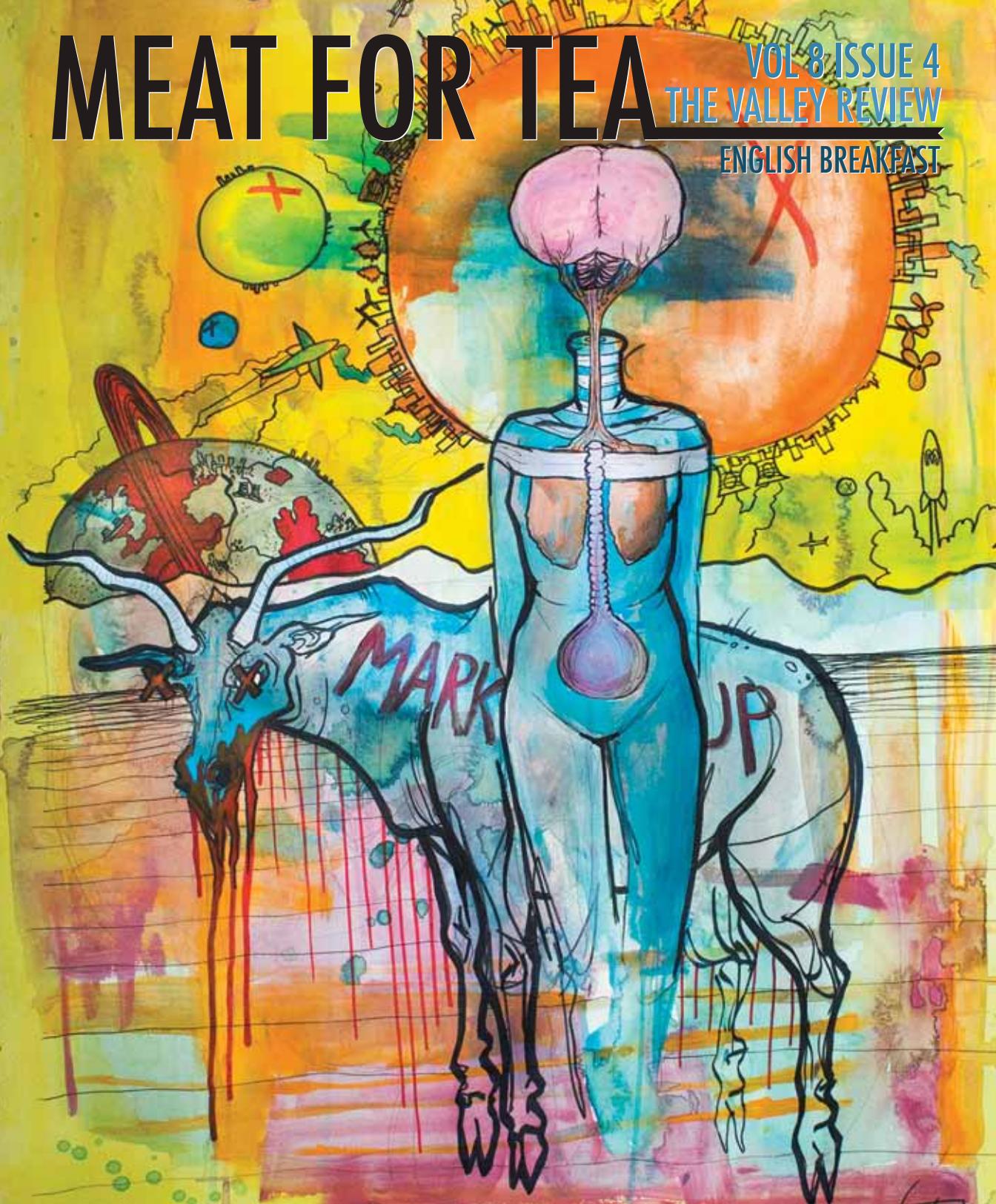


# MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 8 ISSUE 4  
THE VALLEY REVIEW  
ENGLISH BREAKFAST





## Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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## salutations from the editor

I have a dream that on duty police officers will from now on be required to wear video cameras. I have a dream that rape culture will cease to be a part of our culture, or any culture, for that matter. I have a dream that women have full control over their bodies and whether or not to reproduce. I have a dream that religious extremists will have little to no political influence. Suffice it to say, I have many dreams.

