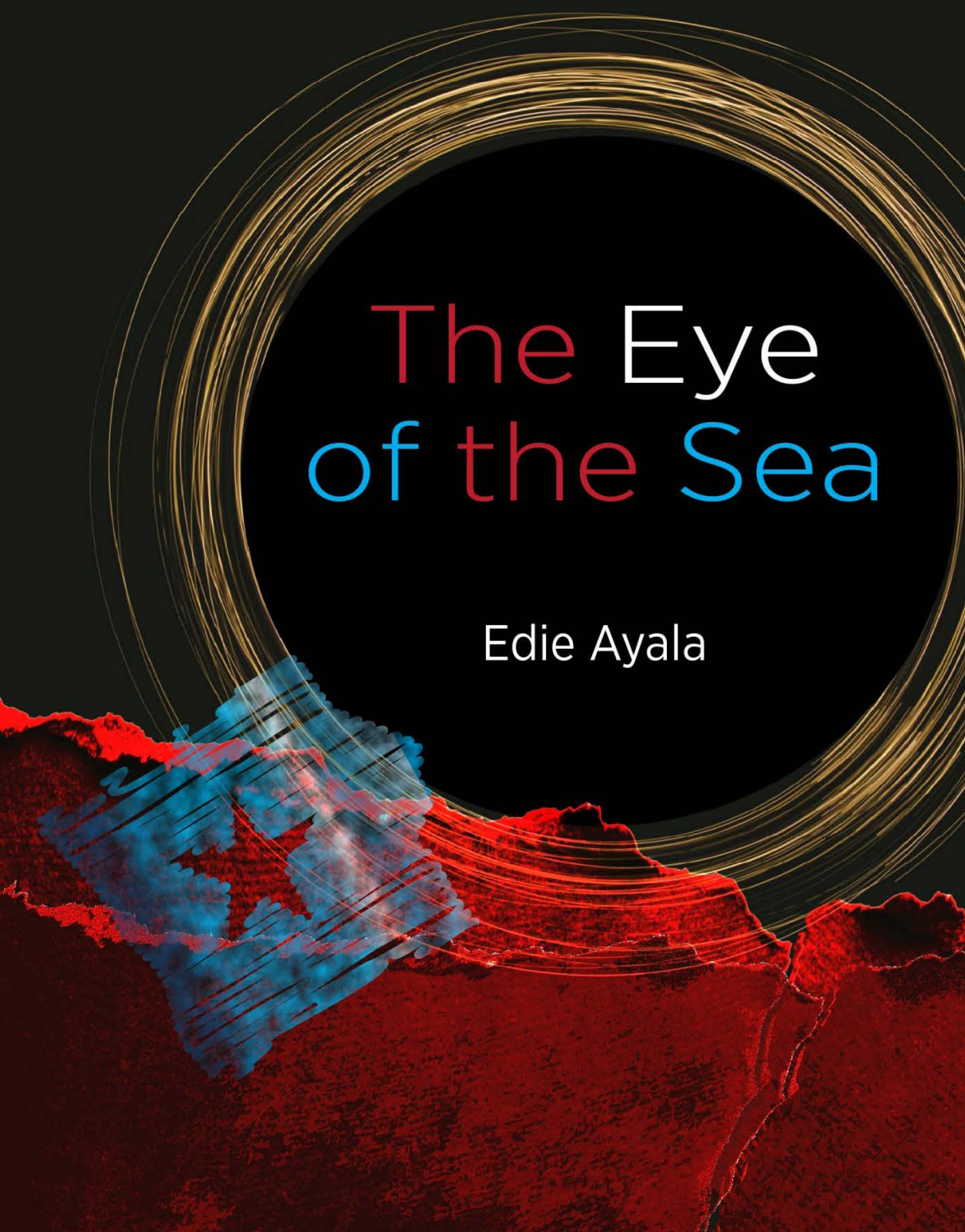


SAMPLE

The Eye
of the Sea

Edie Ayala



Synopsis

In the middle of the Atacama Desert there's a small lake that Chileans call The Eye of the Sea. Some say this lake is bottomless, and if you submerge the truth there, it will never be known. However, in the fullness of time, and by fate or accident, fragments float up to catch the light.

When a woman dies in her upscale apartment during Chile's 2019 social uprising, the truth is meant to be buried with her. However, a front-line activist stumbles upon her family's scandalous past and briefly considers exposing it. Instead he finds himself confronted by his own long-held beliefs and his role in the family's demise.

