the village, her plans. That's why Emma liked visiting her. She made her forget where she was, with her stories about hooking up with salsa dancers in Bogota clubs, or riding horses among the ruins of San Augustin. She had always thought of Pilar as the kind of person who would always be young at heart, no matter what happened. She had once suffered through a rape, yet she seemed incapable of self-pity or bitterness. She greeted everyone with carefree friendliness. But today Pilar sat with her shoulders slumped in silence. Emma served her another shot.

"That's it. We're going to the clinic," said Emma.

Pilar didn't have the energy to resist.

*

Pilar had tuberculosis that had spread to the bones. Emma felt it strange for the youngest and most vivacious in the village to be struck down, but then, of course, all are equal before the microbe; it does not discriminate. It burrows through everything, skin, flesh, lungs, brain.

Teresa called a community meeting to decide how to send Pilar to Bogota for treatment. Dr. Monsalve said her case was too advanced to treat up here. Teresa's proposal, that they use community funds, met with cheers. But Lane said this was against the entire principle of equality in the village. Community funds shouldn't be used for private ends. When he said this, Emma was mortified to be his girlfriend.

"We should all contribute some of our savings, if we have any, or ask our families to donate money," he said.

Teresa said this was a good idea in theory, but it would take longer. And Pilar needed quick action. Lane threatened to block consensus if necessary, because if the village didn't abide by its own principles, what was the point of living here? Decision-making was based on consensus-minus-one, meaning any two people could block the decision. For two people to block a decision everyone

else wanted caused a lot of ill feeling, so people picked their battles. If someone wanted to voice their opposition without blocking, then they would usually abstain.

Teresa said they'd have to vote tonight. They had to have two people to block consensus. "Was anyone else willing to block?" she asked.

There was an eerie and angry silence. Pilar would get her money.

Emma wondered how Lane would cope with the wrath of the whole village. This would crush him. So why did he do it?

First, he would have to deal with her. She was waiting for him after the meeting.

"Don't say it," he said.

"What were you thinking?"

"It's a question of principles. You wouldn't understand. You're not like me."

"I don't have principles?"

"No, that's not what I mean."

She walked away and didn't speak to him for three days. No one did. But then a Kogi child fell sick. He did such a good job of nursing her back to health that everyone decided he must not be a sociopath after all. But from then on, whenever he spoke of principles, it scared her a little.

Pilar went to Bogota with community funds safety pinned in her bra. She felt better after a few months but had to take antibiotic injections for a year. She went out dancing with Bogota's most beautiful men at Quiebra Canto every night. It served as a sort of healing tonic. She returned a year later, ten pounds heavier but with a light heart.

By then, the night silence Emma had once cherished left her with an unbearable feeling of emptiness. She missed her friends back home. She wished she had brought her walk-man, but of course this was forbidden. She missed the sounds of the city, the screaming drunks, panhandlers, crying prostitutes, crying babies, car horns, the jarring ring of the telephone and her friends' voices on her answering machine.

She wanted to be moved by the songs of the birds as before, but by then she would have killed to hear the drunken ramblings of a random nutcase talking to himself on Mission St. The birds watched her with keen interest, and even though they were merely waiting for her to drop some food scraps, they reassured her that she still existed. She wasn't entirely sure anymore; she felt as if she'd fallen off the end of the earth. Sometimes living here was more exhilarating than anything she'd ever experienced. At others, she felt like she was living inside an empty box.

In Kogi Country

One day when I was seven, we asked Teresa if Maria could come over every week to teach Kogi, knowing full well that her anthropologist's heart would warm to the idea. Maria went to the *mamas* who promptly agreed. After that she didn't have to sneak around anymore, though she soon missed the adventure of subterfuge.

When Dad heard that a bona fide Kogi was visiting our village on a regular basis, he made sure to invite her to lunch.

He sat her down at the table as an honoured guest. Mom and I went to the kitchen to get the *ajiaco* soup, and when we came back, he was grinning and asking her childish questions, "Do you like our goats? What games do Kogi children play? Do you have any brothers and sisters? Do you like our village? Is it really different than your village?" He was fishing for an invitation to go to their village. I think Maria sensed this, because she looked down in silence.

We had a moment of respite from Dad's overbearing friendliness while he noisily sucked down his soup. I wanted to disappear. Mom looked distinctly uncomfortable as well. He kept on offering Maria extra helpings that she tried to refuse, to no avail.

First, he asked about her parents and *mama* Antonio and how they were. He was trying to sniff out why they were so unwelcoming. She answered politely, though she kept on flashing me unsure looks. Then he began treating her like an anthropology graduate student, asking her complicated questions about Kogi farming practices, creation myths and burial practices. I cringed, knowing there was no way she was going to tell him about how they bury their dead. She pretended not to understand the question. She was quite helpful about the other subjects though, and he acted as if his whole purpose in life had been validated. Here was an actual Kogi who was willing to talk to him. Maybe this meant it wasn't wrong that we lived here on their territory. He always said this was better than a home; it was paradise.

After I'd had as much of this as I could bear, I asked Dad if we could go out and play. Before we left, he told Maria that she was welcome in our house at anytime and to make sure to say hello to her parents. Her father had a lot of pull in her village as a *cabildo* (village secular leader). He was obsessed with the idea of finally being invited to visit. He made sure she took some banana bread for them.

The next day, my dad and I ran into Victorio on the uphill path. He was a Kogi we'd never met before though we'd heard he was less than pleased about our presence here. He carried the brown and white *mochila* bag of a layperson. His look was so dismissive, so cold, that I had to look downwards to avoid it. Dad ignored this, "Hello sir, so delighted to see you. I am going mushroom picking with my daughter."

Dad nudged me to say hello. I made an effort to respond, though I wanted to disappear like this man wanted me to.

Victorio said, "You come here and you destroy things. Look, you have killed too many turkeys already. *Mama Andrea* had already informed us of the problem, much more politely, and we'd made an offering of potatoes to compensate.

There was nothing more to say.

Victorio wasn't part of *mama* Andrea's circle, so we were lucky to get a response from him at all. Since *mama* Andrea was the one usually sent to negotiate with us on behalf of the others, to get a doctor and medicine for them, his friends were polite to us. But even they hadn't let their guard down around us, with the exception of my friend Maria.

Victorio continued down the steep rocky path, and we continued up. Dad acted extra cheerful to clear the air of Victorio's aggression. He said that with persistence we'd eventually win his way into their hearts. But their hearts were full to bursting with love for their own. What did they need us for?

Dad was so happy I'd made friends with Maria because all attempts to cosy up to the Kogi had failed. These mountain slopes and the thick jungle below

were not the only forces to keep younger brother away; the Kogi kept their culture alive for five centuries with relentless unfriendliness.

When a Kogi meets a stranger their typical greeting is, “When are you leaving?

They closely guard cultural secrets. For instance, the Kogi do not share the true names of places with younger brother; they give us decoy Spanish names instead. The *mamas* meet and debate about what information should be shared with us, that which will help younger brother evolve into a less destructive animal and that which should never be told. They protect themselves at all costs. Mom taught me about the redwoods in California and how if you cut one down or burn it to the ground, the roots come up and grow a fairy ring around it. A new tree will grow that has the same DNA as the original tree. The Kogi are like that. They refuse to die out.

Many years later in San Francisco, I would sometimes feel the heat of an accusing stare on my back and turn around half expecting to see a Kogi. Instead, I would find the a crowded street, and I would wonder if it was the ghost of an Ohlone, the local tribe, trying to reach me from her grave saying: “This is my home. You are an intruder. You will always be an intruder.”

*

The following week, trying to compensate for the run-in with Victorio, Dad got the idea that Mama Andrea would be impressed with his photos, all five that he had brought from his world to this one. He invited him over with great flourish. Mom and I made tea and served him *lulus*, a tangy orange fruit. Usually we retreated into the outdoor kitchen when a Kogi was present, happy that sexist expectations gave us this refuge from Dad stumbling over himself. We found him painfully ingratiating, especially when faced with the typical Kogi stony response.

Today was different. Dad perked up when Mama Andrea laughed at the photo of San Francisco. To my surprise, he wanted to see more. I stopped

eavesdropping and joined them. Mama Andrea pointed at the skyscrapers of the Embarcadero asking what they were. Dad explained in a humbler version of his professorial voice. I inched closer to them to see the next photo, a picture of sea cliffs. He asked if this was Santa Marta, and Dad explained that it was the Pacific Ocean, far to the northwest. In the next photo, Grandma and Dad were standing in front of a barn. Mama Andrea laughed at my grandma's bright red hair asking how she made it that way, if it was fake, like Teresa's. And Dad happily explained it grew that way. Explaining was his favourite thing to do.

Encouraged by this rare show of interest by a Kogi in something of ours, he brought Mama Andrea over to Fabio's to show him the typewriter. I followed. He clanked away, showing him how it made marks on the paper. Mama Andrea wanted to try. He played it like an instrument; I recognized the rhythm from a song Maria had sung for me. He laughed, looking pleased. Dad then tried to explain writing to him, bringing him a book. Mama Andrea said with a bored look on his face, "The nuns wanted to teach us this. We don't need it. It is for younger brother.

Dad protested, "This is not a Bible. No Jesus. Just stories."

At this Mama Andrea walked away. While these Kogi had no time for Christianity, there were some converts in San Antonio, on the other side of the mountain. There was a divide between the two communities for precisely that reason. Since the *colonos* had failed to produce a single convert in five hundred years around our mountain, I wondered how dad presumed he'd have any greater success in changing a Kogi's mind. Dad sulked for the next couple days. "Surely there must be something we could do for them," he mumbled to himself. The Kogi needed our antibiotics and nothing more. And if there was one thing his protestant mind hated, it was being useless.

*

Every morning, we rose at dawn. Dad made coffee for himself and my mother and hot chocolate for me, his one daily nod towards domesticity. For this, he

would milk a goat, just enough for the morning. The main milking of the day was left to me.

Every day one of my parents would get excited about a new idea for the village or the house. Even when the other disagreed, they would discuss it with equal fervour. Dad's lack of involvement in the household did not deter him from having strong opinions about even the most trivial of matters. Since they had reduced their world to a hillside, village concerns took on earthshattering importance in their minds. As they drank a second and third cup of coffee, they would speak faster and faster. This was their happiest time of day, the hour most full of hope.

One morning Mom presented the idea of building a sweat lodge. Dad thought this was a waste of our energy. He also thought North American indigenous practices didn't fit in Kogi territory. Mom said *we* didn't fit in Kogi territory either, and he shut up for once. Mom brought the issue up at the next community meeting. Several of the women agreed to meet her the following Sunday. All enjoyed the endeavour so much they decided to make it a weekly routine, until one week when Pilar left her shoes inside the lodge, instead of outside the door like everyone else. (When I was little, we didn't have shoes. We walked barefoot, like the Kogi, in order to be closer to mother earth, until Arturo got a bad case of hookworms.) No one noticed her shoes, until they went up in smoke. That was the end of the sweat lodges.

One morning over hot chocolate when I was eight, about a year after showing *Mama* Antonio photos, my Mom came up with something we could offer the Kogi, "Why don't we make replicas of the statuettes to give as gifts to the *mamas*?"

Dad got all worked up, "That's a great idea Emma," Dad said, as if he were speaking to a child.

Then he told me about his trip to the *Museo de Oro* in Bogota. The Kogi consider it a jail for their stolen artefacts.

"We'd have to present them in the right clay pot. Do you know which kind?" asked Mom.

"I'll see if I can find it in my notes. If not, I'll ask Teresa."

My parents talked for hours, putting off their morning chores. Dad jumped into the project with fervour, acting so much like our master of ceremonies that I almost forgot it was Mom's idea in the first place.

She insisted, however, on being the one to go to Santa Marta to get the thirty-two moulds. There she found paint with real gold flakes in it. When she opened the can, I was mesmerized. I leaned in close to see, but Mom stopped me saying I'd get asphyxiated from the fumes. I couldn't believe that there was a natural rock this colour. No wonder the Kogi found it sacred. We used Spazzolino's clay pizza oven to set the clay. My favourite part was painting them. Dad went on about how happy the *mamas* would be when they got them.

The figurines looked like little men and animals. Mom told me each of the rings crowning the heads the little men represented a world. The Kogi believe there are nine worlds. She told me they believe that the circular protrusions coming out of their heads are magic mushrooms. I knew all about magic mushrooms. This was the only drug allowed up here, because it grew naturally.

She praised my paint job. Everyone was happy. And even more unusual, no one was upset about anything, not even on the inside.

By the time we finished the figures, we valued them more than if they'd been real gold.

The next time Mama Antonio came to pick up antibiotics, he picked through the pile with a look of recognition.

"These are like those that were stolen, but I can't keep them. They are not real."

"Sorry, we couldn't afford real gold," Dad explained.

"No, first they need to be made in *aluna*, the spiritual realm. The *mamas* can see what is in *aluna* and then direct the carving of the statuettes. Otherwise, they have no value. It's like using normal water instead of your holy water. It would be meaningless.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," said Dad.

"That's alright. But take them away. They make me sad."

My parents sulked in disappointment for a week. Dad was crushed. Mom deliberated over the fate of the statuettes. Could we still keep them? Eventually my parents went to Santa Marta to sell them. Too bad these weren't her own designs, she said.

Seeing her disappointment, Dad told her he liked the way she played with her jade-bird pendant when she talked. At this, she smiled.

I dreamt of the sea I had never seen. I pictured an endless lake with currents running through it, emerald green and as vast as the sky. The Kogi are also cut off from the sea; their ancient lands on the coast were taken from them. They can go there, but they only go when they must to gather shells or perform ceremonies.

The Kogi say that in the beginning there was only water. All things come from water or spirit. Water is possibility. Both share the same word in Kogi, *aluna*. For me, I saw the sea as the way home, because my parents crossed it to come to the mountain. I considered it home, though I had never been there. It's just like birth or the world we inhabit before conception. We don't remember it, but we know we came from somewhere. The Kogi say that in the beginning, in *aluna*, all was chaos and, though I didn't know it, chaos would make us cross the sea again one day.

If the world is dying, like the Kogi say it is, will a new world be formed from the sea of tears that the mamas cry for our world?

My parents were sulking, because they felt cut off from the Kogi. But I felt a kinship with them. They were cut off from their lands on the sea, just as I had been cut off from my parents' land, on another colder sea.

Fabio's novel

In December of that year, Fabio told us he had an idea for a novel of "profound philosophical insight", but it seemed to be some sort of revenge vendetta on his ex-wife. He thought he would be vindicated when it got favourable reviews in the Bogota papers.

"But you hate newspapers," Marcela pointed out. We didn't know he had been a print journalist. We only knew that there was something called a newspaper that printed lies, not good lies like in Fabio's stories, but lies that hurt people.

"Yes, but my wife adores them," he said.

He read a passage to us, and we smiled serenely, hoping he wouldn't notice we understood little.

A week later, he decided to write about a city that floated on a cloud and fought against a city of caves. He read us an entire page this time. We liked this story much better. We'd have liked any story about a city. Unknown and forbidden, all cities were mythical to us. We began to miss his old stories, the ones he told us while fishing. Diana asked him why his new stories never had endings. "The power of the blank page," he explained which made me think of the powers of the witch in his story. The page must have a curse on it, I concluded.

Much to our relief, we managed to get him to tell fish stories for us again for few days, but soon after, he grew distraught about his writing projects. Our lives here, at least for us children in those early days, were carefree. We had no defence against his distress, so it became our own.

He wrote so feverishly that our lessons became shorter and shorter. He didn't stop to go to town when he ran out of coffee and cigarettes. Then he did something that hurt our feelings, he called a meeting asking the community if he could stop teaching us altogether. They decided to let him have a vacation from teaching until the novel was done. I imagine they were as anxious as we were to relieve our *pueblecito* of this disturbance in its equilibrium.

*

During the next months, he rarely came over to visit. Since he had, as Diana put it, abandoned us to his imaginary friends, we soon shifted our affections to Teresa who took us on hikes through the woods to find ancient statuettes and arrows. If the Kogi knew about this, we could have been kicked out of the area. But we rarely found anything more than an arrowhead or two. Sometimes my mom and dad would join us. With every find, however small, Teresa gave us a history lesson, not the boring history from school where kids have to memorize dates, but a history in stories, legends, myths, and rumours. Perhaps that is why we forgot Fabio so easily; we had a new storyteller. The difference between Teresa's myths and Fabio's stories was that Teresa believed them to be real, not true stories mind you, but accurate representations of Kogi legends. Fabio often told us not to believe a word he said. Yet, I could tell he was disappointed when we didn't believe him. At the end of each tale, he would always swear by its truthfulness. Cross his heart. Hope to die.

Teresa would teach us rituals and incantations from Kogi ceremonies and their hidden meanings. Dad would join in, adding details she'd overlooked, though he didn't have the gift of gab. He would get bogged down in detail, and by the time he got to the point, we'd have started catching butterflies.

I liked to catch butterflies and let them go again. I would imagine their routes. Would they go upwards to the *paramo* or down to the sea? Did they go over the mountain through the valleys to the Andes and onward to Bogota with its the cafes and restaurants, clubs and mad politicians and the beautiful pretentious seductive women of Fabio's lore or did they fly over the sea to visit my grandma with the long red hair? I contemplated tying messages on their wings and wondered who would find them. When would I get to follow them? Marcela and I would spend hours hatching escape plans knowing we'd never act on them. Though our parents sheltered us from the details, we sensed there was growing danger down the mountain. We began watching the adults very closely.

Their words were filled with tension, and their actions were imbued with a muted fear.

*

During this time, I followed my father around on his daily rounds as I had when I was smaller. Only now, I was big enough to work alongside him in the fields. I had begun to feel that I was just a case study to him. All of us children were the crowning achievement of our village. I sometimes felt Dad regarded me much in the way he did the Kogi, a member of a tribe whose traditions should be analysed and scrupulously recorded. Strange as this was, I would bask in his attention. When he asked about my studies every day with utter focus and even love, it was as if he and I were the only people on earth.

Bent over in the field, aching, impatiently awaiting lunch, my father now talked of his old life in a way that completely contradicted everything he had said about it before. Instead of the site of an evil imperialistic war machine, his home was where my grandmother had cut off her long red hair and sold it to feed her children, where she made dumplings and cinnamon buns, where he had accidently shot his sister in the eye with a BB gun. The memories bubbled up. He could no longer suppress them. He looked even happier than he did when discovering a new Kogi ritual or when resolving some conflict at a meeting.

His voice was gentle when he spoke of how he'd pulled his mother's hair. She was the grandmother I had never seen. I wanted the privilege of pulling my grandma's hair and eating her cinnamon buns, a privilege other children took for granted. Although I loved my friends deeply, I wanted to know what it was to have family, not just a mom and dad, but cousins and aunts and uncles. I knew they were mine, and they had been stolen from me. Sometimes, I hated my parents for this, but not when Dad told me stories. His weakness transformed him from authority figure to human being. Then, I could love him as other children loved their parents. After that when he was severe, I felt it was just a role he was playing like when he was a mediator at a meeting or when he carried around his

notebooks and acted the anthropologist. He was just entering an imaginary realm much like that of Fabio's characters.

The problem came later when these roles became his only reality. He built high walls around the village in his mind; nothing outside of it had substance. His home and the mother who gave birth to him became wispy figments of his imagination. If he could annihilate is own mother, what had he done to himself? What had he done to his child?

*

Fabio went through a period of intense work. He dutifully kept up with required chores while avoiding anything superfluous, even repairs on his own house, so he could write late into the night. He quickly used up his store of coffee and cigarettes and started hitting the coca leaves pretty hard. We kids would peek in on him in the mornings to see what kind of state his place was in. Often, we had to wake him. Yet, he was becoming more distant from us; he was becoming more our pet than our friend.

He retreated into his memories of lost opportunities, lost loves, his lost wife, his projections, his musings, his disappointments, his pain, speculation, regret, elation, wild fits of adrenalin spent constructing the details of the lives of his characters who of course never lived at all. He didn't have much of a life either in those days. He barely ate unless we pressured him. He was the only sleep-deprived person I knew; we were a two-day's walk from the closest alarm clock.

The adults started whispering behind Fabio's back, calling him unhinged. His tendency to ask rhetorical questions had become so heightened that we overheard him asking them to himself.

The past the adults were hiding from us floated in their silence, suspended above us like clouds. Ever since Pilar's friend Ricardo had brought cocaine into the village, family and friends had no longer been allowed to visit. Now there was no one to remind them of the past. Thus, the very memories they pushed

away gained immortality. Fragments of what I now believe to be their memories and secret desires floated into my dreams, forming a collage of all that went unsaid. Asleep, I saw a bomb explode in a fancy shopping mall and a family shot on the way to carnival. My night mind knew what my daytime mind did not suspect. In the morning, I would think these images were too horrible to be real.

The future was sunk in silence, plunged into the sea beneath us, the sea of ships, of departures. The Kogi believed water contained infinite possibilities, and it was the port that offered the possibility of returning home, never spoken of but omnipresent.

Fabio spoke of the past and future even less than other adults. He believed being present in the moment was the key to a happy life, yet he spent hours at the typewriter unaware of his surroundings. We would invent pasts for him in the circus, prison, or a palace with a harem. Our parents had not censored details like these about the outside world, yet we were entirely ignorant of common Spanish words like battle, massacre, mercenary and battle. "Guerrilla" on the other hand was as familiar as the words for local fruiting trees. I don't know if they taught it to us, or if we absorbed it from the air that escaped the lips of those who spoke it in the city below, air that was so hot with the word's meaning that it naturally rose up the mountain to us.

Sometimes, I would dream of Fabio's life in the city. In these dreams, I saw through his eyes, thought his thoughts. I *was* him. They gave me my first hints as to why he'd become so off kilter. I didn't know whether I was glimpsing his actual life, his dreams, or if my own subconscious had fashioned them in an attempt to solve the mystery my conscious mind pondered in the day. Even if they were simply the latter, I knew they held meaning.