Years ago, I read a book that proposed a parallel universe that would actually work. In Robert Anton Wilson's brilliant novel, *Schrödinger's Cat*, a parallel universe is described in which the female president eliminate overcrowding in prisons by eliminating punishment for victimless crimes. All the truly nasty people who insisted on raping, robbing, and murdering each other, were all sent to Texas, (no offense to any Texans reading this). Still, imagine a world like this, a world where we could live and let live, a world in which we could breathe. I think we could make it a reality, not just science fiction.

Still, in these troubled times when racial tensions are running as high as I've ever seen them in my life, people are still writing their poetry, composing new songs, and creating art. I feel fortunate to know so many gifted folks and am excited for the upcoming *Cirque du Gougères*, when the "English Breakfast" issue of *Meat for Tea* will be released. On this night their will be art on exhibit by Michael Sjostedt, Saera Kochanski, and Doug Tibbles, Lord Russ and Wishbone Zoe will rock the house, and there will be films and spoken word to boot.. I look forward to seeing you there. Who knows? Maybe I'll even bake some gougères.

Love,  
Elizabeth MacDuffie

4



# her strange

Christine Brandel

Her hand is sitting on your thigh and you drop yours  
onto hers. Your fingers feel a bone in her thumb,  
is it sticking out just a bit too far? Why?  
On the top of her hand the veins are large and green  
as if a band has been tied around her wrist  
and her blood is trapped beneath the thin, scarred skin.  
Is this the first time you have noticed this?  
What other peculiarities rest upon her person?  
You glance at her neck, there is a mark.  
Is it dirt from the park where you two were walking  
or has it always been there? In three or four months,  
when you slice open her heart, you will find  
some unusual things in there as well.



# newton's third law

Christine Brandel

Bruno's execution did little to kill  
his wife's faith in his innocence.  
Anna continued to wear her band  
with pride. How could a man who had held  
his own child so gently have held another's  
for ransom? So she kept fighting,  
writing the wrongs of his trial  
on every piece of paper she could find.  
She did not stop until her heart did.

And now here we are, a new century.  
Your crime has not decorated  
any headlines, no self-respecting newspaper  
even knows your name. Yet I saw you,  
cradling a life that did not belong to you,  
that you had no right to chisel away. I saw you.  
I know. And I want to tell, yell, write it  
into all my poems until every court convicts  
you, until you become the condemned.



# treatment

Christine Brandel

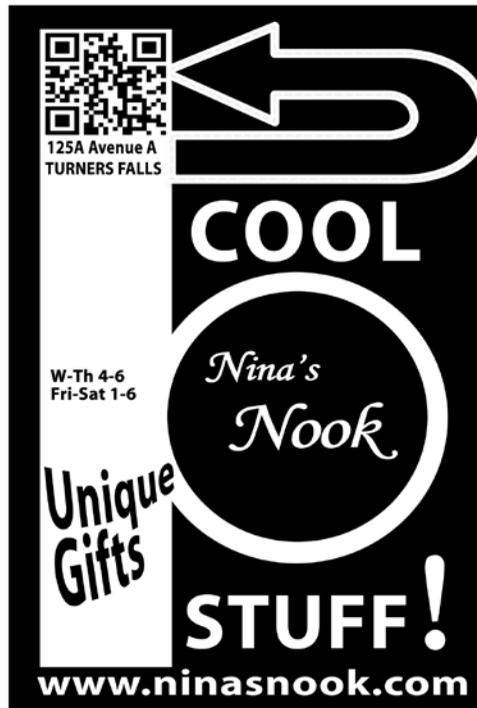
Listen to me, just close your eyes and open your mouth. It's easy enough to eat it. I know, a man taught me all about it--I think he was a doctor. He wears a white coat. Sometimes

what is best for us is not what tastes the nicest.