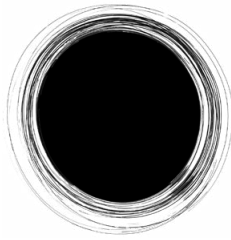
Elena could care less about Chile's inequities but Bladimir has ambitious plans to make the world a better place. While Elena is tormented by confused childhood memories, all she needs are the pills she buys on the street and perhaps a fleeting affair with a stranger. Bladimir, on the other hand, is deep into social activism with a boss who has a reputation as a political fixer. After a casual encounter at a park, Elena and Bladimir begin a game of cat and mouse.

When Bladimir suspects that his boss's motives are less for the greater good and more for self-gain, he becomes disillusioned and makes a move that could cost his life. By chance, he takes refuge with a family that is indirectly related to Elena and he uncovers secrets that pivot around her and Vicente, a disturbed old man who is known to them both. As Bladimir puts two and two together, a web of crime and politics that goes back decades comes to light.

Wrapped in the stories of people from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, *The Eye of the Sea* points to what may have been the driving force behind Chile's violent uprisings.

The book is for readers who are curious about foreign affairs and diverse cultures and who are intrigued by clandestine networks that influence events.

SAMPLE



THE EYE OF THE SEA

by Edie Ayala

For Mom

THE EYE OF THE SEA

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 **STORIES WITH CHARACTER**

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This is a work of fiction. While many events in this story take place during actual events in history, the main characters, their names, storylines and places are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

PROLOGUE | THE SURRENDER

March 19 or March 20, 2020

On her last day—it was either Thursday or Friday (no one knows for sure)—Elena fell and hit her head on the wooden floor of her bedroom and she broke her nose. She lay unconscious for a long time before her soul finally made its getaway, her heart kept pumping and the blood kept flowing unobstructed, slowly spreading across the oak to form a dark, sticky pool. Perhaps (we can only imagine) she opened her eyes for a last brief look around before releasing her final breath. A sigh of relief. Escape from the violent street protests that screamed up and down the country, and the long-desired release from the torment of her confused memories.

She gracefully submitted to the calm when she stumbled, giving way, allowing the secret of her demise to be snagged like a little note wrapped in the uncertain fingers of the wind, that it might be carried off to soar like a condor and later to be set free, fluttering down into a deep crevice of the Chilean Andes.

That day—either Thursday or Friday, no one knows for sure—the universe did what it does best. It began to accommodate the shift in energy caused by the absence of her breath. Atoms realigned, rippling out in waves from the axis that was her body, millions of them nudging one another and shifting to create new molecular formations. Bacteria came alive and multiplied, the air in the room filled with an unpleasant, putrid odor. Beyond that, a few long wispy fingers of low-lying clouds eventually reached down through the window to touch her hair, limp and sticky, and they retreated carrying a rich decomposition that the atmosphere would repurpose, already rubbing its hands with glee at so much potential. The sun took refuge behind the mountains and the days grew shorter by seconds in the global

south. Energy flashed up to wherever energy goes after one dies and joined in the oneness of the universe. Anyone paying attention would have known she had passed into the beyond.

On the day of her final surrender there was another person who stood so close to her that she felt his breath on her neck. It happened at Canal San Carlos. She had stopped on the wooden footbridge to gaze down, seemingly mindlessly. But it wasn't mindless at all. She was contemplating the possibilities of dying there. If she threw herself over the wooden railing, would she land in the shallows and smash her head on a rock? Or would she fall into one of the deep hollows that had been eroded by the current, and would the brown water swirl around her, gather her into its foamy embrace and whisk her out to sea? She imagined both scenarios and couldn't decide. So she stayed there, leaning over, and her small handbag, which contained only an empty wallet, dangled from her wrist. All so precarious. She became aware that the tranquilizer was wearing off because she felt panic clawing its way up her throat. She should really go home. She needed to take another pill. Almost certainly, she would return another day to accept the destiny offered by the canal.

She felt a presence and when she turned, she was looking into the dark eyes of the man who was standing so close that she could have kissed him without much effort. But that's not what happened. He ran off and just after that, the old man from the cafe appeared and the past and present collided in timeless chaos. When she finally navigated her way back to the sanctuary of her apartment, she felt another familiar presence.

1 | THE SWINGS

December 22, 2019

The dark eyes. Elena had encountered them before that day at the canal. The first time was one warm day before Christmas, and the impact was one of stinging ecstasy. You could say there was a mini mental orgasm, a pulse through the air, an electric shot through the heart. Some people might call it chemistry. Stuff of souls. Connection from a past life if you want to believe that. Whatever it was, the encounter would lead to an interlude that would in some ways satisfy her relentless yearning and in others ways, deepen it. What it meant for the man with the mesmerizing eyes remained to be seen.