While dreaming, I saw the flat in North Quito Ecuador that Fabio had told us about. It is ten years ago. The maid serves Fabio, his wife and some friends *café con leche* and *roscos*. They discuss revolution and Cuba. Indigenous weavings hang on the wall. A friend tells of being kidnapped by the FARC[2]. He

[2] The Marxist Leninist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia have been fighting the Colombian government since 1964.

says he simply showed off his knowledge of Marxism, and they let him go. The maid asks him if he'd like more coffee. He holds up his glass and smiles. He continues with his story. Fabio awaits the brandy. Not wanting to seem too eager, he says nothing even though this is his house. He notices his wife play with the tablecloth. He knows she too is thinking about the brandy. The maid serves *hervidos* instead, hot fruit juice with *aguardiente*. They go out dancing.

When they return, his wife says she wants a divorce. "I don't know who you are here," she says. "Then let's go back to Bogota," he says. "You know I can't," she says. Of course she is right. She is a human rights lawyer. The men who sent her death threats are awaiting her return. They are both members of the *Union Patriotica* party, a communist party whose members were regularly turned into corpses fertilizing the gardens of the capitol's parks or ditches along the highway, three thousand corpses to be exact. He was a journalist who worked on stories of that made a difference between life and death. He is an ad man here in Quito. He became an ad man for his daughter's sake, so she could go to a private school. He did what he thought his wife wanted him to do. He knows now what she has known for some time. He is going home.

It turns out that this dream wasn't far from the truth. Later, I wondered if he'd told me, and I imagined that I'd dreamt it. It's like those childhood memories that people confuse with photographs, or so say the people who have photographs of their childhood. Since I had no photographs, it was dream and reality that I tended to confuse. Years after the Quito "dream", Fabio told me what happened after his wife dumped him. He went back to Bogota and fell into one of his stupors. But when Teresa stopped by his mother's house one day, she was appalled at his slovenly dress and daytime TV watching habits; there was nothing she hated more than apathy. She told him depression was a bourgeois invention and commanded him to get out of bed, in her scariest voice, and took him to a party.

Sitting at a window overlooking the cobblestone streets and colonial houses of the Candelaria, he was reminded of his childhood, a time when he only vaguely understood there was a war on. The houses reminded him of another

time as well, a peaceful colonial past that only existed in the collective imagination. Though he had as many indigenous ancestors as Spanish, his mind often crossed the sea to Sevilla, breathing in the imaginary scent of olives, nostalgic for a country he'd never seen.

But then he was in Bogota sharing a bottle of Chilean red with Teresa on a chilly evening. She told him about her plans to live on a faraway mountain slope. He proposed a toast to the new village and to the future. He instantly agreed to join her and her husband and children. His life had been threatened because of a piece he'd written. The village was a perfect place to hide.

Fabio jumped into the idea as if it were the warm soothing waters of the Caribbean. He was as captivated listening to her descriptions of the mountain as he'd been upon first hearing Neruda's verses. He clung to the ideals Teresa presented with a ferocity she hadn't seen in him since the day he'd given a rousing speech against US military aid at a demonstration at the National University. It worried her that the village had not yet been built. She wondered if he would sink back into his existential vacuum when he saw how much work there was to be done. Fabio loved a good *parranda*—a blowout party, particularly one he could bring a woman home from to his comfortable bed. When he realized there were few single women and no beds, how would he react?

Three months later, they began building our village. Surprisingly, he took the situation in stride. This lapse in character that could only be borne of desperation worried Teresa, but she relaxed telling herself that the purity of the air would heal him as it was healing her.

In Bogota, Fabio had been alternately withdrawn and gregarious. He would withdraw into his apartment before a deadline, speaking to no one but the maid who brought him his meals. Then upon finishing an article, he would become a bundle of social energy unravelling all over the Zona Rosa.

When he first got to our mountain, he was high on the constant socializing of the village. Everyone was. Someone was always telling a joke, opening a bottle or singing a song, even as they worked. After six months, he had

fully absorbed the fact that there were no new women to meet, no new friends except for the occasional new arrival. This was a major event that was met with enthusiasm by all, especially by the single people. He was trapped in the dull middle of the two extremes of his previous self, the introvert and extrovert. Here, even when he was alone in his hut he was close enough for us to hear his typing. And when he was working in the fields or drinking *chicha,* it was with the same small group. The circle that nurtured him, composed of people he had grown to love, closed in around him.

*

After a year of toil, Fabio finished his novel. He visited all twenty houses to celebrate, offering each of the adults a nip from his bottle of *aguardiente*, us kids following in tow. He walked more confidently, stepped more lightly than before. He made Moncho play his guitar as he and Teresa danced a cumbia. Everyone gravitated to the clearing at the centre of our village, the site of fair weather parties and meetings. The adults were acutely aware that Fabio had kept a few bottles aside for this day. We all settled in for what we knew would be a long haul.

The next day, he was hung-over but jubilant. A week later still cheerful, he resumed our fishing trips and his storytelling. Two weeks later, he took the bus twenty-four hours over the Andes into Bogota. Upon his return, he refused to answer our questions about what he had done and with whom. We were particularly curious about former girlfriends. We knew better than to ask about his ex-wife, who was still in Quito. All he told us was that he had danced with many women on a chilly night in the colonial centre. He drank mulled wine and felt free. The feeling passed upon his return. He had lost all enthusiasm for fishing stories again.

For the next six months, he lived in monkish moderation; he neither wrote nor drank feverishly. He slept well and gained back his colour. A month after his return, he resumed lessons with us. We floated on a high from all the attention he

now lavished on us, and we basked in the afterglow of his tales of *brujas* and *duendes*. We thought we had become mythical creatures with magical powers. Diana placed spells on us. Marcela had become a unicorn. I couldn't decide what mythical creature I was. In a restricted world with limited options, I somehow managed to be indecisive.

I still am. I like to keep my options open. On some level, I remain convinced that there are limitless worlds full of adventure and promise I have yet to explore, as if I never left the mountain, never seen your terrifying and marvellous world. As children who are neglected vie for attention the rest of their lives, the suffocating feeling of being trapped sticks to me, so I'm compelled to fly across continents like the butterflies we caught in order to set them free.

Our routine was once again disturbed the day Fabio returned to Bogota to see how publishers had responded to his novel.

Dream Gatherings and Secrets

Jade believed that people created butterflies with their dreams each night. The variety of butterflies she spotted in the day reflected the diversity of her dreams the night before. But the adults had less fanciful theories about the nature of dreams. And these theories would soon become important in their lives, even if they would ultimately find them equally as absurd as Jade's. Emma thought they'd have been better off if they'd chosen to believe Jade instead. At least they would have had more fun.

Emma liked to take time to enjoy the simple things: drinking morning hot chocolate, sitting in the sun by the lake, listening to the birds sing. So while discussing her dreams with Lane, she thought of them as works of art, surrealistic versions of these most exalted moments in her life. The dreams she made up were as intricate and bizarre as a Dali painting, as beautiful as the forest that surrounded them. Her real dreams, on the other hand, were as full of predators as the forest.

Every night for two weeks, she dreamt her mother yelled at her or broke furniture. She never told Lane about those dreams. She hadn't told him about her mother's drinking. It had always embarrassed her. Now that she was far away she wanted to be finally free of it.

She assumed he hid his nightmares from her too, since he never mentioned any and everyone had them. But during morning coffee, there was no such thing as a nightmare, and for those moments they fully believed they lived in a village of perfect beauty and would always be lovers and comrades.

Was it wrong to want to be suspended in these moments? Would anyone but the sternest Buddhist monk survive the pressure of facing one's demons at all times? Did these coffee-drenched reveries not provide a necessary relief? They'd come here to find refuge, and at first they'd found just that. But by moving to a place without the distractions of modern life, she had recently been forced to face her demons. By that, she meant her mother.

The community cherished the Kogi concept of *aluna*; it was spirit and thought, the energy of life, memory and potential. All that they lived in the present came from thought structures in *aluna*. Dreams came from *aluna*.

Emma told Lane about her idea that through one's dreams one could simultaneously deal with one's emotional issues and find a glimpse of *aluna* by "translating" one's dreams from the language of the mind to the language of the heart. In this way, they could be freed from emotional blockages while simultaneously opening them up to *aluna*. She also thought that, on occasion, messages were sent to them from *aluna* through their dreams.

One morning Lane said, "We should get together and share our dreams. It would help us to understand each other better – the community I mean. We could call them dream gatherings."

"Yes", she readily agreed, "We should do it". They turned to Jade.

"Yes," she said, "it's your best idea in a while.

*

Everyone was excited about the first dream gathering. They spent all week preparing for it. They sat in a circle. Then they all sang a song that Moncho wrote about dream worlds within worlds within worlds. The Kogi believed there were nine worlds, so their people liked to discuss the possibility of other dimensions.

Fabio insisted on facilitating the first meeting. Emma imagined it reminded him of a poetry reading. He looked happier than she'd seen him in a while.

"Who wants to go first?

Emma felt a bit of stage fright. And apparently so did everyone else, because no one volunteered. Though they all looked forward to this day, they were not sure what to expect.

"Okay, I'll go first," said Teresa.

She dreamt her mom was baking a strawberry cake and drinking cognac. She danced around the house singing and said they were going to have a party,

even though it was a Tuesday. Teresa and her brother wouldn't have to do any homework. Her mom let Teresa lick the frosting. It turned into brown hair dye, and then the dye turned bright purple right on her mom's head. She cried about how horrendous her hair looked until her tears filled the room, washing the dye away, but she wasn't relieved. She blamed Teresa for ruining the party.

Teresa's voice quivered towards the end of the story.

"Does anyone have any questions or comments? Fabio asked. No one said a word. No one had the nerve to face Teresa in this rare moment of vulnerability. She must have revealed this dream in an attempt to be an example, so others would similarly open up. Nothing she ever did was arbitrary.

"Okay then, who's next?" asked Fabio.

Spazzolino stood up and described a dream in which he was welding human forms in a garden. He welded women and men and transsexuals, queens and kings and more queens, some with gowns and hats, others with tiaras or crowns. When he ran out of royalty, he moved on to the commoners of a medieval Italian village: the monk, the milkmaid, the old crone, the alcoholic shopkeeper and the baker who sang opera all day. Then he moved on to his best work, a group of nuns in habits, naked from the neck down. After months of feverish work, he began his way home only to find that his statues had now formed a labyrinth around him. He was lost.

Then Fabio told them about a dream in which he was wearing a shawl of black print floating on invisible cloth.

Lane volunteered to be facilitator the following week. They were excited about this new event in their lives. With the exception of storms and wild animal sightings, anything new had to be cooked up by them, so they were constantly straining themselves to think of new ways to improve the community. And Lane was the most zealous of them all.

*

All this talk of dreams made Lane start thinking about his recurring nightmares of Panama when he was in the Marines stationed at the canal in 1989. He didn't tell Emma about them then.

Two memories in particular haunted him, one good and one bad. The good memory began with a man tapping his shoulder saying, "Excuse me," in accented English. When he turned to answer the man, he was astounded. It was his doppelganger. They were the same height and same build, one dark and one light. He was this man's negative. "Did I see you at the cantina last night?

"Yes, I was there," said the man.

"Wow, we could be twins, no? Since you are a drinking man, come and let's have a beer," said the stranger.

They drank together in a shack in the fishing village, ate fish with lime and coconut rice. Lane ordered a bottle of their best rum; it went without saying that he would be the one to pay as the gringo. They played chess on a board with a few missing pieces that had been replaced with small smooth black and white stones. As the game progressed, they discovered they both came from large families with six children, three brothers and three sisters. And they were both raised on farms with rocky inferior soil. He felt guilty as he talked of his family, because he joined the Marines partly to escape the weight of his responsibility to them. Of course, his family didn't suspect this. They were proud of him, which only made him feel worse. The man spoke of his difficulties after his father died and how he had been the eldest. This meant he had to work both on the farm and at a shop in town in order to provide for his family. He had a determined glint in his eye that Lane recognized as his own. Even the man's hand gestures were the same as his. The man learned English in the shop speaking to tourists, for his town was near ancient ruins. And after he'd moved to the city, he had perfected it drinking with American soldiers from the canal-zone.

Gradually, the eclipse that had been the talk of the town for days began. Lane bought a pair of special glasses from a small boy. The two men took turns watching the black sliver grow on the sun. It looked like a crescent moon. The shadow of a giant bird passed over them, except when they looked up the bird

was tiny. They stood up and walked towards the shore to get a closer look. Then they noticed their own shadows were as long as five men. The sea was emerald green, and the sand had turned topaz. He saw that their shadows were identical. Though they were from different countries and spoke different languages, in the realm of shadows, they were the same.

After the rum was gone, they went swimming. The water was nearly as warm as the air. Floating on his back with his eyes closed, he felt something nudge him. For a second, he was afraid the man was hitting on him. He was relieved to see a pair of dolphins had joined them instead. He had begun to feel uncomfortable with the intimacy of the evening. Had the man been a woman, this would have been a great date. He hoped the man wasn't gay. He wouldn't want to ruin a perfect evening with the tedious chore of having to reject him. Fortunately, they parted with a brotherly pat on the back. Only then did he ask the man's name. "Pedro, he said. "I am Pedro. Here's my address and number. If you ever need anything just give me a call. Come visit any time. My house is your house."

Lane awoke in the barracks with a massive hangover.

Later, he would study Spanish in order to speak Pedro's language, even though they would never speak to each other again. This is perhaps why later his Spanish became flawless; he was able to construct arguments precise as lasers.

*

Two months after that carefree day on the beach, U.S. troops invaded. After two days of fighting, the Panamanian military was holding out in the neighbourhood of San Miguelito in Panama City. On that day, December 22, he was ordered to attack with machine gun fire from a helicopter. He just wanted to get through the day without having to shoot anyone. He could hear the heavy metal that was intended to blast out Noriega by driving him to madness with bad music. But he wondered if it was really intended to blast out the thoughts of the GIs, to erase any reservations they might have about what they were doing here. He looked

around at the others and wondered what they thought. Did they want to flee as well? Did they still believe this was a "Just Cause"? They couldn't possibly, he concluded. But he had once believed in the military, from the safe distance of basic training. There everything was simple: rise at five, do what he was told, believe that they wouldn't send him here if it weren't for the best of the people of Panama, believe that they valued his life and the lives of the other GIs. Now he knew they didn't care about the GIs any more than they cared about the Panamanians. Nevertheless, he was convinced that his fellow soldiers would turn him in if he fled, if only to save their own hides. So he got in the helicopter. In retrospect, he wished he had risked being court marshalled instead.

They were supposed to target the troops of Colonel Daniel Delgado Diamante, but with 200,000 people closely packed in the area, it was difficult to be precise, especially from the distance of a helicopter. And the fact that they were moving didn't make it any easier. Lane kept on missing his target, because he simply couldn't calculate how the speed of the chopper affected the direction of the bullets. Of course, he had been trained to make the appropriate calculations, but spatial relationships had never been his forte. He failed geometry in high school. He was glad that he was not better at finding his target. He didn't want to kill anyone. Each time a barrage of his bullets went into a wall, he breathed a sigh of relief. And after a while, once he realized he could get away with it, he purposely targeted the walls.

But then the troops on the ground started firing machine guns back at them. The fear hit him like a blow to the stomach. He fired back. This time, he was trying hard to hit the soldiers, but the helicopter was going too fast. The previous block had been a warehouse protected by high walls. He didn't see the tiny blue house with barred windows and a roof on the corner until it was too late. He didn't just send one bullet through its walls and windows. He sent enough to kill a whole family. And it was obvious from the quiet deserted streets that civilians were hiding inside.

When he got back to the barracks, he checked Pedro's address. It was in Los Andes, the same part of San Miguelito he had just helped destroy.

A couple of years later, he had the nerve to write Pedro. His mother had written back saying that he was one of the two thousand civilians killed in the invasion. He would never know on what street sat the tiny blue house with bars on its windows, but in his nightmares, it was always Pedro's house, with Pedro's family crouching inside, feeling the same fear he had felt when the Panamanian soldiers turned their fire on him. It was always Pedro who took the first bullet.

The Kogi made *pagamento*, offerings in order to maintain the balance of the world. They made offerings, originally of gold, at the sea and the mountain peak to bind the opposite ends of the world. Lane saw his ecologically sustainable life in the village as his *pagamento* to the earth and to *aluna* for his violence.

Obviously, he couldn't present his Panamanian nightmares at the Dream Gathering. If the others knew what he had done, his punishment would be permanent exile. To them, there was nothing worse in this world than a U.S. soldier. This was why he worked extra hard to be accepted.

*

Emma noticed a lot of people were preoccupied. She wondered if, after all this talk of dreams, the sounds of their nightmares rang in their ears all day long the way hers did.

She began to keep a dream diary, omitting any dreams about her mother. She didn't want to have to explain why she'd abandoned her mom when she was so vulnerable. The more she willed herself not to dream about her mother, the more nightmares she had. She didn't want to invent a dream; that would defeat the purpose of the whole exercise.

Lane was nervous on the day of the gathering.

He told of how he dreamt he was in a mall where he must spend five thousand dollars. He had only spent eighty-seven, and he was already bored. So he ate an ice cream sundae with a cherry on top. This made him sick, but at least he had now spent ninety-one dollars. He bought two stereo systems and the

biggest TV he could find which he must carry on his back. In spite of the burden, he was beginning to get a taste for shopping. He still wanted to buy more, but he couldn't move. His struggle to move was so disturbing that he woke up.

That morning he had told Emma he expected people to criticize him for having secret consumerist desires.

But no one said anything about his dream. They just looked at him as if this was exactly the sort of dream they expected from a North American. Then they moved on to Pilar's dream about swimming in the sea with a gorgeous man she'd never met in real life. When she tried to touch him, he turned into a piece of driftwood.

Everyone seemed to think the gathering was a success. They talked about little else and could hardly wait until the next Sunday came around.

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The next Sunday, Emma told them her dream about the parrots on Telegraph Hill. To no avail, she threw crumbs to entice the birds. They had escaped from pet stores. She wanted to be free like them. Offering them some cheese, she asked them where they were from, and they said, in Spanish, "We'll show you." And she flew with them over the pyramids of Mexico, the mountains and lakes and beaches of Central America to the lower Sierra Nevada rainforests. "This is our home," they said. "If we can make Telegraph Hill home, you can feel at home in the Sierra. Just give it time.

Okay, this wasn't a real dream. It was more of a daydream. Emma couldn't tell them that the only night dream she remembered that week was about her ex-boyfriend. She didn't want people psychoanalyzing the dynamic between her and Lane. Her ex-boyfriend ran after her, calling her name, and she froze in fear for a second, quickly resuming her run uphill and down, and then up again. She could still hear him call out to her. Hours seemed to pass like this. Finally, she reached a barn. The only place to hide was a wooden coffin. His mother

helped her in and told her not to worry. Everything would be okay. This dream recurred often with many variations, but she always ended up in the coffin.

She didn't want to share that she dreamt her Mom had passed out drunk, and her Dad was at work. She felt the cold air as she leaned into the fridge to pour the milk into her own baby bottle. This was her first memory at the age of two. It was a recurrent dream.

Her mom's boyfriend Bob, one of her many "uncles" over the years, used to bring out the paper, and they'd talk about newspaper articles. He was the only one in her family who had been to college. One day when Emma was thirteen, he dove off the roof into the doughboy pool trying to show her how to dive, snapping his neck, dying instantly. She had really liked Bob.

Her mom descended into an alcoholic stupor for three months, so, of course, Emma had to take care of her. Needless to say, Emma learned to take care of herself early on. This came in handy when she got to the village.

Emma and her mom moved every year or so. Each small town was as boring as the last, until they moved to Rio Linda, California for Emma's last two years of high school. It was probably the worst of all of 'the shit-hole towns' she grew up in. Mysteriously, this was the town her mom chose to stay in.

For her whole childhood, Emma had been dying to get the hell out of whatever hick town they were in at the time and move to the city, away from her mother's problems. But now that she was stranded on another continent, her heart ached. Now she thought about her mother all the time. She wondered how her mom was holding up without her, but she had bailed her mom out of a sticky situation too many times. Emma hoped that now that she wasn't there to fix every problem, Mom would have to take stock of her life and quit drinking. Maybe she went back to school. Maybe she had a new boyfriend who wasn't an asshole. Maybe.

The only reason she knew Mom was alive was that she had called her from Santa Marta a few times, hanging up when she heard her mom's voice. If she talked to her, she knew her Mom would light into her for disappearing like this. It must have broken her heart.

These were the images she couldn't get out of her mind: Mom is alone, waking up next to an empty vodka bottle, half-empty take-out containers on the floor and last night's TV still on, stumbling into the kitchen to make herself coffee, realizing she is out of milk, taking a shower. She sits back in front of the television for her breakfast of Alka Seltzer and toast. She leans back. She takes a deep breath. She wonders what happened to her daughter. She knows she was out of hand last time they saw each other. But is her daughter so heartless she can't give her mother a call to say she's okay? She doesn't ask to be forgiven, just acknowledged.

The last time they saw each other, her Mom got mad at Emma for not washing the dishes, so she threw them all away, even her favourite iron skillet. Emma thought it was hilarious at first. Her mom sat back down in front of the TV with an extra strong drink of brandy and began to rant on about how spoiled Emma was now that she'd been to college, and how she didn't share her money with her own mother. Emma told her she didn't have any money. This only pissed her off more, so she continued yelling about how Emma used snobby words trying to pretend she was better than everybody else, Who did she think she was? So spoiled! How did she raise such a spoiled child? So ungrateful! By now she was screaming. And Emma was on the way out the door.

But it's best to leave the past behind. Here, in the gathering, everyone was staring at Emma. Maybe she shouldn't have told folks about the parrot dream. Even though she cut out half of the story, she had told them too much. Now they would know how homesick she got. They might suspect that she had doubts about staying here, especially since she did have doubts.