I've known you all your life. I've watched you fall up stairs, bruise your bones, choke down what's sick. Things must get better.

So settle now and do as I say.

If you have a hard time swallowing, why don't you put some jam on it?



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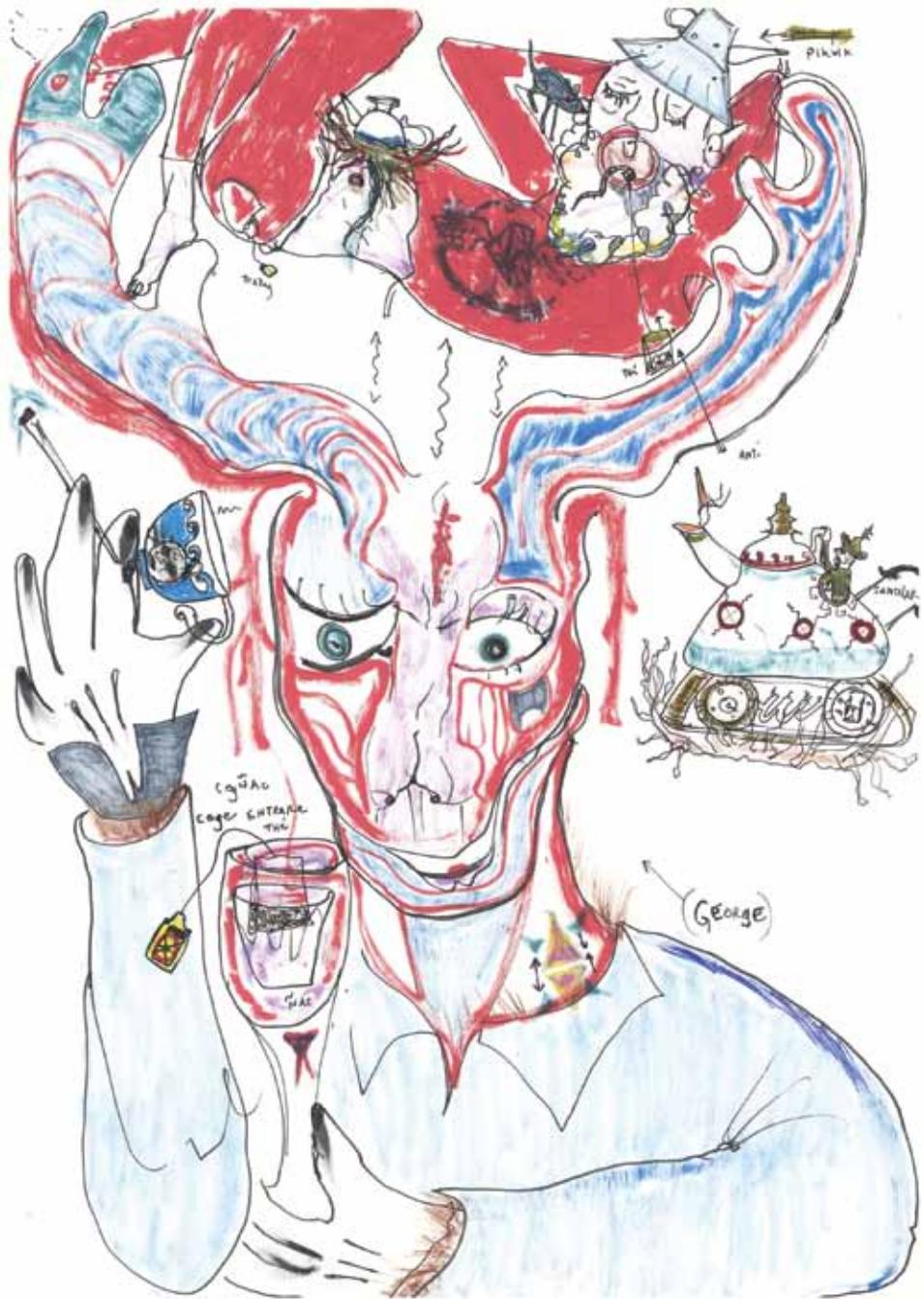
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the war correspondent  
in midst of correspondence soothes himself with english tea from home despite samovar tank in his ear  
Arturo Desimone

# desperados

Marlene Olin

Luellen had just turned thirty-five. She was too old to pass as a trophy wife and too young to be appreciated for her glamor or her wit. She was attractive enough to catch a second glance but too weathered to bear a closer look. Soon she'd be approaching the midway point of her life. She lived in a waterfront mansion and had closetfuls of clothes. Yet forty more years felt like a prison sentence.