They met (we cannot say that they ever truly knew one another) on a children's playground, halfway along Elena's walking route between her apartment and the canal. It was just past noon, the streets were quiet, the park was empty because the nanas had carted their little brats back home for lunch and workers had already taken their seats at local restaurants and filled the air with the sounds of their guffaws and staccato conversation, while others had disappeared to the edges of the canal and stretched out for a siesta like dogs in the sun.

Elena didn't usually venture out at midday, not because it was her usual time to eat (she didn't eat much at any time) but rather because she didn't venture out much at all. She preferred the security of her apartment. You could say that she had become a hermit of sorts, thinking and re-thinking, often writing, always analyzing. She habitually scribbled pages of notes on loose sheets that she tossed to the floor and then forgot. They ended up strewn at the foot of her night table, and from there, they were kicked or blown around before finally bowing down beside the baseboards where

they were covered with dust, pencil shavings and crumbs. Rows of books lined the wall above the radiator, spines out—contemporary novels by Hernán Rivera Letelier, Gabriel García Márquez, books by Latin American philosopher José Pablo Feinmann, a biography of Rosita Serrano, the sad story of the forgotten Chilean who sang for the Nazis, and titles by Chilean author Eugenia Prado Bassi, among others. Books had landed face-down on the floor and others had fallen open, face-up, their grey pages staring up at the ceiling in eternal insomnia. Books in limbo, abandoned but never discarded. She stepped around them.

Today she was feeling light, almost carefree. Maybe it was down to the new medication. Maybe she was a little high. Maybe it was that one extra pill. She decided to let her feet take her where they may. Inhaling deeply, she tried to absorb the scent from the roses that bloomed just inside the iron grill fence around her building. The fence was meant to keep people out. But it kept people in. Another thing to add to her growing list of good intentions gone wrong.

Elena let the iron portal slam behind her and she turned right onto the sidewalk. Head lowered, she watched as her old adidas planted one in front of the other. Heel, toe, heel, toe. She easily found her rhythm and, as was her habit, began counting the steps. She was at step number 1072 when, from the corner of her eye she was distracted by a long, sweeping motion. She paused and looked over to see a man on a swing at the far corner of the playground. His lithe adult body settled upon the wooden seat, as though it had been made just for him. He leaned back, punching the toes of his boots into the sky. He was wearing blue jeans and a black tank top with a silly yellow happy face screened on its front. Leaning back—legs up, arms up, hinging at his hips, his body formed a ‘V’. He was a grown man on a childish pendulum that squeaked. The pendulum gained momentum, the man surrendered his face to the sun, his eyes closed. She thought she could hear him humming.

To describe Elena as shy would be incorrect. She was quiet, she was withdrawn but she was never shy. She approached, pushing the soft interior of her right elbow into the hollow metal upright of the swing set. She leaned in and absently observed as a few green paint chips loosened and fluttered crazily to the ground. The bar vibrated with the man’s movement. She was

amused by the unusual choice of activity for a mature adult male. He was what? Maybe 50 years old. No, he must be younger. Then again, maybe not.

She observed him for several seconds (maybe a whole minute), unnoticed from this close vantage point. When he sensed her presence, he dropped his feet, scarring the sand with two shallow trenches. The pendulum stopped squeaking and went still. When he turned to her, she started and caught her breath. She was captured by his eyes. They were sharp and the dark centers sunk deep into somewhere. His soul, she thought.

“What’s your name?” It was unusual for her to initiate a conversation and she was surprised when the question left her lips. But she wasn’t sorry.

“You can call me BJ,” he volunteered without hesitation. He had a slight smile.

“BJ, as in Bee Jay?”

“Yeah.”

“Why Bee Jay and not *Bay Hota*?” (the Spanish pronunciation of the letters)

“I prefer it,” was his explanation.

He didn’t ask her name as she expected. It would have been the polite thing to do. Instead, he pointed with his chin towards the empty swing at his side. “You should try it.”

She obliged, and slid onto the seat. She waited, looking down at her lap. She hadn’t done this since she was a girl. Sometimes her father used to push her. “Take it easy. Go gently,” he’d say.

“I bet I can fly higher than you.” It was a challenge. His dark eyes glistened with something. She wanted to keep looking into them. But he looked down at his boots then, ready to push off, to take up his own game.