"Maybe you were a bird in another life, or the bird's flight symbolizes your spiritual path," said Pilar.

No one commented on this absurdity.

"Do you feel trapped here?" asked Teresa.

"No, of course not. I don't think so," she said. Of course, she felt trapped here.

"You know, you are free to leave at any time if you're unhappy," said Teresa.

"I'm not unhappy.

"You know, I wake up every morning and feel grateful to live in such a beautiful place," Teresa continued.

Emma felt grateful too, but that didn't mean she was bursting with joy every moment. And she didn't believe that Teresa was either.

She appreciated that everyone else seemed cheered up since the gatherings began. Folks had been getting a bit lethargic. Now they were constantly chatting excitedly about dreams. This also meant that people had started to gossip about the dreams. This made her nervous. Now they speculated about the meaning of even the most bizarre dreams. What did Fabio's dream about cutting a rabbit's legs off mean? Some thought this meant he had suppressed aggression, and others thought that it meant he felt torn about being here, and others thought it meant he needed to get laid. This led them to speculate about his crushes. The part that bugged her was that most people thought it was her he wanted. How they got from rabbit legs to this made no sense, but they often made dreams mean what they wanted. For instance, people began to say that Spazzolino's dream about a black hole meant he had doubts about Alessandra. And then the rumour that they were fighting circulated. Emma ignored it, remembering the idea had been spun from a few bare threads now fluffed up like cotton candy for the greedy consumption of people who had altogether too much time on their hands. They'd use their talents more wisely by writing *telenovela* scripts. They would be a lot better at it than they were at farming. Emma was beginning to hate dream gatherings.

People discussed Emma's homesickness for a half an hour. By the end, she was tearing up. Later at home, Lane asked her what the matter was, and she didn't know how to respond. He was so happy about how the gatherings were going that she couldn't tell him she felt scrutinized in the same way she'd felt after a critique of her paintings in college? She knew Lane would tell her that people weren't critiquing each other; they were helping each other come to a better understanding of themselves and the nature of *aluna*.

Emma had hoped that Cloud village would become her true home, but now she realized that there was no such thing for people like her. By the age of five, she had lived in more places than most people do in their lifetimes. She wished she were a Kogi who had never left the mountain, a person who was always certain of her place in the world. But now she could see that she never would feel that way, even if she stayed here till her dying day. It was true that Jade loved the place with a devotion Emma had never felt for any place or anyone, but could this foreign place ever really be her home?

People liked to gossip and look down on people who showed signs of weakening and returning to the city, like Vilma the sculptress who had kept a baby alligator in her studio-hut and her friend Daniel who frequented the gay techno clubs of Cartagena. They didn't last two months. Emma thought people were a little too smug about this. She was afraid folks would think she couldn't be counted on to stay either. But maybe she really was weak. She really did agree that it was important to be able to live the way all of her ancestors lived for thousands of years, without cellophane wrapping that would take ages to degrade, cars that overheated the atmosphere or houses full of objects that had no practical use. She had to remind herself that the future of the planet was at stake.

Over the next several weeks, people gave increasingly dazzling accounts of their dreams. Emma brought this up to Teresa, saying that they couldn't possibly be actual dreams. Teresa said that one's lies, and the way one lies, also come out of the subconscious, so folks could make just as much progress with the lies as with the truth. Hence the Spanish expression, "Only children and drunks tell the truth.

Sometimes people believed that a dream was prophetic. When Fabio dreamt of an earthquake, people were on edge for a week, constantly expecting the earth to move like waves on an ocean. Dreams would often set the tone for the week. When Spazzolino dreamt of ecological apocalypse, the next week people forgot all about earthquakes. Some weeks everyone had sad dreams. Some weeks the dreams were happy. There were curious parallels between the dreams, as if people had discussed them beforehand in private, and they weren't

supposed to discuss them before the gathering. Just when Emma was convinced this was true, in the next meeting everyone would have a unique dream. So she decided it was a result of a common mood among them, living in such close quarters.

Everyone seemed jumpier lately. For instance one night as Emma was making dinner, she was happily singing away when Lane asked her to keep it down.

She said, “sure”, but not like she meant it.

“She just kept chopping vegetables but wondered was it true? Was her singing shrill?

Around this time, little Diana came over one morning, scared because her mother screamed out at night; her voice crossed over from the terrifying realm of her dreams into the girls impressionable ears. Emma remembered how Teresa got jumpy sometimes when there was a loud sound, like logs dropping. Teresa told the girls it was because she’d once been in an earthquake. This was a lie. She’d told Emma it reminded her of the sound of a bomb.

Rejection

When Fabio returned from his trip, he did nothing. He stopped bathing and cutting his hair. He even stopped drinking alcohol and smoking. We went to visit every day, making him tea. Watching him, I concluded that he had embarked on a grand experiment to see if he could stop time from moving forward.

One day while fiddling with his typewriter, I got an idea of how to cheer him up. I would write him a story. I didn't know how to type with two hands, but I managed. As I rolled the paper into place, I felt grown up. Maybe I was destined for greatness like the poets Fabio told us about.

The first story in the oeuvre of Jade Vogel was about a tropical blue butterfly who spent all her time among humans, lighting on their roofs, frolicking with their children, sneaking tastes of their sweets. She became friends with a little girl and told her all about all the things she's seen, glaciers above and sea below, giants ships and candy stores. One day, the little butterfly decided she wanted to be human too. So she went to the girl and asked her how to become a member of the village. The girl asked her mother who said it wasn't allowed. The butterfly cried and cried, and so did the little girl. The little girl asked to go with the butterfly on her next migration to the butterfly village. The butterfly explained that she had no village, no place to rest. She was forced to always keep moving even when tired, but there was a flock she could introduce the girl to that she would grow to love. The girl said that, until now, she had been trapped in one place. She had always wanted to see the sea. So she grabbed a hold of a butterfly wing, and they happily flew away together.

I was so excited to tell Fabio that I couldn't wait. I ran to him in the fields where he was working. Fabio wiped off his brow and read my story in the same manner he read my homework.

He said, "Very good", without smiling or kissing me on the forehead. He went back to work. I was devastated.

He continued to mope around for two more weeks before Teresa marched into his hut and commanded him to get a grip. She said she'd pulled his lazy self

out of this pathetic state before, and she would do it again. She asked him what his mother would think if she could see him like this, made him some strong coffee from her own stash, added a shot of Medellin rum and instructed him to down it. Then she took him fishing.

We followed them in secret. At the lake, after taking out their city bought fishing lines, she pulled out the rum again, "What is it? Is it Gloria?" Gloria was his ex-wife.

"No."

"Yes it is."

"No, *mujer*, not at all. It's just that they won't publish my novel," he said.

"That's what all this fuss is about?"

"I don't exist."

"Of course, you exist. Don't be silly."

"In Bogota, no one remembers my articles or my poems. Gloria won't speak to me, at any rate she's in Quito. And now no one will read my novel.

"I'll read your novel."

He ignored her, "This last trip I realized that everything achieved in my career after so much hard work, risking my life and that of my family, is forgotten. And that's not the worst part. It made no difference. The war continues on without us, as it did before. I could have saved him, I know it."

"Your articles kept Max's memory alive." Max had been Fabio's best friend. He had told us stories about him. But we hadn't known that he was dead.

"I encouraged him to write that article. If he hadn't, they wouldn't have killed him," said Fabio.

"That's not true. There's nothing you could have done," she put his arm around him. "Don't you think what we're doing here makes a difference?"

"How? No one knows we're here."

"You make a difference to the children."

He looked sceptical but was afraid to contradict her.

She handed him the rum bottle.

We were excited to overhear his wife was in Quito. We loved nothing more than uncovering information the adults tried to keep from us, so eavesdropping was one of our favourite pastimes. On our way home, Marcela proposed we go and find Gloria whom we envisioned with beautiful chestnut hair tied with a red ribbon. We were certain she would cure Fabio, tell funny jokes and give us *arequipe* sweets from the city.

We all agreed to embark on the grand adventure. We wondered where Quito was and whether we could walk, because we had no money for the big bus over the mountains. We'd never used money before, but Fabio had shown us some once. We were taken with its pretty colours but had little idea of how it was used. Diana said we should explain to the driver and surely we'd be allowed to travel for free. We hoped Quito was near Santa Marta. We'd always wanted to go there, and it was reachable on foot in three or four days, maybe five with Diana's miniature feet.

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The next day, we snuck into Fabio's place while he was drinking with Arturo to look for some clue as to what had happened in Bogota. Diana took the opportunity to steal some of his chocolate. In a manila envelope on his desk, a homemade table treated with the grandeur of an oak roll-top desk, I found a copy of his novel with a letter from a publisher saying that the content was too serious to be marketable in this day and age.

Marcela and Diana rushed over to read with me. Fabio had told me his aim was to write something relevant to the current condition of daily life in Colombia; he wanted his words to finally make a difference. I had asked him why he hadn't stuck to the fairy tales we so enjoyed. "Of what use are fairy tales when this country has become a living nightmare? He had responded, as was his way, with another question.

I didn't understand what he was talking about then. Unfortunately, I would remember these words later and understand them all too well. With the

letter was a photocopy of a clipping about the execution of several *Union Patriotica* candidates. Below Fabio had written, "Words disappear with the breath that speaks them or the fire that burns them. Should I have joined the guerrillas with my brother?

At that we all gasped, imagining Fabio trained to kill. It was unthinkable within the bounds of our tiny dominion. If we had gone down the mountain, we would have understood. Down there, even children understood these things. Down there, innocence was short lived. That's why our parents raised us like this, so we could have a childhood. But with a childhood hidden snugly in the folds of our mountain, how would we face adulthood out there? My parents should have suspected that one day we'd have to leave but they were too wrapped up in the refuge they'd created to be able to face anything outside it head on. Their rejected memories floated around our village suffusing themselves with the mist.

After his fishing trip with Teresa, Fabio had gone back to working in the fields, grudgingly at first. But as he dug up the potatoes and put them in a basket again and again, his movements seemed to flow with the others. He was slowly returning to our tribe.

Then Fabio began to religiously attend community meetings. Community meetings were so central to the running of our village that I assumed every town in the world had them. I imagined a government ran like thousands of giant community meetings. At one, Fabio suggested we build a proper *nuhue*, or Kogi ceremonial house. The adults unanimously agreed, and he immersed himself in the project with the fervour he'd once put into his novel.

This worried us even more than had his lethargy. The only thing Fabio hated more than manual labour was a meeting, and here he was putting his heart and soul into both. So Marcela, Diana and I continued planning our trip to find his wife. We began packing secretly. But when I got up the nerve to ask Spazzolino where Quito was, he told me it took several days and nights on the bus on a windy road through mountains as high as our *paramo*. I realized we couldn't walk that far or pay for the bus ticket, but I didn't have the heart to

break it to my friends. I decided to let the trip be like one of Fabio's stories; it didn't have to actually happen for us to savour it.

He resumed telling us fishing stories yet again, but something of the magic in them was fading. More often, he would tell us about community meetings and construction projects. Around this time, my mother had begun painting again, so she began to stop by his place for tea and to discuss art. We asked him about Bogota, but instead of launching into a yarn as usual, he had little to say. The only thing left in Bogota he had any interest in was women, so he told us of a moonlight night in mountain hot springs with Anita the flamenco dancer and of walking the cobbled streets of the Candelaria at dawn with Dolores the singing poet. Our only reliable source of information about the outside world was fading away. He had been spending a suspicious amount of time with Teresa and that could mean nothing but privation for us.

Mutual Aid Week

On December 9th every year, on Prince Peter Kropotkin of Russia's birthday, we went hunting and gathering in the woods for Mutual Aid week, so named after Kropotkin's book on evolution. He observed that species do not survive by competition alone; mutual aid was even more important to a species' survival. He studied animal behaviour in Siberia, Manchuria and Scandinavia, and he saw that the animals who helped others of their own species were more likely to survive. As Teresa made us memorize in class, "Cooperation leads to the highest intelligence. And, "the unsociable species are doomed to decay. My mom said his findings were skewed because he only observed species that had to pull together to survive in the extreme cold. But Dad said it's the way things work everywhere. I believed Dad. I'd spent enough time in the woods to know I wouldn't last long on my own.

The kids under seven and their moms always stayed at home; the rest of us split into four groups named after endangered species: jaguar, ocelot, tapir and spider monkey. Teresa's family, Fabio, Alessandra, Spazzolino and Blue Paws were on the spider monkey team. We were supposed to help each other, so our species would survive the week. If a team ran out of food for more than a day, they were pronounced extinct and sent back to the village. We were to survive entirely off the forest, bringing no outside food, sleeping in hammocks when we found two trees close enough together. If not, we slept in the forks of trees or quick shelters we were taught to build at an early age.

The kids didn't hunt much; we were mostly gatherers. Sometimes Marcela would kill a rodent. The adults usually carried knives, machetes, bows and arrows. Diana and I refused to kill or clean any animal. Diana had been a vegetarian since the day she asked me if that was blood on her plate.

We busied ourselves looking for the edible plants Teresa had taught us to recognize. Our legs hurt by the end of the day, but we were filled with the spirit of adventure those first few days. No detail was too banal to hold our attention.

For instance, we were meticulous about spreading our shit thinly, so it would degrade faster. We wrapped our food carefully and hung it in trees, careful not to let any scraps drop that might attract animals. We walked without a sound, so the animals wouldn't know we were coming. Surviving in the woods was a game to us and contrary to the spirit of mutual aid, we were competitive about it. We always helped our own group; we wanted to bring back the highest quality food. We looked for rare berries and medicinal herbs, even sedatives and the magic mushrooms that seemed to make the adults happy.

On the third day of mutual-aid week the year I was nine, I'd left the camp on my own to pee when I saw a tapir. She looked at me for a while, deciding whether I was a threat. Then she came up and sniffed me. She had a friendly look in her eyes. I spoke softly saying, "I'll call you Carla. Then a male tapir saw us and trotted towards us in distress. Carla joined him, and they ran past me. I missed Carla already. I hoped she would visit us sometime. She knew where we lived, of that I was certain.

I didn't feel like going back to camp, so I kept walking even though folks would worry. I crossed a clearing and then entered the forest again. I was nearing a creek when I heard voices. I stopped to listen more carefully. It was Mom and Fabio. I walked closer. Fabio had his arm around her. Normally, I love a good eavesdrop, but I felt a tightness in my chest and a desire to flee. So, I used my quietest hunter's footsteps and went back the way I came.

When I got back, Dad asked me if I'd seen Mom, and I lied. I was naïve, but not stupid. Dad looked reassured, and I felt guilty for lying. Maybe I was just imagining things.

Hunting was going badly. Folks were talking about slaughtering one of my goats for the feast, so I agreed to join the hunting party. It was better to kill an unknown than to watch them kill an animal I'd raised myself.

A couple days later, we ran into Carla at the edge of a clearing. Unaware of our approach, she was wistfully grazing. It looked to me like she was daydreaming. We didn't kill tapirs. They were endangered. We usually killed rodents, iguanas, and wild boar, so I didn't see it coming when Arturo reached

for his bow and arrow aiming for a wild boar running quickly in front of her. He accidently hit Carla, and she fell down mid-daydream. I kneeled down and hummed to her as she drifted away.

Then I turned back. Arturo called out to me saying he was sorry. Dad followed me at a distance for a while. Then he caught up with me and asked if I was okay. I told him Carla was my friend and I felt like I'd killed her, since I hadn't done anything to protect her. I looked up and was surprised to see Dad tearing up. He said he knew how I felt. Once he'd let down a friend too. I wanted to ask him to explain, but we were back at camp, and he was off to tell Teresa about our kill.

I found Mom and told her I was going to be a vegetarian now, like her. She said she was proud to see I had the courage to make my own decisions. Then I found Diana and told her about that and what happened. Though she had tears in her eyes, she smiled. She said she felt less alone now that there were four vegetarians in the village, Diana, Pilar, Mom and me. Teresa had been a vegetarian too, but she cracked the first time we got low on food in the village. I had heard the story many times about how after having barely eaten for four days Teresa savagely ate a meal of pig's heart. She'd gone from vegetarianism to barbarism, they always said. But I wasn't tempted. I was better at identifying forest plants than anyone except Teresa, and the milk-goats were my loyal friends. They'd never let me down.

Mom was repairing her bow. Dad came over and corrected her method. She threw him a hostile look. He repeated his advice. She looked down at her work and continued doing it her own way.

Everyone was cranky. This was usual when the hunt was bad, but this year we had more meat than we could comfortably carry. Fabio was quiet. He only spoke in the evenings when he told us ghost stories around the fire. Alessandra was mad at Fabio. Spazzolino was mad at Alessandra. I was having fantasies of putting a bow and arrow through Arturo's heart to see how he liked it. Diana took my side against her father. We comforted ourselves by chatting all the way home about the delicacies we would devour at the feast.

The day after our return was Prince Kropotkin's feast, the most important holiday of our year. The food was also the best of the year: sizzling roasted Carla with *aji* sauce, yucca, fried plantains, *arepas*, Mom's wild berry pie and Spazzolino's pizza with forest mushrooms. The adults got stupid drunk on goat-stomach canteens of pineapple *chicha*. When the adults got that crazy glint in their eyes us kids cleared out to make our own party at Fabio's. Marcela performed a little ceremony for Carla. The rest of the kids, even Marcela, became vegetarians after that.

Every year there was a fight on Kropotkin's feast, but as it turned out, not this year. Alessandra would usually start an argument about some ideological question, like whether we should change our decision making process, or allow the children to go to town, or learn about organized religion, or whether communism or anarchism was a better model of organization for society. The men would get so riled up they'd end up at blows. But, they never touched Alessandra. Maybe that's why she seemed to enjoy pissing them off so much. She knew she was safe.

A solitary tree stood in the middle of the plaza. On Kropotkin's feast day, we would climb it and decorate it with flower necklaces. And around this time of year, David from Medellin would light candles in the evenings and sing a prayer. We made sure we never missed this; it was one of my favourite things about our holiday season. We had been taught that these things had to do with Kropotkin. The tree decorating was an homage to our fellow tree species, and the candles were the light that led him to the animals on the distant tundra. We didn't know about Christmas or Chanukah. We were surrounded by a hodgepodge of myths, but I was never introduced to the usual myths of North American childhood, Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or the Easter bunny.

Mom sang songs to herself during this time of year, but she would stop whenever I came into the room. I know now they were Christmas songs. She must have felt as sad to lose Christmas as I later did when I lost Kropotkin's feast and Mutual aid week. Christmas would later seem so sterile in comparison to

avoiding jaguars in the woods and then feasting on a meal cooked on an open fire under the stars while hearing ghost stories.

The kids called it Prince Kropotkin's feast, because it was more glorious; the adults dropped prince because it was patriarchal and authoritarian. It was bad to be a prince, to have power over others, to deprive them of some of their own personal power, to blunt their wills. We had been taught to respect even the smallest of creatures as independent wilful beings, that even the leaf wants sunlight. This is why children were encouraged to go to meetings. In theory, we were to be treated as full-fledged human beings as early as possible.

Diana wanted to be a princess, and nothing could convince her otherwise. She wanted a coronation, so we staged one at Fabio's house while the adults were still drinking themselves sick. Diana wove crowns of flowers for us and placed them on our heads while chanting a sacred chant, "zawinda, zawoonda, zai", and then she had me place one on her head. We painted her face with berries. We couldn't grasp that in the world of younger brother, everyone couldn't be a princess. They had told us, but it was absurd. I thought Fabio must have been teaching them how to tell tall tales as he had taught us; they might as well have told us that men had walked on the moon.

A Shared Dream

Emma read them her dream. She was in a dark bar with a wood wall and a fireplace. There was a chill in the air and a poster promoting a singer-songwriter on the wall. The place was empty, so she went behind the bar to fix herself a single malt scotch. Then she went into a room with a sofa. No one was there either. She felt drawn to a hallway with light at its end. Following the light, she reached a roof with a family of jaguars soaking up the sun. They wagged their tails. The high green mountains were beautiful. She lifted her arms and began to fly. She flew over houses, and pot-holed roads, and snow-capped peaks until she landed in a hot springs. The water turned rose-coloured from the mineral cure-all. She felt restored soaking in the hot water. No one was at the spa either. She told them she thought this symbolized a new beginning. She had the free and light feeling she'd had as a new arrival in Cloud Village.

When she was done, Fabio said he'd had the same dream. Of course, she didn't believe him. No one did. So he handed her his notebook. There was her dream, only it was written much more beautifully. "Why don't you read it to everyone?" Emma asked.

He did. No one said anything for a few minutes.

Then Teresa offered a theory, "I thought you all believed that dreams came from *aluna*. If that is the case, then why couldn't they both have the same dream? Maybe, we have finally stumbled upon a message from that world to ours. They had thought that this was a fun idea to toy with, but could it actually be true?

"What if it's just some sort of communication between our minds?" asked Fabio.

At this, Emma looked nervously at Lane. But he looked oblivious as usual, like he was innocently contemplating the nature of consciousness.

"Yes, I believe these things happen. Don't you ever have a song in your head when someone else starts singing the same note at the same moment it crossed your mind?" Emma said.

"Like used to happen with us, you mean?" said Lane.

Teresa jumped in and said this was the sign they'd been waiting for, a message from *aluna*. Most people agreed this was indeed a message from the spirit world. But Emma was acutely aware of the other possible implications of a shared dream, that she and Fabio were somehow linked.

Teresa said everyone should reflect upon the dream's meaning during the week to discuss it next time.

During the next few days, Lane acted jumpy, asking Emma where she had been all the time, getting on her every last nerve.

Emma no longer felt like singing much. Moncho had to beg her to accompany him, and when she did, her singing lacked gusto. She even gasped for air, as if altitude sickness had hit her years late.