Her closest friends were the household help. Maritza was her cook, confessor, and confidante. Broad-shouldered. Squat. Indian cheekbones. Maritza had survived one disastrous relationship after another. She'd remind Luellen daily of her good fortune, reciting a catechism of her own grief.

“You think your husband ignores you? Guillermo, he beat me.”

“You think his children show disrespect? My son, he steal from my wallet.”

“You think his parents hate you? My father, he throw away my love like day-old bread.”

A decade earlier, Karl had treated Luellen like a prized possession. He flaunted her like a rare gem, a Faberge egg, a Baccarat flute. Twenty years older, he knew which wine to drink and which art to invest in. And of all the women in the world he had picked her. Now he looked Luellen over like a flea market find, appraising the dents and the nicks.

“You think your husband looks at other women? Guillermo, we have the sex while he watch TV.”

With her short-cropped hair and boyish figure, Luellen looked ten years younger than her age. In college she ran cross country and played tennis. Whenever she raced, she pictured her sharp angles and bony hips slicing through the air like a speedboat. She always thought large breasts were a burden. Like putting on an extra five pounds.

Luellen tried to smile. “I thought Karl liked my body. I thought he loved my body. But when I mentioned the boob job, his eyes lit up. He practically did a little touchdown dance.”

At first Karl showered her with gifts. A five-carat diamond. A yacht with her name in cursive letters on the hull. He was generous to a fault, desperately lavish. If he didn't adore her, at least he adored a version of her he had carved and whittled. When she looked in his eyes, she saw her own reflection. When she held his hand, his touch lingered.

Now they were strangers in separate bedrooms, breakfasting each morning at a twelve-foot table with cloth napkins on their laps. His parents were robber baron wealthy. They wintered in Palm Beach and summered in the Hamptons. Sitting in his bespoke suits and handmade shoes, Karl spent his days managing their foundation's trust.

The smugness of it drove Luellen crazy. He redistributed a small slice of his family's largesse, came home to a glass of fifty-dollar scotch, and felt like Robin Hood.

"He waved his American Express card," Luellen told Maritza. "And suggested a few rounds of Botox, too."

Her lover was always been on the receiving end. In the fall of 1980, Juan Carlos had arrived in Miami on a raft with his mother. He was three-years-old and penniless. While her husband thought she was at the gym, Luellen met him at motels. She paid cash for everything. Juan Carlos was needy and Luellen liked feeling needed. He needed new clothes and new shoes. A few weeks earlier she had bought him a car.

Over the course of their affair they frequented every shady dive on Biscayne Boulevard. By the front desk there was always a display case with brochures. Monkey Jungle. Weekee Watchee. The Coral Castle. A vending machine usually sold condoms. One size fits most. Ribbed. Lubricated. Bubble gum flavored. The rooms typically ringed around a swimming pool, the water filmed with oily liquids. Plastic bottles bobbed on the surface. No one ever swam.

Later, when they were in bed, Juan Carlos would tease Luellen about her good fortune. "Do you know how lucky you are?" Instead of looking at life in America as an opportunity, he always felt robbed. "First Batista stole everything. Then Castro stole everything. We used to be rich. So rich! A house filled with servants! Now my mother has to wash floors, clean other people's toilets."

He didn't believe in inching forward, finishing college and taking small jobs that grew into bigger ones. Juan Carlos was always looking for a get-rich-quick-scheme. "My friend Jose, knows a racehorse. A race horse wid a future. And when he's done, dees horse spends the rest of his life eating grass and making babies. How do you call it?"