“I bet you can’t.” She pushed off too, pumping her legs with a vigor that she must have stolen because surely such energy did not belong to her. She glanced over at him, exhilarated, a tight circle of joy ringing her chest. Then she leaned her head back, felt herself mingling with the blue, higher and

higher, losing herself in the motion and the infinite sky. She couldn't stop. She thought she heard his voice, "Take it easy." But she ignored it. Who was he anyway?

She landed flat on her back, winded and panicked, swimming in the blue. She moaned and felt she was twisting from side to side but then realized she wasn't moving at all. Her shoulders had surely been wrenched from their sockets, her spine cried out in pain. But worse, she couldn't breathe. She was going to die. This isn't the way she had planned it. Helpless, she looked up and saw his black eyes floating just above her face. There was fire in there. They were the eyes of a wolf, a predator. Divine or sinister? She couldn't decide. Maybe it was both. She saw only the eyes. No mouth, no nose, no cheeks, just fiery, black eyes that mesmerized. It lasted only a few seconds but she felt like she had travelled somewhere and back with him. Trapped in their depths, his eyes penetrated her, and she burned with their energy. Suddenly, the blue of the sky was vacuumed into his darkness. She didn't feel him give her his breath.

She didn't know how long she laid there but at some point she became conscious of someone's hand on her shoulder, large, its touch light and warm. The hand stayed there, patting her gently and then suddenly she knew she was alone. She was breathing and was able to move her shoulders again, and with some difficulty, she raised herself to her knees. The pain subsided. Flashback to another man's hand patting her shoulder, memories of warmth and understanding. There was that—the sense of another man, an intangible, familiar vibe.

But it was gone now. Elena got to her feet and hobbled away without looking back and she counted her steps all the way home.

2 | YOUTHFUL AMBITIONS

December 22, 2019

There was a young-ish, or at least, a not-too-old man. It was difficult to pinpoint his age because the tell-tale traces of his unsettled past were ambiguous. Even for himself, there was a question about the validity of his birth record. His cheeks were covered in short black stubble, lightly peppered with grey, he had a wide nose and a square chin, and lips that rarely parted in a smile. His eyes were dark and they had a tendency to bore into you; it was like someone was shining a flashlight in your face and you couldn't see who was holding it. His eyes trapped you. You could see yourself reflected so sharply in their perfect roundness that it hurt. You knew he was in there somewhere, observing. He could see you but you couldn't see him.

People raised a hand and called for his attention. “Bladimir, bring me this. Bladimir, take this over there.” Outwardly, he was a waiter-gopher in El Terminal, an unremarkable restaurant in Recoleta, which was owned by a man called Giorgio. He was Bladimir's long-time boss. The restaurant, aptly named for its location just around the corner from the General Cemetery of Santiago, was one of the sector's more popular Commie hangouts. The restaurant's claim to fame was that it was once frequented by famous artists and politicians—most of them now long dead and buried just around the corner. Their faded photos clung to the walls, a montage of music warriors and political idols from the Cold War era. So the restaurant had that and its more than 50 years of history. People felt comfortable with long-term, established anything. El Terminal's muggy atmosphere was complete with mangled and outdated lists of lunch specials attached with pieces of grey duct tape to grimy windows. Cockroach-infested corners were a trivial concern behind its persistent menu of traditional beef and corn soup,

greasy fried fish sandwiches, cheap wine and instant Nescafe. The regulars always went home satisfied, and they pressed coins (if they had extra) into Bladimir's palm.

The boss had learned that he could rely on Bladimir, and Bladimir was content with the façade of steady, legitimate work. Some years ago, he had tired of too many brushes with the law, of *los pacos*, time and again, dragging him into holding cells and then into court. He was a minor criminal with a long record. But they noted that basically he was *un buen tipo* and not deserving of jail time.

Once upon a time, believe it or not, Bladimir had political aspirations, the origins of which were rooted in his problematic childhood. He had inherited these aspirations from his mother. Before she disappeared from amidst the hippies and their fold-up mattresses, she baptized her son 'Bladimir.' It was not a religious ceremony. Rather it was her verbal pronouncement, toasting her infant mentee with a raised, heavily-frothed mug of beer, "I present to you my son, Bladimir. He will grow strong and will one day champion the cause of el pueblo. *Salud! A mi hijo.*" Once upon a time, she had had political aspirations of her own but those floated away with too much alcohol and too many drugs. Don't blame her. She also had her demons.