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Fabio searched her out on her daily walk in the woods. He told her he recognized the bar in the dream. It was his favourite bar in Bogota.

"But how are you sure the image in my head is the same as yours?" Emma asked him.

"I'm not sure, but doesn't it seem like a bit too much of a coincidence to you? The bar was the last place I saw a good friend of mine before he disappeared.

"But that's impossible. The bar in my dream was in the Mission District of San Francisco," she said.

"Maybe one of us picked up on a bit of the dream of the other, like a radio wave, and then added bits of their own," he said.

Emma was sceptical but told him that was as good an explanation as any.

"I think the empty bar symbolizes my friend's absence; the same was true of the spa. It looked like a Cundinamarca resort I know. And the curative waters were meant to soothe my friend."

"If it didn't feel the same to you, then it must not have been the same." Though she secretly wanted it to be the same dream and even believed it was

possible, she thought a little doubt might be prudent. It was possible they were both losing their minds.

“What do you think it means that we had the same dream?” Fabio asked.

“I think it is proof that *aluna* is real, that reality cannot be reduced to only the material,” said Emma.

“No, why was it us and not two other people? Why is it that thoughts can travel between our minds?" Fabio wondered aloud.

“I don’t know, but I think it means something for two people to share a dream. Don’t you?” he said.

Emma stopped walking for a second. He took her hand. She jerked it away and told him to leave her to her walk. He looked hurt and turned back.

She went to the lake and paced along its beach. Why didn’t he leave well enough alone? She came all the way to the heart of the world for some peace and quiet, and here she was with two men marching around inside her head. She felt depleted.

That night she couldn’t sleep. Though she was usually open about her problems (except her mother’s drinking), dreams were different. Like the others, she too believed there was something mystical about them. It no longer seemed strange that she and Fabio might have shared elements of a dream. She remembered how once she dreamt that she got a call from her cousin saying her uncle had died. She sobbed all night in her dreams. When she awoke, she had three messages from her cousin. She called her cousin back immediately. Her uncle had indeed died in a car crash in the night. Her cousin had been trying to reach her to give her the news. Either her cousin’s message reached her subconscious, or it was the severing of a spiritual connection or quantum entanglement with her uncle that allowed her to know without being told.

She became obsessed with the idea that the thoughts of other minds could enter her dreams. At first, she was relieved at this confirmation that the universe wasn’t merely mechanical. If thought can travel without the aid of a body or a fibre-optic cable, then the world must be fundamentally spiritual like the Kogi

believed. To them, the realm of *aluna*, represented by water, created everything in the world.

Did the dreams of others leak into hers on a regular basis without her knowing it? Could the thoughts of other minds enter her conscious thoughts as well? If so, which of her dreams were her own and which were mere interference from other minds? Since one could manipulate one's own dreams at times in lucid-dreams, could other people manipulate hers? Were some dreams psychic white-noise, originating from many minds simultaneously without anyone's knowledge? The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced that the thoughts of other minds entered her dreams.

Or was it merely that through the dream gatherings she had become closer to these people, perhaps too close, so they crept into her dreams? Lately most of her dreams were about people from the village, even those dreams set in San Francisco, Outer Mongolia, or imaginary lands. She thought of dreams like shadow puppet shows, distorted reflections of an original she could not see, just as her many homes were chimera for a true home that was dear to her heart, even though she would never find it. She had always been an outsider and always would be.

She felt like the village was a house with no walls.

*

The next week, Spazzolino facilitated the gathering. He put off the new dreams for the end, so everyone could dig into the implications of the shared dream.

Spazzolino began, "I think we can never know if the dream came from *aluna* or if it was just some kind of telepathy. But if it came from *aluna* and it is a message, I think it is warning us. It is telling us that if we are not careful, our days here are numbered and one day this village will be empty. Think about it. We have both a snowy peak and a spring nearby, like in their dream. I think it may be saying that we are not achieving what we set out to do; in fact, we may be doing damage. The Kogi rarely speak to us. Do they really want us here?"

"I agree," said Alessandra, "I think it's a warning."

“I think it’s meaningless,” said Arturo.

“No one made you come to this meeting. If you don’t believe in this, you’re free to go and paint,” said Teresa.

Teresa had been telling Emma lately how he’d been trying her patience. So of course, he stayed put, depriving Teresa of the satisfaction of seeing the back of him. If he missed out, how would he know what people were talking about all week?

Then Pilar spoke. “I think it is a good sign for us. The curative waters symbolize our desire to heal the world. I think it is time to begin outreach beyond the website. I think we are finally proficient enough at surviving here; we are finally ready to teach others.”

“What are you proposing?” asked Teresa. She loved nothing more than a proposal.

“It is time to go to the city and bring back students, not just anybody, but people who have been vouched for by people we trust.”

Emma was surprised at this uncharacteristically practical proposal from Pilar. But when she thought about it, she realized Pilar had been roused from her recent depression by her hopeful interpretation of the dream. She needed optimism like other people needed air.

“Maybe you’re right, if we start slowly,” said Lane.

“Of course,” said Pilar.

Teresa didn’t say anything. She beamed with the pride of a teacher whose pet student just excelled in the exam. Only if they were students, Pilar was the worst in the class.

“How many should we invite?” asked Spazzolino.

“How many are we now? Forty-five? Then no more than five, I’d say. Go to the universities, or go to the hostels and find foreigners,” said Arturo. The countryside was already full of farmers. There was a tacit understanding that they needed to recruit middle and upper class city kids, potential consumers. If they farmed instead, the earth would have fewer people using it as a garbage dump for crap they didn’t need. Who else but the bourgeoisie would actually volunteer to

do manual labour? Manual labour was a harder sell for Colombians of any class than for Europeans or North Americans. In fact since the *gomelos* had usually grown up with maids, they were even more useless than North Americans, which was really saying something. They all knew the left well enough to know that Nicaragua in the eighties had been full of Sandinista-supporting-Germans willing to pick coffee for their daily *gallo pinto*.

Now everyone started yelling over each other. After a few minutes, Arturo's voice boomed over everyone else. "We can't just let anybody in. What if they destroy what we have here?"

"We need more women," said Pilar.

"I second that," said Fabio, laughing. Then the rest of the men seconded that by howling and whistling.

Emma found them offensive, but she didn't mind the idea of having more women around either, to balance out the men's macho posturing.

"Ok, so how many support the idea? Hands up," said Teresa. It was nearly unanimous. Arturo and the kids abstained. Children over eight had the option to vote in theory, but they only did this when they felt really strongly about something, like when they blocked the slaughtering of Jade's egg hens. The kids probably sensed that folks didn't really want the children to speak up too often, though they claimed otherwise.

Emma should have known then that something was amiss, since their community was founded on the idea that they should limit civilization's influences as much as possible. They must have been pretty bored, seeing the same faces, to agree so quickly to an idea that could so dramatically change their lives.

After that, she was afraid to share any more dreams. What if people ascribed sinister interpretations, or worse, pinned all their hopes on them? She didn't want that power. In the next few weeks, the kids jumped in and told their dreams, especially Diana, whom Emma suspected of elaborating. She'd been taught storytelling from Fabio, and this was her chance to hone her skills. Over time, she became a regular Scheherazade of the forest. The more Fabio

complimented her storytelling, the more Diana tried to outdo herself the next time.

Kogi Village

A month later during our Kogi lesson, Dad asked Maria if she could tell her father he was invited over for dinner. But they never came. So after a few weeks, Dad came right out and asked her if we could come and visit her village. Of course, she said she'd have to ask her parents. She came back the next week and said yes. I assumed this was a polite yes, meaning no. Maybe Dad knew this, because he proceeded to organize our trip right away. He called her bluff.

We walked up through the cloud forest, through big fluffy clouds, and out again. We walked half the day, arriving an hour before sunset. The village looked much like ours, smoke rising out of the same circular huts; this was the genuine article, our village a mere imitation. My parents beamed like devotees making a first pilgrimage to a holy city. People came to greet us, smiling.

At first, we felt sheepish and lost. Dad tried to speak to them in Spanish, and they simply kept smiling back at us. Then Maria's family came to our rescue. Her father, *Cabildo* Roberto was the only overweight Kogi I'd ever seen, but he carried his weight well. His position of authority was apparent from his gait and gestures, but he embraced us warmly. Senora Andrea, Maria's mother, stood back a little, but I ran to her. She patted my head.

Mom and I were quickly sent to one of the 'family houses' where the women lived separately from the men and Dad to the men's house.

We were led into a hut where the Senora served us creamy soup in *tutumas*, hollowed out seed they use as bowls. They gave us half avocados that we ate like apples and *bolos*, yucca dough rolled into a tube.

Senora Andrea asked us questions about ourselves. The other women seemed uncomfortable around us, but Maria seemed more at ease than I'd ever seen her. Then Senora Andrea had to go and do some chores.

I had Maria at my side, so I was okay. But, Mom became visibly uncomfortable. She had expected she'd be observing them in order to learn their ways. Mostly, they were looking at her, and she looked away in shyness. She couldn't reconcile the people before her with the mythmakers of their ancestors.

She knew the language barrier made it impossible to know what was really going on, but they seemed ordinary, even boring.

Everyone seemed so quiet here. When Mom laughed, it seemed to echo against the mountain while everyone looked on in silence. I could tell she felt brash. I wasn't sure if that's how they always were, or if they were shy in our strange presence.

Senora Andrea led us to the hut where we were going to stay for the night and stared at us, giggling. Then they made us a fire and left. Mom told me she felt guilty, as if her laughter were an act of colonial occupation. To put them at ease, she had tried to be quieter, to take up a smaller space. So when she had Maria ask a question for her, she spoke in a near whisper.

I had been told that in the city, with streetlights, day and night bled into each other. Up here as in our village, night fell suddenly and irrevocably. The animals who worked the dayshift switched with those working the night shift. In the dark, I pretended my red headed grandma was here, telling me to be careful of the jaguars. She shared her cinnamon rolls with me. She told me her secret recipe and said not to share it with anyone. I imagined the smell of cinnamon wafting in, my grandma ready to take me home with her. Kids other places believed in Santa; I believed in grandma. We had a good night's sleep in the warmth.

When we woke up, the women were watching us from the door, smiling. Encouraged by their smiles, Mom brought out some coffee. One of the women grabbed the bag and sniffed in deeply. Coffee was a luxury, since it couldn't be grown at this altitude, much higher than our village. Someone went to get cups. Even the kids gathered round, all excited. Then it started raining, hard. We were surprised, because it was still morning. The rainy season was ten months long, but the mornings were mostly clear. The clouds came down the mountain around two in the afternoon. Then the roofs were in the clouds, matching the smoke in the houses. During the brief dry season, I often got confused about the time.

Mom had some *panela* sugar, so we all sat around the fire and drank sweet coffee and smiled at each other and listened to the rain. Mom started pointing at things to ask their names. People caught on and seemed to like the

game. I knew a little Kogi already, but I enjoyed the game just the same. And I had Maria, who was happy to translate, so it wasn't as hard for me. When the rain stopped, Maria and I went out, so she could show me around.

Mom stayed behind. That night she told me she was amazed to find out how much could be communicated without words. By the end of the day, she felt fluent in miming. After watching the women's gestures all day, she felt she had learned more than in all the previous decades about the emotional gist of the flick of a wrist or the glint in an eye. Just the day before, she had felt that she could never reach these people even if they spoke the same language.

The other thing that struck her, she later told me, was how much of a relief it was to be without men to tell her what to do or how to do it. We only saw Dad or the other men in passing. The absence of Cloud Village men's patronizing little lectures was palpable and she didn't have to feel their lustful eyes on her. She felt free.

After feeling so free for an entire week, she wasn't too happy to see Dad again when we left the village. She looked annoyed as he told us again and again about what a warm and wonderful leader *Cabildo* Roberto was and how he was an example for us all. He had given Dad ideas for the running of Cloud Village. *Cabildo* Roberto had left home to be educated, but chose to come back here and serve his people. He had been cooperative enough to share the details Dad needed to finish the chapter on Kogi ritual.

Dad didn't ask about Mom's week until he had been speaking for fifteen minutes. She complained that Kogi women rarely participated in politics, and the men were relieved of a lot of important tasks. They seemed to lounge about chewing on coca leaves while the women slaved away. She asked Dad what he thought of these things, and he said it wasn't our culture. We had no right to judge. She said, of course he didn't mind. The same was true in our village. Women did more work and had less say. He said this was absurd, and that if it had any leaders at all, the village was a matriarchy. And who did more work than himself?

She said that this was true, but these were exceptions to the general rule of machismo.

He said they were exceptions but notable ones. Without Teresa, there would have been no village, and without the sweat and farming expertise he had put in, they would have starved in the first year.

She said he didn't know how it felt to have people ignore you.

He said feelings were beside the point. The question was: were women disadvantaged in the village?

She said feelings were her entire point, and if he couldn't see that, she didn't want to talk to him.

She sent him ahead on the trail. I stayed with her.

When Mom got back to the village, she was so pissed off at Dad that she caused a ruckus, dancing and singing loudly and off key. She went to the *chicha* barrel and poured herself a bottle. Then she made the rounds from hut to hut in an attempt to rustle up a party. Everyone but Dad and Teresa, who whined about all the work to be done, came along to help her build a bonfire. She was grateful Moncho brought his guitar. She kissed him on the cheek. She sang "*Gracias a la vida*" louder than she'd ever sung any song before. No one dared join in. She was no Mercedes Sosa, but she held her own.

That night I heard her sneak out to join Dad in his hut. I guess she hadn't been that mad after all. The next morning, my folks were all smiles, as if they'd never argued. Mom said that though it had been like a dream in the Kogi village, she was happy to be home. Entering the village yesterday, she'd remembered how magical it had seemed the first time she'd ever laid eyes on it. She had felt isolated for the past year, she told us. But in their village she'd seen how the Kogi didn't feel isolated. They didn't feel that the place wasn't complete, because it lacked telephones or television, because it wasn't on the grid. If the Kogi didn't need that connection, neither should she. She would become more involved in village activities. Dad beamed with joy at this.

Instead of feeling more at home, the visit had made me realize this could never be my home like it was to the Kogi. Until now, I'd felt native to this

mountain, the place of my birth. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to go to the city. I was afraid that if I went, I would be trapped in the world of younger brother forever, never to return.

Café Fabio

One afternoon Fabio said he wanted to show Emma something. They walked an hour until they found a cabin in the forest fifteen minutes from any trail. Emma didn't know then that this was Jade and the girls' secret cabin. She asked him how he had found it, and he said that, like all good things, he had stumbled upon it by accident.

He had fixed up the place. The poster, from his hut advertising a poetry reading in Bogota, hung on the wall. On the table were a battery-operated radio, a bottle of rum and two glasses. He must have smuggled in the radio. He handed her a bouquet of forest flowers. She found the gesture a little embarrassing, but when she thought about how Lane would shudder at the waste, she thanked him effusively. The place reminded her of a café. She felt as if she had left the mountain behind when she had crossed the threshold. This place was theirs and theirs alone. She was surprised to hear *vallenata* music when he turned on the radio. It was hard to think they were only twenty-six miles from Santa Marta as a crow flies and yet so far away.

They talked about art and poetry, the avant-garde and the meaninglessness of such things here. She watched his hands as he spoke and decided she liked their size and shape. She liked the way he gestured wildly when he got excited about some subject, especially about things of no practical relevance. At home, she had been considered a relatively practical minded person. But on the mountain, getting up early to go to the fields, working hard all day, and then going to meetings every week to discuss the minutia of everything she'd just lived through, made her fed up with all things practical, particularly practicalities that served an ideal. At Café Fabio, there were no ideals, only ideas. Fabio and Emma never discussed anything so tedious as a goal. Here they floated in the present with no future to move towards. Emma felt free with him. He looked at his empty drink. She filled it.

After having suffered through a series of "uncles" as a teenager, she didn't want Jade to have two fathers, just as she didn't want her to have more

than one hometown. That's why she stayed in the village even when she felt she was going to burst having to see the same faces every day, the same trees.

When she moved to Virginia when she was five, Emma cried in the arms of her aunt on a brilliant California spring afternoon under her lemon tree, begging her to let her stay. Later when she returned to California, she missed what she'd called the "broccoli" trees and the brick houses and muggy summer nights of old Virginia. A year after that, her family drove out to Maryland, singing "Country Roads" through West Virginia.

When she was ten, her parents got divorced. After that, she stopped missing any of the homes that had come before. She stopped missing her old friends, the smells of the plants, the humidity in the air peculiar to a place. By thirteen, she'd started planning her trip to Europe after high school graduation. A couple of unofficial stepfathers came and went. She went to thirteen schools in twelve years.

She knew there was something not quite right about being incapable of missing people, but she thought she could miss Fabio.

She tried to convince herself that everyone had uncles as well as a father, and wasn't Fabio already like an uncle to Jade? Once the idea of a soul mate had been something dear to her heart, but when she felt that Lane was becoming controlling, sex with him seemed dreary.

She felt she could only share one side of herself with him, but if anything ever happened to her, if she were sick, injured or grieving, she would turn to him before anyone else in the world. His strength gave her the courage to face the gruelling fieldwork every day. He made her feel strong enough to face anything. Together, they were unstoppable. Together, they were going to change the world. But Fabio understood why singing made her feel alive and why the breeze on a warm night by the lake moved her. They danced there sometimes in secret, though they had never kissed, not until now. She was going to kiss him as soon as he stopped talking about Lorca's New York poetry. While Lane was too serious, Fabio was too soft hearted. She could see why he'd left the city; the world constantly bruised him. Even beauty made him sad. Meanwhile, Lane

seemed impervious to the harshness of the world, except in an abstract political sense. It didn't fit with his hopeful vision for the future. Put together, Lane and Fabio would make the perfect man.

They took off their clothes and placed them on the dirt floor, like a sheet, before making love. His hands glided over her gently and with great care in all the contours and corners that Lane overlooked. The freckle on his neck, the small roll of fat on his stomach and all his other ungainly odds and ends seemed touched by God, though from another light they might have seemed unpleasant, even vile. His kissing was filled with sadness. It was played in a different scale than Lane's, one based on minor chords. Lane's kissing was like a city sky; the strongest, brightest stars shone through the haze. Fabio kissed like the clear sky on the mountain, showing all the little stars in between, even the wretched and dying ones.

Tomorrow didn't exist. She felt as if she was living an entire lifespan unto itself that began the moment they entered this "café" and would end when they left it. These moments had no more connection with her relationship with Lane than her time in San Francisco did with her life here.

At dusk as she walked back alone, her chest wrenched with longing in places for which she felt certain there were no nerves. Fabio's smell had become an inextricable part of her being. From now on, even its absence would leave a trace.

Escape

Emma hiked towards the highway alone. She was leaving Lane, but she couldn't decide whether to leave the village for good. She shed one solitary tear. She had never been happier to be alone.

For several nights after a jealous temper tantrum on Lane's part, she lay awake at night fantasizing about his death. Nothing made her feel more smothered than jealousy, so she wanted to be free of him. Maybe he'd get killed in a car crash or shot by the guerrillas with a submachine gun and thrown into a ditch to get pulled out to sea in a storm. She'd have settled for him returning home or moving to Santa Marta, but somehow she didn't enjoy picturing that as much. She knew that if he did in fact die, she'd be devastated. But this didn't stop her. Instead of committing homicide, she settled for breaking up with him and taking this trip to Cartagena to cool off a bit. She left Jade with Lane. He wasn't her favourite person right now, but he was a reliable father.

On her last night before leaving, she dreamt she was eating bread when something hard nearly broke her teeth. She spat it out, thinking it was a rock, but it was a wedding ring.

When she had first come to Cartagena, she'd found it slightly dilapidated in an endearing way. Now everything seemed bright and shiny and aggressively modern. She checked into a room with a balcony in the old city. She loved having a hotel room to herself in a strange place; it was even better if no one knew her name. This reminded her of a room she'd once rented in Sevilla. She'd brought a bottle of red wine, bread, cheese and olives and drank alone on the balcony with only her journal and the flamenco from the bar below for company. Nostalgic for that day, she went on a walk and came back with fried *arepas de huevo* wrapped in newspaper and warm beer. She attempted to draw in her notebook, but struggled. For a moment she felt she didn't know who would be drawing, her California self or her village self. Could she become a new person

yet again? Half of her wondered why she'd left the village, while the other half wondered why she'd stayed so long.

A friend of Teresa's, a Kogi linguist named Carola, along with a young archaeologist and a balding cultural anthropology professor, gave her a tour of the old colonial city, a restored district of brightly coloured two-story row houses with balconies, tile roofs and covered sidewalks with yellow archways. She immediately liked Carola, a Bogotana who had lived in Paris; she understood how it felt to be a foreigner and was gentle with Emma.

First, they brought her to see Gabriel Garcia Marquez's house. High red walls covered with glass surrounded it, guarding the magical lives of the rich from the stark reality of poverty and violence outside. Then they took a stroll looking down at the Caribbean from the high-stone walls that once fortressed the Spanish port city. This was the port so crucial to the import of folks stolen from the tribes of Africa, paid for by the export of sacred gold stolen from the tribes of America.

Then they brought her to the air-conditioned bookshop for cappuccinos over a discussion of the future of Colombian literature; the vibe was neutrally international and comforting. In the evening, they danced to Cuban classics at the Alliance Française. The anthropology professor let her know that her dancing skills needed honing and offered her private lessons any time day or night. She ignored him.

Walking to her hotel afterwards, she was so drunk that she almost overlooked the soldiers with machine guns standing in front of a line of sandbags, dividing realities as neatly as Marquez's walls. She felt guilty knowing their presence had allowed her to enjoy a safe and cultured evening in a state of blissful forgetfulness that there was a war here. She felt guilty, but not as guilty as she should have.

A few days passed. This was longest she'd ever been away from Jade. The inner turmoil she had expected was palpably absent, and this scared her. Like a mourner busily making the preparations for a funeral, the impact of her loss wouldn't sink in until the party was over and she was left alone to clean up

the mess. So she decided to spend a couple of days alone sitting on her veranda and drawing.