"He's a stud," said Luellen. "They put him to stud."

A slat of sunlight peeked between the motel curtains. She placed her hand on his stomach. When he grinned, a gold tooth glinted, slashing the walls like a knife.

"Stud fees," said Juan Carlos. He'd been in this country for over three decades but still refused to learn the language. He wore his accent like a badge. "An annuity. A forking annuity."

It was his idea for Luellen to get implants. He liked his women with some meat on their bones. He'd hold up pictures in magazines and make hourglass shapes with his hands.

"Dees surgery is like nutting," he told her. Juan Carlos studied billboards like some people pored over chemistry textbooks. He memorized infomercials and wrote down the names of every plastic surgeon who advertised on TV.

"Dees guy is an artist," he told Luellen. "Dees is who you should see."

Their sex, as usual, had been rough and quick. That was part of the attraction. There was no artifice. No diamond bracelets to hide in a shoe box. No torturous love sonnets flashing on

her computer screen. She sprawled naked on the dingy bed sheets, fingering cigarette burns and honey-colored stains.

“I’ll see him,” Luellyn promised. “Whatever makes you happy.” When he rolled on top, she shuddered twice. Her fingers raked the mattress. She thought she was in love.

The doctor’s office surprised her. Ten-foot windows and mahogany chairs. It was more like a hotel lobby than the hotel lobbies she was used to. When the doctor stepped into the waiting room, a cloud of expensive cologne filled the air.

“You can choose between B cups, C cups, and D cups,” he said. After the examination, they met in his office. On the wall were tasteful botanicals. Behind him peeked a view to the bay.

“But these...” he said, “are our top of the line, most expensive enhancements.” He fanned more photos on his desk. The breasts looked like enormous loaves freshly baked from the oven.

“I see in your forms that there’s a history of breast cancer. So just to be on the safe side, you should have an MRI before we start. I’m sure you’re fine. I’m positive you’re fine. But it’s good to be careful, don’t you think?”

A week later Luellen found out that she wasn’t fine. Stage one ductal carcinoma. They carved three chunks out of her small left breast and told her six rounds of radiation would take care of the rest. All in all, she should feel grateful, they said. She was lucky they found it early.

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Her husband immersed himself in the literature and called his contacts in the medical field. “No matter what happens, I’ll be there for you,” he told her. “Even if you lose your breasts and your ovaries, your hair and your looks, I’ll love you just the same.”

Each scenario he painted was bleaker than the last. Every conversation was about cancer. Every gesture a helping hand. Nothing seemed to make him happier than to bear her burden. But the greater his show of concern, the more frightened Luellen became.

Poor Karl. Still looking for a role to play, thought Luellen. Now he’s a knight on a white horse jousting Cancer. She’d sneak glances of him in his bathroom mirror. Two skinny white legs, a kangaroo pouch, as ass as flat as a map. He combed his hair from the back of his head straight up to hide his scalp. Then he’d turn to her and say, “Can I get you anything, sweetie? Perhaps a cup of tea?”

Soon she found herself immersed in a new world, a world of antiseptic odors and green hospital gowns. Some of the patients she met were as healthy looking as she was. Others were clearly sliding towards Death, tethered to machines, their skeletal bodies decomposing day by day. No matter what their stage of illness, they were all processed like factory goods, lined up in waiting rooms for hours, tattooed with colored pens. They were custodians of faulty equipment, caretakers of bodies that had failed and broken down.

“That drain should be cleaned,” said an attendant.

“Gotta insert a line,” said a nurse.

There was a sameness to it all. Each hallway looked the same and smelled the same. Luellen would spend hours roaming the corridors, trying to figure out where she needed to show up next. Machine beeps and conspiratorial whispers resonated like a pulse.

“Do you know where the pharmacy is?” asked Luellen.

“Follow the green lines on the floor to the elevator,” droned a white-haired receptionist. “Go down five floors, take the yellow lines to the west building then turn left. Once you pass the cafeteria, the pharmacy should be on your right three doors down.”