In the early days, she passed on her dreams, which in years previous had become so tattered that she almost couldn't recognize them, to her son. As they stood on the sidewalk, in front of the butcher at Cal y Canto, she would mutter half-finished thoughts about inequality that drifted off to meld into the diesel behind the buses. Little Bladimir used to reach up in search for her hand. Perhaps he could calm her. Perhaps she could comfort him. But her hands were needed for other things. She used one hand to push the toddler in front of her and brace his chin so that his grubby, forlorn little face was lifted towards passersby, affording them a look into the depths of poverty. Her other hand, she kept outstretched to accept sympathy donations. When she was too wasted to do the begging herself, she rented him out for 10,000 pesos a day to an acquaintance who could use a waif to help increase her earnings.

His mother had intended to call him Vladimir, in honor of Vladimir Lenin, hero of the poor and working class. But in Spanish, 'tall b' sounds the same as 'short v' and when the time came, it was the 'tall b' that came to

mind for his mother and she named him Bladimir. She didn't know who his father was. Therefore, his paternal surname became the same as his maternal one. He was called Bladimir Jaime Morales-Morales. She was sure that this name would help forge a meaningful and important path for the boy. God knows, she had strayed too far from it herself. So Bladimir, with a B, made his start as a spelling error and really, what were the chances?

Several years into his young life, social services received a call about a young boy sleeping rough in the abandoned ruins of a workers' hut between the half-constructed hospital and a highway at the south end of Santiago. Other than "Bladimir Jaime," the boy didn't give up much. The social workers found in the public records, the name of a young boy of Bladimir's approximate age, and this was enough to make him official. In order to clear the file off the desk at the Civil Registry (it had already collected dust for several months), the most convenient was to decide that he was indeed the one and the only, and they gave him a card with an ID number that corresponded to that name. If this boy was not that Bladimir Jamie Morales-Morales, then good luck to the real Bladimir, who would be forced into a lifelong battle with the State for his identity—one that he'd never win.

The authorities placed our Bladimir in a children's home, where he fell in with some young friends (you couldn't call them friends, exactly—more like small-time hoodlums, amazingly young ones, who would stab you in the back for a nice pair of Nikes or a decent knock-off of a national team shirt) who had dropped out of school to stand around in abandoned lots and exchange drugs for money. Even at nine years old, Bladimir knew better than to participate in this activity but his desire to belong drowned out the distant voice of morality that had, in all honesty, never been that loud in the first place.

Bladimir didn't do drugs himself. He had an aversion to lack of self-control (an unconscious reaction to his addict mother) and after awhile he realized he preferred the rawness of living the moment, during which, when he so chose, he could observe with a superior feeling of distance and control, the tormented souls who could not resist the surreal experiences that drugs offered.

For one brief period as a young man, he felt sure that he had stumbled into the coveted position of protégé for an up-and-coming senator of the

Republic, who had managed to gain his seat on the far left of the ruling coalition, albeit with a small percentage via the *sistema binominal*. But all of Bladimir's dreams were shattered when the senator was caught accepting illegal contributions from a Brazilian multinational and the senator disappeared into the arid folds of the northern Andes, taking Bladimir's hopes and grinding them into the coarse gravel of the Atacama Desert. Later, Bladimir would discover that the incident with this senator was the original template solution for future senators-gone-wrong.

Bladimir was a soul who was driven, without necessarily knowing towards what. Even as a youngster, although he didn't feel nervous, he could never stand still, always had to be moving somewhere, like a shark circling around an undefined goal. His theory was that if he circled often enough, maybe he'd eventually bump into it.

Bladimir was a badass. No one knew for sure why. He was just wired that way. But he was a hell of a smart badass. And he was fast. He was so fast that people hardly saw him, barely noticed as he whipped by. He was like the wind. It was this very speed that guys like the now-disgraced senator had an eye for.

Decades later, on one of his days off from El Terminal, he circled around and up to a more affluent part of town and was not far from Canal San Carlos (which defines the eastern edge of Providencia) when he passed a small children's park. The park was empty and he noticed a swing set at the far end. The park amenities were much more modern than what you could find in Recoleta, and the park itself was swept and manicured for the little minion snobs whose families lived in this neighborhood. He decided to make the most of it. So he jumped on a swing and pointed his boots up towards the sun.