By the second day on her own, she began to see her little life from the outside. It was sort of like the time she dropped acid and looked at herself in the mirror. She was looking at a stranger. At the same time, she felt like she'd never understood herself so clearly, but a person can only take so much clarity. She had a vague sense of unease.

For breakfast every day, she went to a café frequented by backpackers. She felt like she was visiting her long-lost tribe. She had the same conversations with the same people she might have met in Rajasthan or Chiang Mai.

The same misty view of the village she'd once held in awe bored her lately. It wouldn't have mattered if she were looking at Mt. Everest, the skyline of Jerusalem, or the mosques of Istanbul. She was the kind of person who would be bored looking at even the most wondrous of sites, if she had to see it every day.

She had spent a couple years backpacking her way around the world. Her appetite for newness was inexhaustible. She had thought that life in the village would be so dramatically different from anything she had encountered before that her sense of its exoticism would be constantly renewed. She had visited far flung villages in Asia, drank yogurt out of a bag made from a dead-cow's stomach in Pakistan, eaten locusts with Karen rebels on the Thai-Burmese border, slept in a hammock next to a family of pigs in Mexico, but she had never done any actual farm work before arriving on the mountain. And she had never spent an extended period of time in a village. It was different for Lane. He was from a small town. He was used to smallness of scope, reference and mind. Of course, he wouldn't view it that way. He found it cosy and quaint, and Emma suspected he didn't mind how easy it was to be a notable personage among such a tiny group. This must have been a relief for him after the fierce competitiveness of grad school where he was just an average student.

Her old friends started to creep back into her mind. She felt that, for her friends back home, time was moving forward, whereas for her it stood stock-still.

When she'd first arrived in Colombia, she had felt the opposite. She was experiencing previously unimagined adventures while they were merely looking for jobs, getting drunk, or in some cases, shooting up. But now each day was the same as the next. Some days she felt that, if she ever got out of here, she never wanted to see a farm again, not a seed, a root, a freshly hoed row, a chicken or a goat. She would live like her uncle who rarely left the Mission District of San Francisco.

But what relationship did her new self have with the old one? Sometimes she felt like her life in the village was lived by someone else, and the very thought of it repelled her. At others, it seemed like the village was the only true home she'd ever had, and she longed to return.

Lane's counter arguments were still a prominent part of her inner monologue; no sooner did she think a thought than his spectre intervened with a rebuttal. The chatter of village gossip and opinion also surfaced in the form of a constant ideological assessment of her every move, what was consumerist, and what was bourgeois. Nevertheless as she wandered the streets of the old city, she felt her spirit gain strength. She felt as if a space had opened up around her, a boundary protecting her, allowing her old thought patterns to slowly reassert themselves.

She had planned to leave Cartagena the next day, when she met Amparo. Then everything happened so fast that it all runs together in her memory. What do old records have to do with bitter almonds, a Russian circus, chainsaws, or stealing beer? Not much, but it goes to show how crazy times were with Amparo that all these things swirl in her mind as one.

They met at Club Havana sometime between midnight and dawn. Emma was with Carola and some of her professor friends. They sat at the balcony and ordered a bottle of *aguardiente antioqueno*. Carola made a toast to Emma's newfound freedom. The men, always happy for a woman to become available, toasted her enthusiastically. Then Amparo, Carola's cousin, arrived. Everyone, men and women alike, stared at Amparo with her Fedora, dangling carved coconut shell earrings, a turquoise necklace, friendship bracelet, black tank top

and jeans that had fit her ten pounds ago. She had deeply tanned olive skin and a Sephardic nose. She spoke loudly and confidently. Her every move was executed with conviction. She was more handsome than gorgeous. Emma felt drawn to her, yet a little apprehensive. Amparo was audacious. Bold.

She was a world traveller, like Emma. She told her about her tryst with a hazel eyed Moroccan when she lived on an Israeli Kibbutz. During Yom Kippur service, they were having sex in a synagogue bathroom when the rabbi knocked on the door to tell him to hurry up, because they needed him so they'd have a *minyan*.

They all went back to her hotel by the beach, drinking and dancing in the courtyard. In addition to Carola's crew, Amparo invited strangers from the bar. They made so much noise that half the hotel woke up to join them dancing. Amparo proclaimed herself the D.J. Emma had the impression Amparo didn't wait for approval from anyone.

She liked to imagine she was the same way, but it wasn't true lately. She had grown to look for Lane's approval in everything, not because he had asked her to do so, but because of some sort of atavistic submissiveness she carried in her mitochondrial DNA. Her mother had told her how *her* mother had never left her abusive grandfather. And her mother had never had a decent boyfriend, except the crank-addict Bob. Instead of resenting Lane, she should blame her ur-grandmother, the first of the women who gave her this trait, the idea that it matters at all what a man thinks. On the other hand, maybe she shouldn't blame her, but her husband, the first husband, the one who came up with the preposterous arrangement that was patriarchy. Ten *men* count as a *minyan*; one hundred women count as nothing. Instead, she would cling to her resentment of Lane. It was much more gratifying.

Emma and Amparo danced and sang loudly to the Brazilian band *Os Tribalistas*. She had lived in Leticia in the Amazon near Brazil. Emma was entranced by her story about taking Ayahuasca with a shaman guide. The shaman warned her not to touch anyone or allow herself to be touched while under its influence. When her boyfriend touched her, all his most terrifying feelings and

thoughts entered her. Emma wondered if this was what always happened when you let someone into your life, even if you didn't notice it. She felt that this is what had happened with Lane.

Emma told Amparo about visiting the second highest town in the world in Sichuan, China and how the Tibetan Khampa nomads really carried swords, how she was accused of trying to change a counterfeit dollar bill and was kicked out of the province where no foreigners were allowed. Meanwhile, Carola and the philosopher chatted about Botero, the Colombian figurative artist. By the time they all watched the sunrise together, she considered these people the best of friends. Suddenly exhausted, she rented a room, no longer able to make it to her hotel. She slept till four p.m.

The next day in sober light, she noticed that the place was a bit strange. She wondered if it was her hangover or if things moved more slowly here. It seemed to take an Argentine dance troupe five minutes to cross the courtyard. The flies couldn't be bothered to buzz. She detected the faint taste of cyanide. She imagined the roots of the large bitter almond tree went from courtyard to the centre of the earth. She imagined everyone and everything was more rooted than she was.

She moved in, settling into the constant social whirlwind of the hotel. She soon forgot about going home.

Emma was running low on money, but this was never a problem with Amparo. She was nothing if not resourceful. She and Emma lived on spaghetti. What it lacked in nutrition, they made up for in joy. There were so many travel stories to share. Of course, it didn't take them long to start to plan their own adventures. If Amparo had proposed that they take a trip to see the Cobb castles of Sanaa, Emma would have at least considered it.

Instead, they dragged themselves onto the bus to Tayrona National Park one evening. They arrived at the park in the middle of the night and spent a freezing night in the back of a random pickup truck. For breakfast, they stole beers from an outdoor restaurant across the way by jimmying the locked fridge

hours before the place opened. Then they walked three hours through the jungle and had breakfast. They had brought as much food and liquor with them as their backpacks could hold. The smell of rotting palm and salt in the muggy air, they ate cheese sandwiches with mangoes and drank wine at the seaside. Amparo ranted away, putting a philosophical spin on the nature of rotting coconut husks and mortality that would have been facile and boring if spouted by anyone else. Amparo had an atheistic soulfulness.

It seemed like they didn't sleep for the next three days. There were so many Argentine men to flirt with. Amparo was embarrassed to be with a gringa, so she told them Emma was Romanian. They bought it. Emma was flattered to pass as a non-American. She didn't catch the inherent insult that to be from the United States would have made her less than human, the lowest of all life forms. She was a gringa through and through, only she didn't yet know it.

One day, Amparo told her how a friend of hers from the university was chopped into pieces with a chainsaw. He worked for a Canadian environmental NGO, and the paramilitaries didn't like what he was up to. He was taking a boat upriver. He never came back downriver. She didn't speak with her usual flair. She said this coldly, with *frialdad.* Then she said there were paramilitaries on their mountain, probably not far from where Emma lived. Emma insisted there weren't any nearby, but she wasn't sure.

They were quiet for a while. Then Amparo said if Emma found that story far-fetched, she had another one for her. Once when she was little, she begged her mom to let her go to the Russian Circus with her mother's best friend and her family. Her mom refused, but after a week of listening to her whine, she relented. She went and had fun eating ice cream with her "cousins". They rode back in the car with the windows down. It was a beautiful day. The next day, the entire family was killed, children and all, because the parents were members of the *Union Patriotica* communist party.

The two new friends took speed pills and drank wine all day long, swimming and baking in the sun. They met people from every obscure country in the world, Slovenia, Iceland, Lesotho. Fortunately, there was no one from

Romania. They awoke hung-over, confused and desperate for coffee. They could no longer afford it and had to mooch some off the Argentine guys. But they still had some of the food they'd brought with them. Amparo was unruffled by the situation, so Emma rolled with it. Amparo neither embraced nor rejected chaos. It simply was. To Emma, who had been managing chaos since birth, this was a radical idea.

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From there, they went to the Barranquilla carnival. Dancing down the streets with the procession, Emma's sandals broke. So she threw them aside and kept dancing. They ended up in a little open-air bar with an amazing old salsa record collection. Everyone danced with everyone else. This was the only time she'd seen Colombians throw regard for class differences to the wind. Normally, a Colombian can detect a hidden *campesino* grandparent in one's accent or demeanour with the accuracy of a NASA telescope looking at a crater on Mars. But during Carnival, the *gomelos* took pride in dancing with the people they would make take the service elevator tomorrow.

When the sun started to rise, they decided to walk home to their hostel. In the empty streets, Emma now noticed the thin layer of grime covering the sidewalks and the walls of the buildings. She detected a faint smell, a mixture of sewage and ripe bananas.

She saw two teenage boys heading their way. Amparo took her hand and led her to the other side of the street. Suddenly, the boys ran towards them. Then one of them held a gun to Emma's head, the other at Amparo's.

"We're going to the ATM," the small one said.

Sure enough, there was an ATM just around the corner.

"Take out the maximum. This was the equivalent of three hundred U.S. dollars.

Amparo said she was broke and explained she was Colombian like them. She tried to speak in a humbler accent than normal, but they weren't falling for it.

"Or I'll shoot you," said the taller one with the earring. Emma had the urge to yank out his silly silver hoop.

He put his gun up her skirt. She reached for her bankcard.

Emma didn't know how she remembered her password under the circumstances. All she was thinking was how much she missed Lane and Jade right now.

They gave them their money. The men ran one way, and Emma and Amparo ran the other, fast as they could, to the hostel.

Back at the room, they compared their remaining resources. Emma had the equivalent of eleven U.S. dollars, and Amparo had twenty-four. It took a while for Emma to stop shaking. They'd been *dando papaya* or giving away the papaya. This was what they said of people who didn't bargain in the market place, or failed to look both ways for unsavoury types before taking money out of an ATM, or didn't lock the back doors of the taxicab in a bad neighbourhood. In Colombia staying about one's wits was so valued that they had an expression specifically for those whose carelessness begged to be taken advantage of.

The family that ran the place gave them breakfast for free. Emma savoured the sweet coffee and *arepas,* not knowing where her next meal would come from. No one suggested they call the police. Everyone knew they were useless at best, dangerous at worst.

Were she not with Amparo, she would have been screwed, but as usual, her friend had a plan. Clearly, they couldn't afford to stay another night. They gathered their change and took the city bus to the station. There, Amparo watched for moneyed people. Emma wondered if this was how the thieves had chosen them, or if they were the only ones stupid enough to walk down that street before full daylight had dawned.

Amparo approached an old lady, using her snobbiest accent and told their sad story. She asked if the lady could buy their tickets, making it clear they weren't panhandling for cash. Still, the lady walked away. So did the next five people. Then there were a couple of guys, a little younger than them. They were still

hung-over and greasy but didn't look too bad. Maybe it was all the dancing that had given them a glow.

She asked them where they'd gone last night. They took the bait. They traded carnival adventure stories for about a half an hour. Then Amparo went in for the kill. Emma shouldn't have been surprised that they agreed, because men are simple beings.

Of course, they had to sit next to them and endure more of their stories. They were okay guys though, only slightly boring. And they managed to get a decent lunch out of them in Santa Marta plus bus fare up the hill. The guys even bought them snacks for the road.

The hot coastal air felt heavy with fumes and heat. Emma craved the thinner, cooler air of the mountains. Teresa called the re-entry shock after returning from town "detoxing", as if the city were heroin, noxious and dangerous. Emma missed her daughter. To her surprise, she missed Lane too. She wanted to fall into their old rhythm again, to a time when her pulse replied to his like the call and response of an old blues song.

With so little money, there was only one place Emma and Amparo could go. They took the bus to the end of the road and then walked for two days with only chips, cookies and bananas. They gathered berries and drank from streams and lakes. They treated the lake water with iodine pills. Emma still had no shoes. Fortunately, her feet were tough from years of walking barefoot; though shoes were allowed in the village now, she rarely used them. When they finally arrived, they were near collapse. Emma wanted to fall into Lane's arms but remembered that she had lost the privilege. Jade must have been at her father's. Saying hello to no one, they went to her hut and fell into a deep sleep, waking in the night to eat the entire contents of her kitchen.

While Mom was away

While Mom was away, Dad and I would take long walks. He surprised me by taking time off work. I guess he was lonely. I could hear him crying at night. I showed him the plants we could eat and the ones we couldn't. And he told me stories about the farm in Utah. Once he and his family had to live in a chicken shed for a summer, because their house had been damaged in a storm. I didn't understand what the problem was. I liked living with my animals.

When Mom got back, I was sad I wouldn't be spending as much time with Dad anymore. I was too mad at Mom for abandoning me to be fully happy to see her, but her guest fascinated me. She wore tight clothes and spoke just a little too loudly. During Amparo's first days here, Blue Paws followed her everywhere, and I did too. Amparo did unpredictable things like walk off the trail at random places, or bathe in the lake fully clothed, like a Kogi woman.

She and Mom spent a lot of time together, laughing and telling stories. Mom smiled a lot and often hummed, like she used to with Fabio, so I couldn't help but tag along. When the two of them reminisced about their adventures, Mom's face lit up. I could see that Mom didn't just miss the city. She preferred it. Eventually, I found myself accidentally answering Mom's questions. Little by little, we began to have actual conversations again. I told her about the bird's nest that had taken residence near our hut, and she showed me a *champeta* dance from the city. Amparo helped me with the steps. I don't think my father liked the dancing. I would catch him looking at my mother with a malice I'd never seen in him before. Of course, she had left him too.

Amparo liked to argue with Dad about village ways, mocking him for his defence of our dream gatherings. He said, "I'm not surprised you don't understand what it is to have a true community, living and even dreaming together. You're from the city."

She laughed, calling them, "the silliest thing she'd ever heard of." Dad's face turned red, but I could tell he enjoyed debating with her anyway. At least it

was a new argument with unexpected twists and not the same debates with the same folks.

Amparo let me listen to her walk-man. It was my first recorded music. There were so many instruments. It was as beautiful as a birdsong, but so precise it was unearthly. I was hooked. Amparo wasn't worried about breaking the rules, and this daring move drew me to her. Teresa had a talk with her, but she laughed her off.

The morning after Mom got back, Maria came to my hut. Before I could say good morning, she told me her father had been found dead in the woods, riddled with bullet holes. She wouldn't sit down and refused food, but she didn't cry. She had come to ask for as much coffee as we could gather. Traditionally, this was drunk in large quantities throughout a nine-night wake. They were unable to invite us; it was off limits.

Dad asked Maria if she would mind us accompanying her to the bridge. She agreed, shyly. Mom joined us. We walked upwards through the cloud forest making awkward conversation. I didn't know what to say to Maria.

The clouds engulfed us completely, and we fell into silent blind footsteps.

Before Maria crossed the bridge, she said, "My father told me something last week. You know how your houses still have old stone foundations? Everyone in the old village died of a plague except a redheaded missionary, the one whose grave we found. People believe your village is cursed. That's why no Kogi will live there. My father told me not to tell you. But now that he's gone…" She had tears in her eyes, to my relief. It must be a terrible thing to grieve without tears.

So that's why we were allowed to live here.

On the way home, we talked about whether Maria's dad getting killed was a sign of a curse. On the other hand, the Cabildo was from another village. Still, it worried me.

Mom asked me what grave Maria was talking about.

"We found a grave in the forest…with a cross on it."

It was pleasant to be walking this road again with my parents, even if they were fighting.

I remembered how we buried my goat Wildflower under our *lulu* tree. Whenever I drank *lulu* juice, I imagined I walked with Wildflower's springy gait. I wondered where they would bury Maria's dad and if some part of him would return in the green of the forest or the red of next year's tomatoes.

Return

The morning after Emma got back, she woke up late. Half asleep, she stumbled to make coffee, but it was nowhere to be found. She heard what sounded like Maria whispering. Could she be saying her father was dead?

Amparo was still snoozing away. Without the help of caffeine to stiffen her spine, she crawled back into her hammock and listened to the children talk. Jade had never known anyone who died before. What would Emma say to her?

It took an hour for Emma to gather the nerve to go to the plaza to face Lane. Everyone was milling about talking about the Cabildo's death. Fabio's face was covered in stubble. His hair was askew, like one part didn't agree with the other. His eyes lacked focus.

Lane was in the centre of the plaza, looking like he'd never been better. He was busy directing people in the packing of the coffee. He truly believed the world should be made according to the image he carried in his mind. Much in the way the Kogi believe everything was first a potential in *aluna,* he felt everything should match his mental blueprint.

On a dark street in Barranquilla, she had been reminded just how full of turmoil the world was. She missed Lane's affection; it was steady and strong, like him.

She crept into the plaza and started to chat with Pilar. She knew Lane saw her. He turned away and continued his chat with Moncho. She was familiar with the gesture; her mother, in her typical childishness, used to give her the silent treatment over trifles like accidently breaking her favourite teapot or failing to do the laundry.

After they returned from their walk accompanying Maria, Lane came over. When Jade went out to play, he said. "So who do you think it was, guerrillas or paramilitaries?"

"Or a Kogi dispute?" she suggested.

"What Kogi has a gun?"

"Good point," Emma said.

"What would paramilitaries be doing in the National Park? "

"There were paramilitaries in Tayrona."

"I asked *Mama* Andrea, and he said they'd moved a little closer. But they are still far away. He said he had no idea why this happened, but they wouldn't tell us if he found out."

"What did Teresa say?" she asked

"She doesn't know either."

"But would she tell us if she knew?"

"Maybe not," he said. "You know how she feels about giving everyone a sense of stability."

Lane seemed nervous, but not as nervous as she was. To her relief, he didn't launch into a tirade against her or burst into tears. Before he left, he said, "I'm glad you're back."

"I'm sorry. I really am," she said, flinching, because whenever she apologized to her mother, she would yell at her, listing all the things she had done wrong. She was impressed that Lane said nothing, nodding sadly as he left.

*

Later, she went to Fabio's. To her relief, he made her coffee. She felt a sense of well being travel down through her body, finally, her daily fix.

"Weren't we supposed to donate all our coffee for the funeral?" she asked.

"I kept a little aside for myself."

He had the usual amount of coffee. He hadn't donated a thing.

He didn't ask about her trip. Instead, he told her he'd been on a trip himself. He'd been down to Santa Marta to the Poste Restante.

"They're going to publish my novel!"

She had forgotten about his novel and was pleasantly surprised. "That's incredible."

He had forgotten to refill her coffee, so she served herself while he rattled off the details of his book contract.

"But there's one problem," he said.

"What's that?"

"I have to do some drastic revisions…. I'm drawing a blank"

"That's just nerves. You'll figure it out. Of course, you will."

He looked doubtful. She wondered how Lane would react to the news, since he had never finished *his* book.

Fabio rambled on for the next forty-five minutes about his novel.

She had never noticed before how ill formed his arguments were; he made flighty jumps in logic. It was this flightiness that had drawn her to him, the way his ideas took flight and his stories transported her. Perhaps her problem was that she didn't know how to settle down, even when she wanted to. Since she couldn't move to another place, as she was accustomed to doing every couple years, she'd travelled to another man instead.

Now that he had to do the unpleasant work of fine-tuning the novel, his editor said that his innate talent wasn't enough.

"So you're saying, the problem is you have to work at it?"

He ignored her question and continued raving.

Lane's faults were many, Lord knows, but he never shied away from *grounding* his ideas, no matter how crazy, in hard work. The arid Utah soil was still under his fingernails, whereas Fabio had had a live-in maid as a child. In some tiny portion of his deepest psyche, Fabio would always dwell in a magical realm where floors scrub themselves and food is cooked by *duendes*. No wonder his stories were so fanciful.

She left without telling him what she had wanted to say. Confrontations were like homework to her, an unpleasant duty she had to push through. She had been dreading this visit. It wasn't just that she was afraid to hurt his feelings. She was afraid of temptation. But now, watching him twirl his unwashed hair distractedly, he seemed distant.

Fabio didn't talk to her at the next party, to her great relief. She couldn't enjoy herself, because both he and Lane were present and refused to look at each other or her. She left early, having drunk too much too soon. Part way down the path, Fabio caught up with her.

"Hey, I can't stop thinking about you." He leaned in towards her. She felt her stomach drop with that familiar pull, but the feeling passed as quickly as it came. She pushed him away.

"The thing is…I don't think we should be together anymore."

"Why? I can share you. I shared Alessandra"

"I don't have the energy for both of you."

This evidently had never occurred to him. He had had energy for many women in Bogota, from what she'd heard.