If she wasn’t being examined, she was being interrogated. The oncologists rooted her family history like it was the key to buried treasure, unearthing memories Luellen had long buried.

*Tell us about your mother, they asked her. How old was she when she died?*

Opening a vein was easier than discussing her childhood. They lived in Ohio. Her father was a pastor, her mother a hairdresser in a one-stoplight town. While some girls fantasized about rainbows and unicorns, Luellen dreamt about big cities. Skyscrapers. Neon lights and Dom Perignon. For as long as she could remember, she saved her allowance for a one-way bus ticket out.

*Any information would be helpful, they told her. Anything you could share.*

Luellen cringed. Her father was no taller than she was and just as thin. But Luellen’s mother was a force of nature. She spent hours each day in the kitchen cooking vats of food. Her huge breasts spilled across her arms every time she bent over. Her stomach shadowed her feet. But the treatment changed everything. At first she morphed into Buddha. Bald. Round. Serene. At the end, her skin was loose, the bones protruding, her scars an endless seam.

*Your relatives ought to know, they told her. They’ll need to get x-rayed and probed.*

It took Luellen three tries to get through to her sister. They hadn’t spoken in years.

“Tish, it’s me. Don’t hang up. Don’t hang up. Don’t hang up.”

Click.

“Tish, we need to talk. It’s important.”

Click.

“Tish, I have CANCER for Christ’s sake!”

Eventually Tish stopped hanging up. For a while, she let Luellen do all the talking, throwing in a sigh or a grunt every few minutes to let her know she was still there.

“Have you been checked?” asked Luellen. She twirled the phone cord around her fingers and waited for an answer. “I mean, I’m worried. We’re sisters. When it’s all said and done, we’re still sisters.”

“Today we’re sisters? I know what’s going here. We’re having a come-to-Jesus moment, aren’t we? A little health scare and you’re afraid God’s been keeping score.”

“I’ve tried, Tish. God knows I tried. I tried to be there for the three of you the best way I could.”

“You fucking abandoned us, Luellen. How many times did you visit Mom that last year? But you had to go to college on the east coast, didn’t you? A thousand miles away. And then all your fucking track meets and bus tours and your busy, busy schedule. Who do you think was taking care of them, Luellen while you were having a party?”

It had been almost fifteen years and her sister still had a list. A list of grievances she waved like a flag. A list of grievances she’d never forget.

“They wanted me to stay in school, Tish. They wanted me to be happy.”

“And how’s that working out?” Click.

Maritza took her to her radiation appointments. She was surprised by how tired she was, how exhausting each day had become. Her scars were thick and red, the skin dimpling and puckering over the incisions. She had spoken to Juan Carlos only twice since the diagnosis. During each conversation he seemed distant, like he running down a tunnel. She used short words, easy words like he was right off the boat, a Marielito just washing up on the shore.

“Juan Carlos, I want to see you.” She couldn’t believe the sound of her own voice. Her desperation tasted like metal, like she had bitten her tongue and tasted blood. “I have to see you, Juan Carlos. I need to see you soon.”

They made a date to meet at a new assignation, The Ocean Breeze Motel. Outside a neon sign flashed *Vacancy, Rooms to Rent*. Inside a single light bulb dangled from the ceiling. Damp carpeting clung to the floor. She brought a picnic basket with a bottle of champagne and his favorite foods. But instead of greeting Juan Carlos under the covers naked, she bought a loose-fitting negligee. It was black and lacy. She remembered when they watched TV shows that he always liked the bombshells in black.

By two o’clock she had watch an entire movie on the pay-for-view channel. By three she had tried out the coin massage machine by the bed. By four she decided to it was time to break up. She was changing back into her clothes, when someone knocked at the door. She answered in a silk blouse and panties, thinking it was him.

“Don’t yell, don’t scream, don’t say anything.” The man wore a ski mask and held the barrel of a gun to her stomach. “I’m not going to hurt you. I need cash. I need cash fast.”

She didn’t speak. With her right hand, she touched her damaged breast, shielding it from the intruder. He tried again in Spanish.