3 | INSOMNIA

The summer of '69

At times, Elena's outer self could sparkle with fun. But it had been a long time (several years, in fact) since she'd had a good laugh or enjoyed a wholesome adventure. Actually, 'wholesome' disappeared from her vocabulary when she was a pre-teen. Elena had an inner core that was solitary and intellectual, and sometimes it felt like she was on a slow motion slog through purgatory. Her darker side had installed itself when she was a young girl but it didn't take root until her early teens. And once it was firmly established, it began sucking on her, then it chewed away, and finally consumed her. The seed for this root had been sowed on a hot, sticky afternoon in 1969, during Elena's sixth summer. On that same day, the sun chose not to show himself, and he slunk behind the southern clouds, "I was not witness, my view was obstructed," he would later declare. And the moon would turn from him, unable to look such blatant cowardice in its flaming, farting face. The moon had no choice but to hang in and occupy the same sky and she would have fled the orbit in shame had she not felt such a deep responsibility towards the tides. It seems everyone has an excuse.

That day back in 1969 was the day Elena's father disappeared. He and Elena's mother had had a loud discussion up in their bedroom. Elena's stomach turned somersaults and she felt very unwell because she'd never heard her parents argue so violently. She remembered scurrying with her nanny, Rosa out the door and at some point, she ended up taking shelter in the far corner of the garage. She squatted, rubbed the palms of her hands over her ears, and she forced herself to focus on the thin rays of light that striped across the toes of her favorite black patent leather shoes. At first she didn't notice that her father had entered the garage. He fumbled furiously with

the door handle of the old, black Mercedes. She looked up in time to see him heave his leather duffle bag—the soft, supple one that he sometimes let her linger over when he was about to go on a trip—onto the passenger seat, start the engine and speed off, leaving her sputtering in a trail of exhaust. Beyond this, her memory faltered. She must have run down the driveway for a distance. Mustn't she? She probably waved her arms and yelled at him to stop. Didn't she? She would have run across the gravel, little stones entering her shoes and digging into the soles of her feet. Wouldn't she? Or was it all imagined, that she just wished she had run after him? If she had, then it would mean that she had cared and had wanted to stop him, had wanted to go with him. He wouldn't have gone alone. She ran past the tool shed. And that's all she could remember.

She didn't recall the dark, stocky man lurking beside the shed, branches painting shadows over his crouched, tormented body, his ragged breath, shaky beneath the carnal moans that rose from his throat. She didn't recall Rosa running full throttle straight up to her and admonishing her as she gestured towards the shed and pointed frantically down the driveway. She didn't remember Rosa grabbing her by the elbow and dragging her around and up to the house. And she couldn't remember the something more. She always knew there was something more but she couldn't get to it.

One of the days right after that, her mother was almost hysterical. Her voice was high-pitched. "We have to bury your father tomorrow."

"No! But Mamá..."

A month after that, Elena's sleep became filled with nightmares in which she heard her father's voice. He was yelling at her to run. But when she tried to run, she found that she had no knees and she collapsed. Little stones embedded themselves in her crippled legs and she sat right down there on the gravel and, forgetting everything else, she began to pick the stones out, one by one, watching the little indents in her flesh change and redden. She looked up and there was her father's face, distorted. His pain pierced them both. And then she saw the shadow. The dream always ended that way—with her doing nothing but picking pebbles out of her shins, waiting for the cold shadow to roll across and take its confusion with it. But the shadow never left. It parked itself right there in her dream and refused to move on. It took her several years to learn how to force herself to awaken. And then

she had to rub and rub at her forehead to erase the shadow that chilled across her wakefulness.

Before she learned how to awaken from the nightmare, before she could rid herself of the shadow, she stopped eating.

“But Mamá, I’m not hungry.”

“Nonsense. You haven’t eaten breakfast.”

“But I don’t want anything.”

“You can’t go on like this. Look at you. People will think we don’t have any food to give you.”

“But I’m not hungry.”

“Nonsense. Okay, that’s enough. I’ll have to force-feed you.” Mamá signaled the seriousness of her intent by picking up the ceramic spoon that she used to stir the yoghurt and she swirled it a little, teasing.

She dipped it into the sweetened yogurt and, bracing Elena’s neck, she put the spoon to her lips and pushed. Eventually Elena was convinced to open her mouth. She gagged and spat it out across the table. She didn’t mean to do that. She was a good girl.

She didn’t mean to fight and cause trouble, and after several such episodes she learned to submit. That’s also when she learned how to forget for real, to tuck away nasty thoughts and ugly memories. She was six years old. The next week they found her favorite kitten lifeless at the edge of the pond. It was too much to deal with. Elena’s six-year-old brain learned how to compartmentalize.

Fast forward to the woman who was lying on the wooden floor in a pool of blood several decades later, and whose digestive tract, had it been examined by a coroner, would not contain traces of a recent meal.