He grabbed and pulled her towards him aggressively. His breath smelled of coffee. A wave of fear was washed aside by repulsion, inevitably, as high tide always retreats to leave stinking pools at the shore. She yanked herself away. He did not follow. When she got home, she watched Jade sleep for a while. How could she have left her alone here?

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The next Sunday morning, Emma awoke, raw and hung-over. She remembered with embarrassment how she'd singed her skirt nearly falling in the fire and then how Amparo had brashly told the story of how they'd been robbed, almost bragging of their folly. Lane hadn't said anything, but she'd seen the disapproving look in his eyes. It was familiar to her by now.

Sure enough, he showed up, fully caffeinated, while she still lay in her hammock. He didn't ask if he could come in, and she didn't tell him he couldn't.

Mercifully, he brought her coca leaf tea and water before he asked her what the hell she was thinking walking down a dark street like that during carnival in Colombia, of all places. What was infuriating was that he wasn't wrong. That

she’d had a gun held to her head elicited no sympathy from him. No wonder she preferred the company of her new friend.

Guns

Marcela, Diana, Carlito, Maria and I packed a lunch and took a hike up past our secret cabin. We were having such fun singing that we went farther than usual. We stumbled upon crates covered loosely in dirt under a bush. We opened them, expecting to find cocaine. We had heard a lot about the white powder. What I saw confused me. They were made of metal, like Fabio's typewriter.

We all turned to Maria at once with a common silent question. "They're guns," she said.

"What do you mean? I asked.

"You know, to kill people."

I had heard of guns. I just didn't expect to find them here. "That's not possible."

"Maybe they're for hunting," Marcela said.

"That's it. Arturo likes to hunt," I said.

Maria looked at me sceptically, but remained silent for a while. None of us were tempted to touch the guns. Curiosity had its limits. We were scared.

After a while, we covered up the crates and went home. At the fork in the paths, Maria headed off to her own village. On the way home, we speculated as to what the guns were doing here. The possession of guns in itself was grounds for expulsion. Arturo really loved his meat. This was the thing I liked least about him. Was he going to deplete the animals in our stretch of the woods? In that case, wasn't it my duty to tell? But he would have to leave, and I liked Arturo. I liked to hear all about his adventures in the city where he was a famous artist.

Marcela especially seemed to like the idea of someone getting away with breaking the rules.

We vowed to keep this a secret.

During the day, I told myself these were hunting guns, but at night I had nightmares about people getting killed, giant holes being blown through their chests. I had never seen television, much less a real gunshot, so the bullet holes of my imagination were the size of basketballs.

The visitors

It had rained the night before. Amparo knew how to choose the right mushrooms. In the evening, she and Emma made magic tea and lit candles. Amparo insisted on making the fire because she loved how the village always smelled of wood burning. After vomiting, they took a walk in the dark, unafraid. By now Emma had the night vision of a stalker.

They walked through forests and cities and oceans and moons.

Skulls appeared. Whose dead? The field was now a cemetery. Traces of pink appeared low in the morning sky, the skulls turned to stones, and the stones into a wall.

Now they leaned on the ancient stone wall and looked down the valley, to the world below, bereft, full of cemeteries. Somewhere down there was a war.

Lane appeared and with him the icy morning. The kaleidoscope turned right, fractals into focus; the wide sky was narrowed by his sticky, jealous words. He had imagined she was with a man. Emma closed her eyes, hoping he would vanish.

She opened her eyes. He was still there, what disappeared instead was any desire to be near him. She had been back only a week. In that short time, his jealous hovering had driven her to change her mind about reconciling.

When the farming students arrived, she threw herself into the collective flirting frenzy without focusing on any one man; she found men in general inspiring and her men in particular, exhausting.

The village buzzed with excitement. Five of them arrived with Spazzolino, huffing and puffing from the two-day hike. There was Lorena from Torino, Francois from Marseilles, and Ioannis from Athens. Bernardo was the only Colombian. The students walked faster, talked faster, and even thought faster than the villagers. Having recently returned from the city, Emma thought faster too. She found it exhilarating, but some of the other villagers, like Teresa, were annoyed. Strangely, Lane seemed to thrive on it. Slowly, she began to

notice others moving more quickly as well. After a while, people even seemed to work faster. In short, the rhythm of the village had been disturbed. To Emma, this was a relief. She hadn't been sure if she could fall back into her old life. She and Amparo joined the newcomers around their nightly bonfires. It was almost as if they'd never left Tayrona.

The students got drunk and trampled the terraces. They littered the plaza. They smuggled in pot. They refused to show up to mandatory meetings and slept in late. How did they get away with this? First of all, the only punishment the community sanctioned was banishment, and they needed the visitor's help in the fields. And more importantly, everyone, including Teresa, had a crush on at least one of them.

It was Bernardo who had caught Teresa's eye. For him every morning was as wondrous as the first day of Creation. Everything he saw, everyone he spoke to, he approached with amazement. His two favourite words were *vacano* or "cool" and the English, "Wow." He was way too young for Teresa. She was already sensitive about her age. When she said "pushing fifty", it sounded like a disease. In the outside world, she might have adjusted., but there was no one older than her here. Fabio, the second eldest, was a year younger than Teresa.

Naturally, when Bernardo met young Pilar with her flowing black hair, he proceeded to hit on her, getting on her nerves until one drunken night out of sheer boredom Pilar warmed up to him. This made Teresa even grouchier than usual.

Fabio had once told Emma about how Teresa had been one of the most beautiful women at University. Now, she and Arturo were experiencing a sexual deep freeze. The memory of the way she used to get manhandled, in light of her current celibacy, reminded Teresa that she was getting older, something which could only end in death. Fabio had tried to cheer her up by saying it was the place, that he felt it too, the loneliness. He told her that back in Bogota she'd have plenty of men after her, but she wasn't convinced. That's what this place did to people. Anything outside of it became nothing but a vague dream, outside the reach of day-to-day possibilities.

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Amparo was excited to hear that Arturo lived here. She had seen his work on display in a museum in Bogota and thought it was '*chevere'*. She made Emma bring her to his hut. He happened to be painting, as usual. Amparo wanted to see what he was working on. The painting was faced away from them, and he refused to show them. Emma knew why. Teresa had told her his work had been lacklustre since their relationship had gone downhill six months before. Teresa had also commented that she was surprised he'd held out here so long; she assumed he'd stayed for the children.

Arturo made them coffee with homebrew *chirinche* liquor. The two women sat in one hammock, and he in the other. Amparo swung the hammock as she drank, making Emma spill her drink a little. She laughed at everything Arturo said, even when he talked about abstract expressionism.

Amparo told him about working her way across the Atlantic on a freighter. She had learned to speak a bit of Tagalog with some of the other kitchen crew.

"I've been up here too long," he said. "I refused to come up here at first. Teresa promised me I wouldn't have to do too much fieldwork, so I could paint. That's the only reason I agreed to come. There's a lot of work to do, or we'll starve. So my painting has gone to hell. All these years, folks had assumed that Arturo was simply taking advantage of his position as Teresa's husband. Folks seethed with resentment about it.

As they were leaving, he said they could come back any time. Emma knew he wasn't talking to her. He didn't even like his painting to be interrupted by his own kids.

She could see why the two of them got along. Art was his life, and Amparo's way of living was art in motion. She hadn't warned Amparo about Teresa; she wouldn't have listened. The notion of someone going so completely against Teresa's wishes filled Emma with a certain glee.

Soon everyone was sleeping with everyone else. Lorena slept with Pilar. Amparo moved into Arturo's hut. Lane had a crush on Lorena but didn't act on it. Alessandra slept with Ioannis. Everyone braced themselves in fear of Teresa's reaction to her husband's affair, but nothing happened. She'd given up on Bernardo and worked her way into Francois' hammock to everyone's relief. He was thirty-five, much older than the others.

It didn't take long for these new lovers to begin to fight. Once Teresa's affair ended, she went on a warpath against Amparo. She called a community meeting about Amparo's contraband walk-man, but to Emma's surprise most people supported Amparo. Teresa argued that the contraption's radio had brought in the news, and everyone knew that the news was controlled by the government. If you listened to the news, you'd start thinking on its terms, believing its lies, she said. Unlike in the U.S., in Colombia no one, however mainstream, believed a thing the media said. No one argued this point. What people did rally for was the importance of music.

Mid-meeting, with much aplomb, Moncho brought out his secret boom box and blasted a cumbia. Everyone, but Emma, Lane and Fabio cheered. Emma had been impatient with the rules here, but they had also become a comfort to her. With the noise of civilization booming through their hamlet, it lost its uniqueness.

She knew Amparo found their little social experiment silly. Sometimes, Emma did too. But if the young never had the guts to seem silly by venturing into what convention deemed absurd, each generation would be merely a clone of the previous. She could feel her juvenile ability to believe wholeheartedly in the village drain from her, and she grieved for it.

After the meeting, Teresa disappeared into the forest.

While she was gone, Jade told Emma about finding the guns. Amparo warned Emma that the village was in danger. Emma was too caught up in all the excitement to reflect on this. Two days later, Amparo left.

Teresa came back three days later. She had exiled herself to the "solitude cabin", the village's place of banishment. It was where they sent people to cool

off after a fight. They had rarely used it. For the first time since Emma had met her, Teresa seemed meek and broken. Not even the news of Amparo's departure seemed to cheer her up. Could the village go on without her?

Until now the world below had penetrated their reality much in the way the sounds of the forest can penetrate one's dreams, nudging their course without altering them fundamentally. The newcomers and the discovery of the guns were like the ring of an alarm clock, jolting them from the sweetest of dreams suddenly and brutally.

Luowiko

When the girls and I could steal away, we went to our cabin. We liked to fix it up. At home we had to do what was expected of us, but here we were free. The cabin was ours alone. It became our art project; that's what my mother would have called it. We painted the walls with plant dyes in our own design and covered the table with dried flowers. This is where we kept all of the most wonderful objects we'd found on our wanderings: a bullet, a shell from the sea, a piece of coral, feathers, bones, divining beads, old figurines, and arrowheads.

We stole poppies from Teresa's garden and dried them to plant the seeds for our own garden. We also grew cilantro, tomatoes and garlic. We had worked in the fields our whole lives, so a little garden of our own was easy and a joy.

It was Diana's idea to start the ceremonies. Our parents hated Christianity, yet they were fascinated with Kogi religion. We mixed our limited knowledge of Kogi religion with Pilar's paganism and the magic of Fabio's fairy tales and made our own little cult. Our mythology was based on stories of gods and goddesses, witches and warlocks, jaguars and unicorns, flying boats and floating airplanes. To us, every star was a god. When Maria attended the ceremonies, she corrected our mistakes about her religion, but she soon tired and gave in to our ways.

After one ceremony, it was raining too hard to go home. Marcela said she was going to stop it. We laughed at this. Then she went outside, lifted her hands and said, "Stop". And it slowed down, stopping entirely within five minutes. Marcela was by far the most surprised at this. After that, we started believing in our own religion. If Marcela could stop the rain, then maybe incantations and prayers did reach the stars. We built a shrine with our favourite quartz stone, some divining beads and a jaguar figurine. There we left offerings of *lulus*.

Marcela always served poppy tea to get us in a relaxed and reverent mood. I would light the candles and place our bullet, our shell, our coral and some divining beads in a row. We searched the woods for such special objects.

The more foreign or forbidden, the more we valued them. We sang hymns to the unicorns and jaguars. Then we threw the divining beads like dice and asked Marcela if she got a "feeling" about anything. Sometimes she had a hunch; sometimes she didn't. We played with the tarot cards Pilar had given us. Then we had a moment of silent prayer and sang one last song. In closing, anyone who wanted to cast a spell could do so.

Maria's favourite Kogi God was Luowiko, the God of outsiders. Her family was descended from him, she said. He was a son of the mother of creation. His older brothers, Serankua and Seocucui, listened to their mother and did things properly while Luowiko did as he pleased. His brothers felt he was inferior. He was uneducated and liked to roam freely. He looked at things differently than most and could be counted on for unusual solutions to problems.

Once their mother had hookworm. The other sons didn't dare touch her, so Luowiko got a needle and removed the worms. She gave him special powers in return. After that, no evil power could harm him. His brothers were jealous of this gift, so they chopped off his limbs one by one. The *trapiche,* or sugar gin, was made from his legs. And then his arm was put through the *trapiche* in the way one makes cane juice. After this, his brothers made up with him. He was a cripple, but he survived.

Maria could relate to him. She had a limp, so she was a bit of a cripple too. And she was a black sheep, since she was half-Aruaco and half-Kogi. Her mom spoke Aruaco and Kogi, her dad Spanish and Kogi, and Maria spoke all three languages. It only made matters worse that she'd picked up some ways of the city in her years away. Because of this and her limp, the other children treated her like she was a bit of a freak. It was no wonder she gravitated towards us, the children of freaks. As a Cabildo, her father had been a bit of a controversial figure in the community. He'd been an activist who campaigned against peasant seizures of Kogi lands. While everyone agreed with this goal, not everyone agreed with his methods. Like Luowiko, he found unusual solutions to problems. Maria thought it was his time in the city that gave him this ability. I think she felt

that she would gain some sort of magic powers like Luowiko's by gaining more knowledge of younger brother and our strange ways.

I could relate to the story. I was an outsider too.

One day Maria did a special incantation to summon Luowiko. She'd been so sad since her Dad died that we always did what she wanted. After the ceremony, she told us about the other outsider who lived on the mountain before she was born, the man in the grave. He was a missionary, a linguist who created an alphabet so he could translate the Bible into Kogi. But no one was interested. He was Norwegian and loved the sun. A strange man who left numbers corresponding to scriptures on rock, like messages in bottles on the sea, hoping that someday there would be converts here. One thing he kept from his upbringing was a love of fishing. The Kogi were impressed that he could catch more fish, faster and with more grace than any of them.

He was the only one to survive the plague. He walked to the Kogi village for help, over the forbidden bridge. They were afraid that they would catch the curse and die too. A group of men yelled at him to go away, and when he rattled away at them in Norwegian instead, a teenager hit him with a bow and arrow to the heart. Otherwise, the village would have perished as well.

But this wasn't the only reason people thought our village was cursed. It was the site of a massacre in colonial times. Since the plague, no one had lived there but us. Maria's father had always believed that Luowiko had protected the man from the plague, as the god of outsiders.

Marcela had been saying a god was going to visit us. And few days after Maria told us this story, we found Luowiko sitting at our table in our cabin. He told us his name was Rodrigo, but we insisted on using his real name. He was a frightfully thin man in his forties. His right arm had been severed above the elbow. There was a backpack in one corner, a sandwich on the table. Diana asked him why he only had one arm. He said a bird had flown away with it. She nodded earnestly.

He offered us *lulus* from our tree. A bit jumpy, he dropped one.

We thought we'd conjured him here to help us, so we acted hospitable. We were a bit taken aback to see him behaving as if it was his place and we were the guests. When Marcela told him the place was ours, he informed us he was staying a while. Though this was rude, we took it in stride. There was something hard in his face. I didn't think he was a happy god. Maria didn't mind; she cried tears of joy. This seemed to confuse him.

I asked him if he'd come from the sea. He said no; he'd come from the Medio Magdalena, inland.

On our walk home, Maria said she was sure it was Luowiko. Marcela said she didn't know. There was something she didn't trust about him. We considered this, because we'd learned to trust Marcela's hunches. But we wanted him to be our own personal god, like a pet but with powers. It was dusk, a special time when every animal in the forest was in a state of alert transformation; those whose souls fed on solar fires wound down, and those whose souls who fed on moonlight began to stir.

Now that Luowiko the god was with us, our cabin wasn't just on the border of Kogi territory but also on the border between the heavenly and the worldly, between the undying possibilities of our dream world and the endless struggle against the wear and tear of daily life, between poppy potions and our special incantations and mending clothes and gardening. We had learned to be specialists in the sorting and sifting of realities from our parents who pushed their pasts back down the hill.

We went home and told everyone we'd met the god Luowiko. They thought it was just another one of our stories.

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It was a week before we had the opportunity to return to our cabin.

Though bold enough to help himself to our garden, Luowiko was wary of us. He eyed us suspiciously and talked to us in a singsong slow voice.

Apparently, where he was from, this was how one spoke to children. It was as if we hardly knew Spanish at all.

"How…old…are…you?"

Diana asked him if he had a family, and he said he did, in Cali.

"Where do you kids live? You don't seem like you're from around here."

"We're from Cloud Village."

"And where's that?"

"An hour down the hill."

"I was wondering. Do you know an anthropologist named Teresa? She was here years ago."

"That's our mother."

He laughed and ruffled Diana's hair. "In that case, I am already like family to you. I went to University with your mom a long time ago."

"Like Fabio?"

"Fabio Avella Garcia?"

Our parents didn't believe in last names. They said last names were for governments to track people, like *cedula* numbers, whatever they were. "I don't know Fabio who writes poetry," said Marcela.

"Is he here too?"

"Yes, there's a whole village."

When he smiled, the hardness in his face melted away. "A village up here? How does Fabio live without his precious poetry readings?"

"He reads to us," I said in all seriousness.

"Why did she stay up here?"

"Because she wants to live in peace," replied Diana.

"That's the same reason I'm up here. She's right. As usual, your mother is right.

We brought him home with us. Rodrigo and Teresa chatted until dawn. From that first night on, he stayed in her hammock. Fabio enjoyed spreading the

news that the two of them had been a couple at University. “They should be given space,” he said.

People threw themselves into the serious business of gossiping. How did he lose his arm? What was the nature of his relationship with Teresa?

The next day, we went to see Fabio. He told us that Rodrigo had run away from the guerrillas, making us swear to secrecy, knowing we loved to keep secrets almost as much as we loved his stories.

Settling in

After Amparo left, Emma felt city ways fall from her. She walked a little slower. She began to spend more time with Lane again, and it scared her. Like someone swearing off liquor after a bender, she swore off the city. But she knew that as soon as she recovered from the excitement, she'd be itching to escape her sober existence again.

Fabio wept with joy when he saw his old friend Rodrigo. He invited him over for a game of chess along with many glasses of his homebrewed *chirinche* liquor. They played a private tournament for the next couple weeks. Emma liked to watch whenever she could get away without Lane noticing. She came for the sport of it, not for Fabio who was ignoring her anyway. It felt comforting to be in his presence, but she no longer felt the same spark.

One evening, she asked Fabio about the grave of the man with the red hair. Though he was lackadaisical about village affairs, he seemed to know everything Teresa knew, since they'd been friends so long.

"He was a missionary. Never managed to convert anyone though."

"So you knew about the plague then?"

"Not the plague, no. I don't know if we'd have moved here had we known."

Fabio liked to veer his discussions with Rodrigo to revolution and art. Fabio said to Rodrigo: "You can have a soul and not be bourgeois. To have a soul was all well and fine. But Rodrigo thought unengaged art was indulgent when one lived in a country full of poverty and illiteracy. Fabio said that one could combat illiteracy with poetry workshops in the slums. Rodrigo shrugged. And so they argued, day after day.

Their discussion of revolution was as impersonal and abstract as a chess game. Here they were calmly discussing murder as if it were the construction of a new well.

Chess gave Fabio an excuse to procrastinate on his book. He seemed at peace; perhaps the regularity of its rules was a relief from the contradictory process of

trying to capture untamed inspiration in order to contain it in words. Released from looking inward at his own chaotic psyche, he now allowed himself the luxury of simply looking outward at the definite lines and symmetrical shapes of the board.

The chessboard was always left out with the last move from the night before, lingering like an unanswered question.

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One night after a party, Emma found herself in Lane's hammock again. It was like coming home. She had to tell him, though, how she'd felt *invaded* with his constant advice. He said he'd been merely trying to help make things better, but he would try to hold his tongue if that's how she felt. He squeezed her hand, and she almost believed him.

It was his turn to voice his complaints, but he held back. She knew she had hurt him deeply, but she had been numb to his pain. Growing up with a guilt tripping drunk, she'd learned to selectively shut down that crucial element that makes a person human, empathy. Lane didn't resort to any overt appeals for pity, but she recognized the pleading glint in his eye. Part of her felt sorry for him, the other did not. These two sides battled for a few moments. He squeezed her hand again. Empathy won.

In all this time, she'd never told him about her mother's drinking, so she did now. She started with the time she'd had to make her own baby bottle and ended when she slammed the door behind her for the last time. This took a couple hours. He said he'd sensed something like this. He kissed the tears on her cheeks.

Then he told her about Panama, whispering so no one could hear. Now she was the one to be surprised. When she thought about it, the signs had been there. How else would a boy from Paradise, Utah have gotten to go to college besides by joining the military? She'd assumed he'd gotten his bossy *invasive* ways from farm life, getting up at five to feed the cows and struggling to keep everyone fed. Now she knew that the regimentation of the military must have affected him profoundly, that and the guilt of not knowing whether or not he had killed. No

wonder he was so driven to do good deeds. It stunned her to realize she didn't know him as well as she thought. She knew his Cloud village persona, but what about the Lane of Paradise, Utah or Lane the soldier? Would she ever get to know *him*?

Goodbye

I woke up just before dawn. Lying in my hammock, I waited for the familiar serenade of my birds. Instead, I heard a violent blast. I looked to my parents for reassurance, but they looked terrified. That's when I knew to be truly worried.

Soon men with guns came to our hut. One of them was young, maybe sixteen; the other was in his late twenties. Though I'd never heard a gunshot before, I understood what the sound was. But I didn't ask myself right then if anyone had been killed. I assumed they were just warning shots. Why would anyone want to kill us? We were peaceful. That's what everyone had always told me, and I believed it wholeheartedly.

In a voice far angrier than any I'd ever heard, the older one told us we had twenty minutes to pack. I had never been afraid of anyone before. Later, I would learn that children were often afraid of parents and other authority figures. Here, the scariest person was Teresa. And she could be easily distracted from her fuming if I skilfully turned the subject to whatever project most interested her at the moment.

We were taught, even encouraged, to question adults. As long as we asked intelligent questions and didn't raise our voices, we would usually be congratulated, even if we didn't get our way. So I was totally unprepared for this. There was no way to question these men. Even *I* knew that.

We stared, frozen in terror, waiting for them to leave.

Then the young one got angry. "I said, pack! Move! And he started to move towards me.

This surprised me, but what surprised me more was that Mom blocked his way. "We'll pack. Leave my baby alone.

The teenager stared at her for a minute with his lifeless eyes. I'd seen this hardness in Rodrigo's eyes at times for an instant. I waited for the boy's eyes to come to life again, but they didn't. I could almost hear Dad's thoughts now, chastising Mom for doing something so stupid. I wondered if we were all going to die now and what that was like. Did we become stars or did our souls travel

like butterflies up and down the mountain? I would rather be a butterfly than a star. Then I would get to stay here on my mountain.

The younger man laughed an empty laugh.

"Hurry up with your packing," the older one said.

I went to find Marcela and Diana, though my parents called after me, telling me to come back at once. The girls were in their hut, safe. Teresa was packing frantically. She told me to hug my friends goodbye. My friends hugged me back as if it were just a normal day. Not even Diana was weepy.

I went to say goodbye to my goats and chickens. And I freed my jarred spiders and pet rat. Then I went home for the last time. I didn't have much to pack. I asked my parents if I could bring Blue Paws. They said no. Quickly, I walked him into the woods and told him to stay. Hugging him goodbye was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do.

Dad made sure to gather all the handwritten pages of his unfinished book. Fabio stopped by. We all hugged each other in one heap, even Dad. This is when we heard the second blast of gunfire. I looked at Fabio, asking him with my eyes what was going to happen to us. No one said a word.

There were other armed men in the village. We were all split up into small groups. We were grouped with Alessandra and Spazzolino and ordered to walk. Blue Paws found us and tried to follow, but the young one with the dead eyes shot him.

When I cried, they ordered me to stop. I wondered if we were going to die.

The men with guns never left our side. If someone had to pee, one of them came along. We hiked downwards into warmer weather, past our *lulu* trees and everything I had ever known. We camped one night near a stream. Exhausted, we dragged ourselves down the mountain all the following day in total silence until we were sweating from the lowland heat. Then there was a road. The paramilitaries forced us into their jeep and drove us to Santa Marta. They dropped us off in some neighbourhood far from the city centre. For days we searched for our friends and found no one. Spazzolino and Alessandra bought

tickets to Italy. We went to Cartagena to stay with strangers that my parents called my “aunt” and “uncle” until we could decide what to do.

I looked closely at my parents’ faces to see when we were safe enough to be able to break down and cry. They stared vacantly into space most of the time. But I did notice they were holding hands for the first time in a while. Looking into Mom’s eyes I wondered where the courageous woman who had stood up to the soldier had gone. This scared me more than the traffic and the pollution and the men with guns we saw all over the city. My parents didn’t bother to explain these things to me. I had to try to figure them out myself. I experienced neither the wonder nor the fear I had expected at seeing the city for the first time. I felt numb.

My parents told me later that they’d been preoccupied with the question of whose guns the girls and I had found. Was it these men who had left the guns? Did these men even know about the guns? Were the guns Rodrigo’s? Did these men come to steal the guns from their enemies so they could never be used against themselves? Had someone perhaps been followed back to the village? They had no way of knowing. How could they forget how Maria had warned us? I knew the truth. The village was cursed.

Later, my parents told me that by staying in the village, they had simply wanted to keep me away from the evils of the world, separate from the profane, as if I were really a sacred stone like jade. But like the ecologically destructive society they rejected, they had made the mistake of thinking the part could be separated from the whole, a mountain could be separated from the world. They should have known this was not possible.

Fashion and Sex

The next morning, we took the bus to my supposed aunt and uncle's house in Cartagena. My aunt was really a friend of my mother's, Carola the Kogi linguist. She lived with her husband Yves, from France. Along the highway, the cars looked like lethal weapons. For my first week in the city, my parents had to take my arm as we walked down the street. Each time they let go of me, I would stop in my tracks, watching all the mayhem.

I was twelve years old, but I may as well have been five. Everything was new to me. I had a lot more than cars to watch out for on those streets. Red horse-drawn carts, stray dogs, and motorcycles rushed by us. And the sidewalks were crowded with sweaty people. Unaccustomed to the heat, I had my fair share of sweating to do too. I was shocked at the women's short skirts, though my mother had taught me enough for me to recognize this peculiarity as fashion. I hoped that I wouldn't be forced to wear 'fashion' just because I was a girl. I vaguely understood it as connected with 'commerce'. I understood commerce to be a type of sadness.

I stared at the women, amazed that so many shades of skin could co-exist on one sidewalk: olive, *arequipe*, coffee, honey. It was hard to connect their beauty with anything sad.

Whereas until then I had been a calm and well-behaved child, now I became a hyperactive teenager overnight. All that I had seen in the day flashed in front of my eyes as I tried to sleep. I worried about the old man that sat on the corner with a gash in his leg asking for money. I cried myself to sleep at night, thinking about Blue Paws. I didn't worry about the fate of the village yet, because I thought we were merely on some sort of inconvenient vacation and we'd go back after the bad men were safely far away.

My aunt had a television. I had been warned about this too, but I liked to watch the bright colours flicker about. We didn't have as many different colours at home. There was a lot of talk about sex on TV. Mom had warned me about sex. She had told me it would ruin my life. I was too young to wonder if her

attitude had anything to do with my dad.

One day, my mom went on a shopping spree with my aunt. From there, they went to a beauty parlour. When they returned, Mom looked like a city woman. Her hair was brushed out straight; her lips were a hideous red; and she wore a blue skirt above the knees with a low-cut tank top and a bra that made it look like she had one large breast. I looked for sadness in her eyes, but found none. She laughed and twirled in circles to show us every inch of her new self. I wondered if she'd been lying to me all along. She seemed to like fashion. Maybe she really liked sex too.

I started missing my friends. I demanded to know what happened to them. My parents said they didn't know.

Mom wanted to go home to San Francisco. At first, Dad fought her on the idea, saying he'd never go back to that godforsaken country, so she tricked him into thinking it was his idea. She told him how proud she was of him as a father, how she knew he wouldn't want to raise a child in the middle of a war, how she'd always known him to be an honourable man.

And that's how he found himself at a call centre in Cartagena on the line with his brother in Utah asking him to wire some money. Mom said how proud she was that Dad was willing to sacrifice his new homeland for his family. Since we'd been evicted, they'd spent every night together. Maybe that's why her tactic worked.

Officially, I didn't exist. And my parents had overstayed their visas by over a decade. But in a country where you can have someone killed for thirty dollars, this could be fixed for a fee. Soon I had a birth certificate, and we all had valid passports. That's when we found out that my mother's name wasn't Emma. She had named herself after the famous anarchist revolutionary Emma Goldman. Her real name was Frances.

It was after they'd bought tickets to San Francisco that they broke the news. We would never be going back home. I wondered why they wanted to go to San Francisco if it was so evil. Was it like fashion and sex, something you should only admit you enjoy in private?

San Francisco

After spending a few weeks at Carola and Yves' house in Cartagena, we flew to San Francisco via Miami. No matter how much my parents tried to tell me otherwise, I expected the plane to fall from the sky. Metal is heavy. How could it fly? Diana would have swallowed the notion that metal could fly without hesitation, but she also believed in unicorns and fairies.

We arrived in late November. It was foggy, and everything was grey. At first we lived in a hotel in North Beach. After sleeping off the jet lag, my parents took me walking around. We went downtown. They were excited to show me my first skyscraper. The enormity of the towering structures frightened me. The glass and concrete, the sharp edges, gave me a chill from head to toe. I realized Mom must have been as homesick back in Cloud Village as I was now.

After a couple weeks, we moved into an apartment on Dolores Park in the Mission district. As soon as we settled in, Mom wrote Fabio at his mother's house. We waited anxiously but didn't hear back.

During those first weeks, I had brief flashes of understanding why my parents had left: the endless roads, parking lots, a paved-over land for a made-over people who looked like ghosts in artificial shades for which I had no names. Accustomed to breathing rich oxygen-filled air given to us generously by millions of leaves, I breathed shallowly.

I liked Chinatown a lot better. There, the colours of the produce pierced through the fog. The smell of roast duck wafted out into the street. A man usually played a sad song on a long stringed instrument on Stockton St. There, I cheered up. Maybe some of the vibrancy my mother had described could indeed be found here in this grey city.

I wondered where they put their native tribes. Were they hiding, like the Kogi?

Homesick people are persecuted by smells and sounds that sneak up on them unexpectedly as painful reminders of home. I didn't have that problem. Nothing here had any parallel at home, nor did it resemble the San Francisco of

my dreams. Sometimes I awoke to the sound of birds from Dolores Park and thought I was back on the mountain.

Compared to my father, I handled the move well. During our first months, he paced back and forth with his hands in his pockets every day for an hour or so, religiously as if he was doing his daily laps. He would only speak about one subject. Any other subject was cleverly rerouted to the following: "I should have never brought us back here. I shouldn't have. Should I have? He felt we should have at least stayed in Cartagena, in case we could later return home.

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I was sure I was going to love school. I was so excited I couldn't sleep. That morning I missed the bus, so I was late. The teacher yelled at me, but I was undaunted. I learned about the hypotenuse of the triangle. What a wonderful word, hypotenuse. It sounded like it expressed all the wistfulness of the world in four short syllables. When I went to sleep at night, I repeated the word over and over like a mantra, picturing myself drawing rainbows in coloured chalk on the blackboard.

Watching the kids with their friends made me miss the girls. I imagined Marcela and Diana were mad at me for not writing them. How could they know I didn't have their new address? I knew little Diana wouldn't understand. Like me, she'd never been abandoned, never known rejection. I couldn't understand why the other kids at school didn't like me. I liked them, so it was only natural they should like me back. Everyone I'd ever known had liked me as much as I liked them. I didn't yet know that here just being different was a crime. In our village, weirdness was something to be celebrated and cultivated; it was what made you special and unique.

One day, minding my own business while waiting to use the restroom, a blonde girl told me my clothes looked stupid. The Kogi wore only one outfit in one colour, something akin to white dressing gowns and white pointy floppy

hats. And the villagers had a no nonsense peasant fashion sense, so I liked to have a touch of flamboyance. I wasn't about to give up my new red-lace long skirt, dark red shirt and fake coral necklace for these strange children.

Eventually, I accepted the fact that I wouldn't make friends. After that, life got easier. I hid in the bathroom during lunch and avoided making eye contact in the halls. I had a lot of studying to do anyway, to make up for lost time. The school librarian became the closest thing to a friend I had at school.

The teachers taught me all about this thing called the United States, with its invented holidays, like Mutual Aid week. And like in Cloud village, they made a big to-do about freedom. And in both places, they seemed to be adept at keeping people in their place. Instead of being stuck on a mountain, here people were stuck in their jobs.

If the kids were especially mean to me, I would walk to Chinatown after school to buy moon cakes. One of the first things my parents had taught me in Cartagena was how to use money. It was still hard to get used to the fact that people would trade good food for little slips of paper; sometimes I felt like I was committing robbery. The lady at the bakery liked to tell me that in China you could only get moon-cakes at festival time, whereas in San Francisco you could make your own festival any day of the year. It was like the fruits and vegetables available regardless of the season, turning winter into summer like the electric lights turned night into day.

I liked to stay away from the house as long as possible to escape my parent's fighting.

I cried myself to sleep every night that winter. Though our village was known for its mist, by midmorning the sun burned through it, shining brightly until the afternoon rains. Here the gloom never rested; it reigned over everything. Mushrooms grew through our bathroom tiles, mould on our books. If Blue Paws were with me, he would have curled himself up at my feet, protecting me from the loneliness of the city outside. Mom let me get a parakeet in Chinatown. He was blue, so I called him Bluey after Blue Paws.

I often wondered if my animal friends missed me as I missed them. Did they miss Moncho's songs? I tried to collect animals as I had in the village. I brought Sally the squirrel up to our apartment, but Mom screamed at me. "Get that rodent out of my house! I had never known her to be so squeamish before. I guess she was returning to her city ways. But why did she have to be so grouchy with Sally who had never done anything to her?

I let Sally out on the ledge and fed her peanut butter and crackers. The next evening I heard her scratching at the window, so I snuck down to the kitchen and got her an apple. After that we made it a routine. When the kids at school were mean to me, Sally would always cheer me up.

Sometimes I wondered if the girl in the village really had been me. Surely, I had dreamed it up, the iguanas, the secret cabin, the jaguar. Even if I confused it with a dream, I could never imagine my life without the image of my mountain providing a relief to events as they unfolded. It was still my origin, the scene for my nightly dreams as it had been the scene for the daydreams of my parents.

*

The red glow of the perpetual electric twilight of the city night kept me tossing and turning for months, wistfully remembering the dark of true night pierced by the pin-prick of stars, so unlike this amorphous city glow. Mom pasted some glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. They just made my insomnia worse. To this day, I continue to be a light sleeper.

Dad had trouble sleeping too. He slept till noon and didn't get dressed until dusk. He sat around reading and drinking coffee. When I asked him if he was happy to be home, he said, "Not yet. I'm enjoying this little vacation. Don't tell your mother, but I'm glad not to have to work in the fields anymore."

On the day Dad threw my desk across the room, I really had an okay day otherwise. The holes he punched in the wall were quickly plastered over. Life wasn't so bad. It's not that he was mean to me, not that often anyway. It's that I didn't recognize him. Mom said if he didn't get a job soon, she'd have to kill him. It was like having an alien living in our house. But he loved us more than himself.

Mom was not even a little bit amused that he wasn't looking for a job yet. Dad had problems filling out forms properly and filing things on time. He constantly whined about the "petty rules" of bureaucracy. Mom said he only liked rules if he was the one to set them. I noticed he didn't tell me what to do as much here. Now it was Mom who bossed me around, though there wasn't much to tell me because, having been deprived of school for so long, I loved homework. Mom had been offered a teaching position at City College starting in the fall. In the meantime, she had a part-time job at a bookstore.

Dad spent the afternoons at Café Boheme, shooting the breeze over a few glasses of chilled white wine with the Salvadorian leftist crowd, alleged former guerrillas, at least that's what they told the ladies. They started coming over to our place, bottle of wine in hand, to debate politics. They taught me all about surviving war in the jungle. It never once occurred to me I'd already survived it.

One guy, Rolando the poet, befriended me. He taught me terms like historical materialism and primitive accumulation and Lenin's theory on Imperialism. Mom called Dad's new friends "revolutionaries" in a mocking voice, or she called them useless in her normal, serious voice.

One evening, Rolando and the salsa dancer Luis joined us for dinner. Dad cooked one of his bizarre curries and served boxed white wine for them and Colombian hot chocolate for me. Luis told us about the book he was writing about the war in El Salvador. He said he might as well make it autobiographical, because you just can't make up stories more out of control than real life. Dad said that movies were Hitler's medium. Luis said that Hitler sure knew how to get his point across, just to make Dad mad. I was relieved when Dad laughed and poured him a drink.

Mom grabbed the bottle and served herself and Rolando. Dad continued saying, “The movement needs speakers and writers, not Disney.”

Mom laughed at the word “movement.”

Dad pretended she didn’t exist.

*

On the weekends, it was impossible to avoid my parents. On the positive side, Dad was more cheerful. Mom’s departure for work Monday morning made him feel useless. But on the weekend, he felt like a man again. Plus, he missed Mom terribly all week. So come Saturday, he woke us up with banana pancakes.

Mom bought a jalopy. I was surprised when Dad didn’t say anything about it being an evil product of greed, choking us all to death with its noxious fumes. I think this was because he missed being out in the country so much.

He invented a game called “playing map.” Each of us would point at a random place on the map within a few hours’ drive, and then we’d choose the best of the three and go there immediately.

Mom would bring her mini easel and paint. I have her painting of a snow-covered Mount Shasta up in my study to this day. Dad always took his notebook. Since I inherited Dad’s lack of hand-eye coordination, I couldn’t draw to save my life, so I started to keep a journal. One weekend, Dad bought me a leather-bound diary.

Dad let me practice driving on back roads. In Napa and Sonoma wine country, he snuck me wine. Mom didn’t approve.

We laughed together, even if this meant we laughed *at* each other. Or, Mom and I laughed at Dad, the way his hair fell in his face, the intent look on his face while he scribbled in his notebook. After several of these weekends, Dad stopped his pacing.

One day, my folks went wine tasting in Napa, freeloading in other words. They refused to actually pay for any “yuppie wine”, as they called it. I had to

stay in the car. From there I could see them on the terrace, laughing and kissing. I think it was on that day that Dad finally forgave Mom.

After six months, to our relief, Dad started to fixate on the future instead of the past. He was ABD, All But Dissertation, so he couldn't get full time University teaching work in this country. He applied for jobs in Malaysia, Singapore, Western Samoa, Kenya, Fiji and Botswana. My mom said she wasn't about to drag the whole family to another godforsaken place.

This surprised me. I thought she'd loved our mountain. I was on his side. He won me over telling me that these places were tropical. He bought an atlas and took out books in the library about all the places we might move. We learned about the tribes of the Kalahari and the kava-kava ceremonies of Samoa.

He and I started a new type of "playing map" game. We planned our moves in meticulous detail. We knew which neighbourhood in Kuala Lumpur we'd like to live in. Dad only left the house to show me something about a place we might move to. He'd take me to Malaysian food, or buy kava-kava, or to take me to the library and show me pictures of the Kalahari.

We started to learn Malay. I learned far more geography than I'd have ever learned at school. For the first time ever, I thought of my father as fun. Mom shook her head and worked on her lesson plans.

*

I learned to pick out other immigrants on the Muni and the streets. I don't mean those immigrants that come from Shanghai or Havana, but those who are immigrants to the machinery of the modern metropolis. I followed the path of their eyes. They looked far past the other passengers to the forest, or the desert, or the sea. They had difficulty identifying the objects around them, as if without a context these things floated free.

I met a bushman from Lesotho this way. He stood paralyzed at the corner of fourteenth and Mission St. staring beyond the green stoplight. Another time, I

found a Tibetan Khampa warrior laughing at the statue in Union Square. Then a Mongolian shepherd sat next to me on the BART.

At first they recognized me too, but eventually the faraway look in my eyes faded away. I had begun to size up my surroundings like any San Franciscan, assessing them for potential danger. Finally, I stopped approaching these people, because I now scared them as much as anybody else.

I found life in the city much more guided by faith than on the mountain. Here people had faith that the electric tram would bring them places safely without the least curiosity about how it worked. They ate food that came from places they had never seen, grown by people they'd never met and trusted it wasn't poisoned. If someone arrived in a Kogi village saying she would carry someone into the clouds with her, no one would trust her enough to take the ride. But here, without hesitation, people got in metal boxes that flew thousands of miles. Though I had done so once, I couldn't imagine becoming accustomed to it. As I waited for the bus, I was astonished that everyone seemed to trust that the bus driver would arrive roughly on time and bring them to work without any detours. What if the driver felt like stopping off for a coffee? What if he felt like going to the beach? What if he got distracted and ran into a building, or worse, got suicidal and drove us off a cliff? I always sat at the front and kept my eye on the driver. How come they trusted him when they didn't even know him, when they often had so little trust in their own friends? When we were driven from the village, I'd learned how dangerous strangers could be, and now I was surrounded by them. I was separated from these strangers by my lack of faith in the reliability of things.

My dreams weren't as vivid in San Francisco, perhaps because of my insomnia, nor did I feel like telling stories. There wasn't as much need to tell stories, with so many stories going on outside my front window at all hours. It's a good thing we didn't have a television. I might have gone nuts from overstimulation.

I had been treated as special, even precious, ever since I was born. But after wandering these streets with anonymity with the crowds of nine to fivers,

café denizens and street derelicts, I realized I was just an ordinary person and here, so far from the Kogi to whom precious stones were sacred, Jade was just a rock. On Market St., nothing was sacred.

Streets and Strangers

Returning was even more exciting than leaving had been. Emma had dreamt of the life in the streets for so long, the smell of Chinese chilli paste and mango, the sound of Nahua and Cantonese. She was even happy to see the same homeless lady on Valencia St, the one whose only word seemed be, “Quarter?”

She settled into American English like it was comfy old couch. That she could joke with ease, understanding the nuances of every turn of phrase amazed her.

To her surprise, she loved going to work. Putting on makeup and nice clothes at the crack of dawn filled her with excitement. On the way to work, double soy macchiato in hand, she got a contact high from the frenetic street energy, even from the over-caffeinated stressed-out commuters. The smell of panic was exhilarating.

Most of all, she loved leaving her personal life behind. All of Cloud Village had been an extension of her hut; everyone knew the minutia of her life, her every failure and faux pas. On the bus to work, she was happy that no one knew her name. At work people only cared about her teaching. More importantly, they actually respected her for it. At community meetings she’d spoken her mind, but unless she had Lane’s backing, people tended to brush her aside. Here, her students listened attentively; to her shock, they sometimes wrote down things she said. At work she could breathe easy.

This gave her the strength to tolerate Lane’s months on the couch in a stupor. She didn’t want Jade to lose a father as well as a home. She’d promised herself Jade wouldn’t have to go through what she had as a child as the perpetual new kid in school. Now Jade was new to more than a school; she was new to a country, a pace of life, a state of mind. Emma hadn’t prepared her for this. In fact, she’d kept her from knowing a lot of necessary things about life here, like what police are and why you don’t talk to strangers.

As annoying as Lane was in his current state of sloth, at least he left her to her own devices. She could chop onions and make rice in peace without a sermon on the best cooking methods. Of course, she hoped he’d get a grip one day soon.

She might eventually get lonely without a partner capable of adult conversation. Worse, what kind of father could he be to Jade in such a state? In the meantime, she was enjoying going about her day with her thoughts unfettered. Without the weight of his certainties, her thoughts were free to rise up and swirl in erratic and irrational patterns.