4 | HOT AND BOTHERED

December 29, 2019

Sunlight streamed across the garden, casting shadows at precise angles. It drew a hard edge across the manicured lawn at the east wall. The outline of the high-rise behind was clearly defined, its shadow ending abruptly two meters further along. The undersides of leaves were golden and as they fluttered in the breeze, their natural joy at being alive quivered across the afternoon. Elena scoffed at them. She thought back to the first day of summer, December 22, 2019. Was it only a week ago?

Summer solstice—relevant to witches and warlocks, and normally reason for her to stop and take stock of the seasons—had assumed a new significance this year. Now summer solstice was also the day she met BJ. Later that day, when she had returned to her apartment, she had very slowly and very neatly penned ‘met Bee Jay’ (with an extra long swirl on the J) on the empty square number 22 of the photo calendar. A chewed-up yellow pencil was tied with a string to a nail on the wall beside the door, where a calendar left its mark year after year. She hung it there because sometimes she forgot what day it was, and having it by the door was reliable and convenient. She could tick off the days of the month and, in this way, pretend to command her own time. She could pause to get her bearings in order to avoid going out the door and running into a casual acquaintance who might invite her for a drink or coerce her into baby sitting or otherwise engage her in some unwelcome form of human socialization. Truth be told, she only accidentally encountered someone she recognized once or twice in any given month. It was because she was practiced at avoidance, expert in isolation. The most she offered was a nod and quick hello to the man at the local newsstand, a half-smile to the elderly cashier at the corner market, and the customary hand signal and curt order to the waiter at her local sidewalk

cafe. These half-strangers at the edges of her non-existent social circle were all she permitted. Now she considered whether BJ might become an exception. Maybe. Almost certainly. Yes. Those eyes.

She knew she was being juvenile as she watched from her window for a sign. She was a mature woman, was she not? Yes, but she was smitten. Give me a sign, any sign will do. If he lived nearby, she might see him walking along her street. His name (such as it was—just initials) inserted itself into her notes on the yellow foolscap sheets that were scattered about the floor. Unable to shake the memory of last week's encounter, he had taken command of her consciousness with such ease, his brief presence now inflating an absence that kicked in a heightened anxiety. It was an uncertain mixture of anticipation and vulnerability. The memory of him moved her towards delirium, sort of like a schoolgirl still in the bliss of a first kiss, weak and pliable. She scoffed and her silly breath fogged up the window. She drew two intersecting hearts into it with her middle finger. She observed it for a few seconds, watching the edges soften and she used the heel of her hand to smudge it away, sneering at her childishness as she brandished her middle finger in front of her own nose. How old am I? I know, but life goes on, does it not? One must live a little. But she didn't really believe that. She shook her stiff middle finger in front of her nose.

She returned to the children's park twice that week, hoping to see him. But she didn't. Both times, she settled onto the seat of the swing he had used and swayed away several minutes, loose thoughts to-ing and fro-ing as she waited for him to show up, waited for the energy from the memory of his weight on this very seat to push her into the air, to lose herself again in the blue. But both times, a little girl planted herself in front of her, hands on her indignant little hips, challenging her with a spoiled scowl until Elena felt obligated to surrender the swing. And on both days, she wandered to the canal afterwards so she could lean over the footbridge and watch the water ripple a few meters beneath her feet. She got lost in the trickling and bubbling, mentally riding up along the walls and then sliding back down into the wider stream. Both times after several minutes, she had the sensation that someone was there watching her but when she turned, she found that she was alone.

Her mother used to caution her about leaning too far over the railing of the footbridge. When Elena was a young girl, and shortly after they

buried her father, her mother took her for a walk around the canal and they crossed this very bridge. Back then it was all foreign territory. Her mother told her they would be moving here, that this neighborhood was to become their new *vecindario*.

“See?” Her mother tipped up the edge of her wide-brimmed toquilla straw hat and pointed her gloved finger towards the east. “See that tall brick house with the terracotta roof? That’s where we’re going to live. That’s our new home.”

“Why?” Elena had looked up at her for the answer. But her mother didn’t reply. Her head blocked the sun. Instead, she took her by the hand, “Come along. My friend is waiting.”

Elena was saddened by her mother’s decision to move because it meant leaving the place where she had lived with her father. Would it mean that the memories of him would fade? Would her father’s spirit find her in their new house, or would she have to leave a trail of clues, maybe notes, just like they left for *Viejito Pascuero* whenever they visited her aunt at Christmas?