Lane had recently begun to have hissy fits, questioning every decision he'd made in his life, then in a twist of logic, transferring the blame to her. When this happened, she could disappear into the city. This wasn't the same as disappearing into the forest. All paths in the forest led back to the village. Here the whole world was ripe for exploring. One could walk down a San Francisco street and end up in a pocket of China, or Vietnam or Nicaragua.

One night Lane cooked spaghetti, drinking Chianti and singing off-key at the top of his lungs. She had never heard him sing before. They laughed and ate by candlelight. On nights like this when he had dinner on the table for her when she got home, she would have a few glasses of wine. She could unwind when he pitched in; the burden wasn't totally on her. She wondered if Jade was as surprised as she was to see this jolly side of him; he was never this much fun on the mountain. Still, they avoided any sticky subjects that might set him off, like leaving Colombia. Despite his moods, the three of them were closer here. No one else could have possibly understood what they'd been through.

She looked up her old friends. Tammi was sober and back in school. Yardley was still strung out. Chuckie was dead. She invited Tammi over now and again. Jade liked to pull on her blue braids. Emma had been excited to tell her about all she'd experienced, but Tammi's eyes glazed over. And as Tammi told her about her excruciating attempts to kick the habit before she finally succeeded, it was hard for Emma to understand. But in a way, they had both been on arduous journeys, so this brought them back together.

She missed Fabio terribly, not as a lover, but as a friend.

If she had a choice to go back, would she leave the streets of San Francisco, the sound of cumbias blasting from the trannie bar below at three in the morning, the salty smell of the sea mixed with sourdough? Would she give up

her newfound sense of purpose to go back to life as a hippie haus frau? Could she do that for Jade? She didn't think she could.

A Real Family

Mom enjoyed introducing me to new things. Though she had tried to keep knowledge of this world from me on the mountain, now she did the exact opposite. She became passionate about introducing me to her world: Japanese baths, burritos, sushi, jasmine pearl tea.

My life was full of new and exciting things: music, trolley cars, fried rice, the Pacific Ocean, tennis shoes. It's hard to explain how downright ecstatic tennis shoes are if you've had them your whole life. When they finally allowed shoes in the village, all we had were homemade sandals. So when I first got my sneakers, I liked to jump up and down in them for hours at a time, just because I could. I was so excited.

One Sunday, Mom brought me to the De Young Museum as part of my education. We went to the travelling surrealist exhibit first. A purple Miro painting entitled: "Catalonian Landscape" caught my attention.

She told me a history of the painting. People gathered around to listen to her story. A young man was giving her extra attention. She giggled flirtatiously. She was wearing a scoop neck blouse with an amber necklace setting off her olive skin. Her black hair was shiny; she'd recently rediscovered conditioner. At home, her hair had been scraggly, her clothes ragged.

I realized I didn't know that much about my mother's past life. When she finished, I asked her how she knew so much. She said she had a degree in Art and Architecture. She'd even had one painting shown in a gallery.

I felt betrayed that she'd kept so many cool things from me. I couldn't understand what had possessed her to throw away this whole world full of treasures. What had she held against ice cream, swimming pools, galoshes or surrealist paintings? Especially ice cream.

It was a sunny spring day. We walked around Golden Gate Park eating burritos. I asked my Mother why we hadn't gone to visit my grandparents yet.

Then she started to cry.

She sat down on the lawn out front. She pulled herself together to tell me my grandmother had drunk herself to death while we were gone; relatives said she'd never really recovered from her boyfriend Bob's death. And Mom couldn't find her father. I started to cry too in the easy way one cries for those they have never known.

What made matters worse was that Dad hadn't told his parents he had returned. He was waiting until he got a job, he said. He was ashamed to face his family like this. I eventually stopped waiting.

Now I felt that I'd lost two homes, the mountain and the life of my parents' past, the home I'd always thought I'd "return" to, one filled with presents from grandparents on Kropotkin's Feast Day. I learned that here they called it Christmas but couldn't get used to the idea.

After nine months of waiting, we finally got a response from Fabio. I was so excited I tore the letter from Mom's hands. But I noticed a page was missing. I wondered if it was a love letter to Mom, or if she was protecting me from terrible news.

After saying how much he missed us, he told us something shocking. Teresa was a former-guerrilla. She'd joined after University along with Rodrigo. Not only that, she'd been the more militant of the two. He apologized for not having told us earlier, but he never thought the fact would affect us. The reason she'd wanted to found a non-violent village was that she'd seen enough violence for one lifetime. Poor Teresa, the arrival of the men with guns must have gutted her.

So here's how our village was destroyed. Rodrigo had indeed left the guerrillas. As a last favour to his comrades, he had allowed them to store guns near our village. They'd snuck them in in the dead of night. Some Aruaco who had been in a feud with Maria's father's family for generations followed them. They were jealous that Maria's dad started a school for the Kogi kids, but had done nothing for the Aruaco, despite his family ties. So they found the guns and killed him.

And when the guerrillas came to pick up their guns, the paramilitaries followed them in. Discovering scraggly hippies in the area, including foreign ones no less, they strongly disapproved. Paramilitaries were like police with executive powers. Some had a strict sense of moral order. He said it could have been worse. In rural Cundinamarca, people had been shot just for smoking pot.

Fabio had gone to Quito to try to make up with his wife, but she had remarried. Now he lived with his mother and had started work as a journalist again. His novel had been released to rave reviews. Mom and I were pleased. Dad was less so. Neither of us had the nerve to remind him of his unfinished book.

I was sad I might never hear Fabio's stories again.

No matter how much I hassled my mother to give me the missing page, she refused to admit that it existed in the first place. She swore that she knew nothing about the whereabouts of my friends and that she was doing her utmost to find them. That night I heard my parents whispering to each other and crying.

Still, those were happy days. The rub was that my dreaming mind picked up the bits of my past that my waking mind had casually tossed aside and took a magnifying glass to them. At night the girls called to me. Sometimes they screamed out.

Soon after that, Dad got an adjunct position at Laney College. This meant he left the house on a regular basis, showered, and even did laundry. He started liking San Francisco. He enjoyed taking me out for burritos, walks across Golden Gate Park, or shopping in Chinatown. But once in a while, he got a distant look in his eye, and I knew he was overcome by nostalgia for our mountain. I would share the moment with him and think of it too.

Dad had softened. Mom worked on him slowly. After the car, he let us get a stereo with a radio. We listened to the news every night. Then he let us get a used dishwasher, probably because washing dishes had become his job. He stuck to his guns on the TV question. He said he wasn't going have his daughter turn into a moron who thinks of nothing but designer jeans and happy meals. Of

course, I'd learned about these things at school. If I'd had any friends, I might have wanted these things, but since I had no hope of fitting in, I couldn't be bothered. He still rambled on about revolution and the evils of capitalism, but now this was limited to fits and starts.

Dad had never lived in a city bigger than Salt Lake before. Mom said this was the first time in his life he wasn't a big fish in a small pond; he had never learned to go unnoticed, to be unimportant. He kept on accidently leaving the car unlocked. While he navigated the roads of Napa with accuracy, he often got lost in the city. Even I had a better sense of the city streets.

My parents fought less and less, but one subject of contention remained: politics. Mom went on demonstrations nearly every weekend. She attended a peace group, an environmental group and a women's group. The part that pissed my Dad off the most was that she circulated petitions about various issues. He couldn't see how she could petition the U.S. government for anything. After all, it was the most evil force in history. He called her "liberal" and "reformist".

She told him she didn't want to be isolated and ineffectual like she'd been on the mountain. The word ineffectual really stung him. When she said that he'd fly off the handle, saying the opposite was true. There they'd been engaged in making change; here they were just cogs in the machine.

He insisted Cloud Village was part of the world. I wasn't sure. It didn't seem part of this big city world at all. He said, at least in Cloud Village, you knew everyone's name and that made it more real than here.

We all missed the village. It was a part of us. And no one else here understood it at all, not even Rolando and Luis, both from rural parts of El Salvador, though I think it was the fact that they understood it more than any North American that bound us to them. It was strange how living in village had nearly torn my parents apart, but now their shared memories of it brought them together.

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The day Dad got a job, he called my grandma with the red hair. The job offer did little to calm her down. She was mad that she'd had no way of reaching us all these years. Dad had sent regular updates, but with no return address. Nor did she appreciate that he hadn't sent any photos of me. Still, she boarded a bus that night. It was a long bus ride from Utah, and she was old, but nothing was going to stop her. When Dad got off the phone, he went straight to a barber and got his hair cut short.

We met her at the Greyhound station downtown. She was older than the grandma of Dad's stories. To my surprise, Dad cried. At first, she looked like she was going to strangle him. Then she hugged him. Dad had said they never hugged or said the "love" word in his family, because they were something called "Methodists". In the car, they were quiet. But when we got home, she sat with me and answered all my questions.

She really was a Republican. I'd understood this was a kind of devil. When I asked her if that meant she supported wars, she looked surprised. She said Democrats supported wars too.

I asked her about the farm. It sounded like Cloud Village, except they raised cows. It was easier to grow grass than other crops, though they grew vegetables for their needs. It was the milk and meat that provided their income. She said Dad had always been a dependable son, getting up at five to milk the cows. She'd have never imagined that he'd run away to some godforsaken foreign country. She supposed there were signs: he snuck out of church to go to the pool hall, and went to Nevada to see "brazen women" with his high school friends. Everybody had loved him in Paradise. He was on the football team. The family had got along fine, and fine was as much as one could ask for. "Why did he stay away so long?"

"He wanted to do something great. To change the world." I said.

"And how was that going to change the world?"

I told her I didn't know. From the way she laughed, I knew we were going to get along just fine. She asked me if she could braid my hair. And then I braided

hers. It had grown back since she'd sold it to feed her kids. Now it wasn't naturally red, but dyed "Red Penny", a shade even brighter than Teresa's hair.

I asked her to make me her cinnamon buns. She took me to the store, and we bought more food than I'd seen in my whole life. She made me dumplings too. She said they were German like my grandfather who died after working in the fields one day when he was forty-two and Dad only eleven months old. She explained that her grandparents had come from Scotland, and they didn't much like the Krauts. But she married one anyway.

She stayed for two weeks and spent most of it in the kitchen. She worked with icy precision. When cooking she had a determined look in her eye that I recognized. It was Dad's look when he was at work on a project, efficient and unstoppable.

Her cinnamon rolls were even better than those in my dreams. I was old enough at thirteen to know that this was special. There's a reason Fabio liked telling stories so much. One's dreams were usually better than reality. I suppose that's why the adults built Cloud Village; it was fashioned from their dreams. This is why they fought so hard to push memories of their former lives out of their minds; their memories held all their previous disappointments, and the village was a place where no one knew them as they once were.

Those days with Grandma were the happiest of my life up until then, even happier than those in Cloud Village. That summer I was going to visit her on the farm in Paradise and meet my uncle and cousins. Here, I didn't have to imagine a family. I had a real one.

The Menagerie

Emma finally let Jade get a border-collie puppy, then a guinea pig and a sugar glider. And that squirrel moved in. Then there was that damn parakeet. Why did she finally relent about the pets?

She'd been more content with Lane here than in the village, but sometimes she would dream of imaginary lovers and awake with the memory of passion; it shook her to her core. One day after work, Lane and Rolando were drinking and raving about revolution on her sofa. As Lane opened another bottle of two-buck-chuck, it hit her. He had to get out. She could not bear one more day with him in her bed, in her kitchen, in her head. She sent Rolando out for more wine, but didn't have the heart to tell Lane then. Knowing that their relationship had come to an end saddened her deeply. But the certainty of her decision made her feel free. And freedom was worth even the most heart-wrenching sadness. She stayed up drinking with them, as a wake for the relationship she would soon bury. She told him the next day, once his hangover had passed. Of course, he fought the idea at first, refusing to leave. But after a few difficult months, he came to agree with her.

When she saw Jade happy with her grandma, the idea had started to float in the periphery of her consciousness. Now Lane had a job. The nightmares had nearly stopped for all of them. Jade would be okay.

Lane moved in with Rolando, only two blocks away. And Jade was going to spend the summer in Utah with Lane's family. She didn't react much differently than when the two of them had slept in separate hammocks.

She'd stayed with him longer than she might have, were it not for Jade. She had been trying to protect Jade as she'd tried to protect her so many times before: by staying in Cloud village, by not telling her that there were people who were evil to the core. So when the men had come for them, Jade had had no point of reference. Emma wanted her to always be oriented from now on, to be as prepared as she'd been in the woods during Mutual Aid week. Of course, she was surrounding her with pets as she'd once surrounded her by high mountains. But

pets were small comfort for a child who would have to grow up with the knowledge that the earth might not outlive her.

Birdsong

One day I was at our corner liquor store buying some strawberry ice cream, when I realized I actually understood part of the Jordanian owner's conversation. I thanked him in Arabic.

"Girl. Where did you learn this?"

"From the radio."

"You pronounce it perfectly. Have you ever been to an Arabic speaking country?"

"No sir."

"Say it again please."

"*Shukran*"

"Perfect. Here, I give you extra ice cream for free."

When I got home, I told my mother. She sent me to a large Russian lady to get tested for the gift my great-grandfather had brought over on the boat. She said I had perfect pitch like him. Did this mean I could pronounce any language? Sing opera? Mom thought I should take up singing, like her.

She had begun to take singing lessons when Dad started working. Here she enjoyed singing at the top of her lungs without worrying if the whole village would hear every wrong note. And Dad didn't dare call her singing shrill anymore. I'd first known everything was going to be okay when Mom started singing again. She said I'd have to think about what I wanted to do with my newly found gift. I thought of how I'd how to imitate a call from the forest birds.

I met my parrot friends on Telegraph hill wandering around the city after school during my first year here. They talked like the parrots back in Cartagena where my "aunt" introduced me to the local flock. She had invented tunes for the parrots to sing. Once, she got them to sing back the first few notes of a popular *vallenato* from the radio. Soon the local flock learned a word or two as well. She taught them Spanish swear words; I taught them a few gems from the Kogi.

The parrots here in San Francisco seemed lonely, like me. I went to see them every day after school. My favourite class was English. We were studying Ginsberg, so the birds studied Ginsberg too, if only the first three words of a poem. They were better students than I was. They added soul to a poem. They couldn't recite in unison though. When the hill became an overlapping discordant symphony, I felt it wasn't so bad here in this strange city. The parrots were my first North American friends.

One afternoon, when I was seventeen, five years after I arrived in San Francisco, I saw the girls at the cross walk of Church and Market. Or at least I thought I saw them; then they were gone. Then I saw them on a Muni bus. They looked just as I'd imagined they would look after five years. They were around the right ages, eighteen and fourteen. The taller one had dark brown hair and the shorter dark auburn. I'd never known what happened to them. I remembered they'd had a cousin here; they could have immigrated here like us.

Recently, car horns had become more jarring again. The people on the street crowded me. The sweat and fumes and grease smells assaulted me. I began to yearn once again for my mountain. I started hanging out in the Golden Gate Park botanic gardens every day after school to look at the tropical trees with the large leaves, like at home. They reached out for torrential rains and got fog instead. Pretty soon I started calling them *my* trees. The trees understood me. They knew how it was to be stuck.

One day I was walking in the botanic gardens, when I saw the girls again. I was almost sure of it. And then they disappeared again. So I started going back to the park. One day in the fall, I looked up and the girls were staring right back at me. I walked up to them, and the taller one said, "I see you love birds as much as us. I want to show you some special birds. Come with us." She spoke to me with a Spanish accent in English in a familiar tone.

I followed them. As I had always followed the girls when I was little. They were always showing me something like a dead iguana. Normally I felt a pang of anxiety when I thought of them, but now I felt entirely at ease. I didn't care if it wasn't really them. It *felt* like them. I felt I could trust them.

A two-hour bus ride later, in Santa Cruz, we ventured into the woods. I thought that maybe these really were my friends, leading me into the woods once more. They regularly looked back to smile at me reassuringly. The young one said, "You talk to parrots."

The trail became narrower until we had to crawl. I could smell the redwoods several minutes before we reached them. Then we found a guy without eyebrows sitting on a couch in a small clearing. He was a little older than us, maybe twenty. He hugged my friends, saying he hadn't seen another person for days. He pointed to a tree with a ladder alongside it.

"Home sweet home," he said.

He motioned for us to follow him seventy-five feet up a redwood tree. I nearly let go of the ladder from sheer terror. By the time I reached the top, I was shaking. The tree house had a bed with a yellow bedspread and a full bookshelf. If I didn't look out the empty hole in the wall of a window, I'd have thought I was on the ground, snug, safe and secure. Like our houses back home, there were no windows, just empty holes, gaps.

"I'm Lee," he said.

The fog was rolling in. The bugs and the birds buzzed away. I felt comforted. It took me a while to realize that it was the absence of cars that reminded me of home.

Lee gave the three of us his bed, crashing out on the floor. I awoke a few hours later to rain falling so hard that the cabin swayed like the beginning of an earthquake. It was fierce like tropical rain without the soothing warmth to balance it out. To the accompaniment of these sounds of home, with their warm bodies next to mine, I felt that these were indeed my childhood friends. If they weren't, why did I feel just as I had when we were all together and happy?

The girls said the woods were quiet, but I thought they were loud. Several kinds of birds were singing an operetta. Insects hummed along. Coyotes wailed in the distance. The forest dwellers oriented me. I always knew how far away from them I was.

Here in the woods, I was reminded that wild birds have their own songs; these weren't parrots in need of guidance. Of course, I didn't recognize most of these birds' songs. I decided to learn them. Is the moment one has learned all the local bird songs the moment a place becomes home?

The next morning we all had blueberry buckwheat pancakes. Lee cooked them on a Propane stove. As we sat down, Lee made a birdcall. A bird sang back, or possibly imitated him, like my parrots. Who was to say who is imitating whom? I asked him to teach me some of his birdcalls.

He didn't tell me the name of the various species here. Instead he told me his names for individual birds. I hadn't told any anyone in San Francisco that I knew birdsongs or talked to parrots. They thought I was odd enough already. I still spoke English with a slight accent and awkward syntax. My parents had insisted on raising me in Spanish at first and then in a strange mix of languages, eventually including Italian and Kogi. People still thought of me as foreign, but I felt like I had by now made the language my own. In these woods, no one seemed to find me the least bit strange. These girls spoke the same way I did. And Lee would find talking to parrots the most natural thing in the world.

After breakfast, we climbed down the tree to his open-air living room. The sun came out. I eased into the couch next to the girls. The younger one took my hand. I was disappointed to notice it didn't resemble Diana's hand at all. Lee sat in a chair across from us, staring at the sky. He opened a bottle of elderberry wine. We sipped and soaked up the sun. When you let a ray of sun absorb into your soul, it is not deflected back into the warming atmosphere. It stays inside you forever.

Hemmed in on all sides by giant redwoods, I sat back and let my mind open up skywards above the trees, above the loss of my childhood home and friends, above our petty family dramas.

These trees had endured many floods. The only ruins I knew of in California were the Sutro baths. And those were hardly ancient; my mom says grandma swam in them as a girl. These trees were our only remnants of antiquity, only they weren't ruins. They were very much alive. Among the longest living things

on earth, I felt closer to eternity and less afraid of death. And when they disappeared, I would feel like a climber in free fall whose rope had slipped.

Up there in the canopy, many species had never been seen by human eyes, never been named. It was covered with ferns, moss and lichen, as if they knew they were endangered and fled up here to safety, like the Kogi had run to the high Sierra.

As I lay there gazing up at the nameless wonders, I wanted to stay awake forever, but I drifted off into daydreams of Marcela and Diana and me together on our mountain.

In my state of blissful relaxation, I stopped pushing the memory beyond the reach of consciousness. Here it was again, ringing in my ears. Once again I heard my friends' last screams as they faced a rain of paramilitary bullets. My parents had lied to me about trying to find my friends. And I had lied to myself that there was hope to find them.

I looked over at the girls. I let go of the younger one's hand. They were strangers. Still, I knew that I would return here whenever the sound of screaming became too loud. Here the songs of the forest creatures provided a soothing counterweight to the shrillness of my memories.

Returning to the city that evening, it was too quiet. The cars made one bland flat sound; they sang no operettas, no symphonies. If inspired, they might let out obnoxious one-toned squeaks. And my parrots had to be coaxed if you wanted them to recite poetry. They had no song of their own.

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Drawn to the forest that so reminded me of my mountain, I met other folks who lived there, other kids who felt like outsiders like me. Some had been home-schooled, others had dropped out of school, and others still had run away from home. Together, we formed our own sort of tribe. And I got to know the sisters whom I'd once confused with my childhood friends. They lived together in a tent under a chaparral bush. They were runaways. A stepfather did things to them in the night. Experts in stealth, after constantly dodging him, they became master

shoplifters. And because they'd had to survive him, they were close, as close as I'd once been to the girls. The forest was behind the campus of U.C. Santa Cruz, so naturally that's where I decided to study.

Though they'd been against providing me with formal schooling when I was little, now that I'd graduated with honours my parents were bursting with pride. I'd decided to major in linguistics. "My daughter the linguist," my dad often said. When they dropped me off at Stevenson College for orientation, they looked like any other parents, not knowing whether to linger or let go. Mom had embroidered my name into my towels and packed four toothbrushes. As they left, Dad burst into tears.

At my new school, I had an easier time than in high school. This was the college of choice for all the other kids who hadn't fit in. There were more of us than I'd ever imagined. For the rest of my life, no matter what corner of the world I travelled to, and I would travel far as a linguist, I would always be able to find other fringe dwellers like me. For now, I lived between the official world of campus and the hidden, illegal world of the forest squatters.

On Saturdays, when it didn't rain, I never missed a party in the woods. Someone always brought out a guitar. I went there to visit my soul sisters, both human and bird, and to sing a tune or two with them.