Even now, at 56 years of age, Elena had to admit (and was regularly reminded by her mother) that she was confused. Things had become jumbled over the years by her futile efforts to pull memories from the days and weeks around father’s death. She wasn’t sure which memories she might have desperately shaped for her own convenience and which ones might be real. Beginning in her early years, she woke up from nightmares in which, from a hiding spot on top of a pile of oily rags, she saw someone cock a gun at the back of her father’s head and fire. She could never see her father’s face but she knew it was him. And she never saw the face of the man with the gun either. But sometimes in her dream, it was she who held the pistol. In that case, she was standing on something, or else her father was squatted low, because she could see the short hairs on the back of his head trembling. The trigger was always too stiff for her young fingers to activate and she woke up when someone else wrapped their hand around hers and before they could force her to squeeze to its intended end. Her bedclothes would be twisted and half on the floor as though she had struggled throughout the night. But when she looked at the clock, it was relatively early, digital numbers blinking out 10:45 pm. So she decided to trick the nightmare by going to bed later. But the cunning nightmare woke her punctually at 11:37 pm.

Her response was to stay awake yet longer but the nightmare accommodated itself and woke her at 12:20 am. And so on. Finally, she kept herself awake until dawn. But no matter when she finally fell asleep, the nightmare always found her.

This whole week, her waking mind was filled both with the nightmare (trying to avoid it) and thoughts of BJ. Where did he work? Where was his family? Who was his family? Did he also think about her? Could it have been that their meeting was some sort of providence? This afternoon, as she gazed out the window, her eyes pounced on anything that moved. Even a leaf that fell to the ground could be a sign. Perhaps it would be BJ approaching. Or the bird that dropped to the sidewalk and then looked her way. Could it be a signal? But in the end, BJ was never out there, and as the late afternoon sun beat down, she felt sleepy. She finally abandoned her post at the window and, pushing a dozen loose papers to the floor, she sank down on the sofa and closed her eyes.

At this point in Chile, there was a continuing rash of violent protests and disturbances born out of *el estallido social*—the social uprising—that began on October 19, 2019. Elena herself, had been downtown the following day and she experienced the terrifying energy and she feared the forces behind it. The protests, which were purported to have been sparked by a hike in metro fares, had origins that were much more profound and far flung. She backed away from the politics of it all. She turned inward and, as she had conditioned herself to do as a child, she made her world smaller in the hopes that it would be easier to comprehend. But it wasn't and it didn't.

There are various theories as to the origin and sustenance of Chile's October, 2019 social uprising. *Los de la primera linea* (the extreme activists on the front lines) would say it was a wave that had built up over the years until it could no longer be contained, that it reached tsunami proportions and finally rushed in to decimate the barriers of Chile's inequality. Certainly, the tens of thousands who joined the street protests in the days that followed would agree. They were comprised of the Pedros and Marias who lived every day in the inefficient bureaucracy that was built on policies designed by the powerful, for the powerful. And by 'the powerful,' it was understood to mean *los grandotes*, those who had money to invest, who had a family name that could be traced back to old wealth and political influence, who were connected to foreign capitalists and as a result, who would

benefit most from the status quo. Now the Pedros and Marias were out to change that. Who could disagree?

Then there were those who thought the social uprising was the result of planning from outside forces, especially other Latin American countries. The recent history behind it went something like this: a couple of years earlier, several countries from South and Central America and also Canada, formed the Lima Group, who believed that President Maduro of Venezuela had, among other things, rigged the Venezuelan judiciary in order to illegally sustain his position as President. The Lima Group wanted to replace Maduro with Juan Guaidó, the man who many believed to have been the democratically-elected and rightful president of Venezuela. Meanwhile, Maduro, along with the President of Bolivia and others, were dedicated to the *Revolución Bolivariana*, a movement whose goal was to see all of South America united under one socialist flag. They had steadily been setting plans in motion across the continent to ensure the ‘red wave’ would take wing.

Meanwhile, the situation in Venezuela was worsening by the day—inflation was running away with life savings, the military became more powerful and narcos moved in to increase Maduro’s wealth and the military’s power and influence. Venezuelan citizens, broken and desperate, rushed to leave in long waves of sadness that backed up border crossings in Columbia, Brazil and other South and North American countries. In February 2019, President Piñera of Chile joined in a Venezuela Aid Concert at the Colombian border along with Richard Branson and other high profile supporters in a highly public display, where he showcased Chile’s support for Guaidó with a shipment of humanitarian aid. And it was a clear demonstration of his support of the popular uprising against President Maduro. It is said that, in response, President Maduro threatened to orchestrate not only Chile’s downfall but that of President Piñera as well.

Elena did not subscribe to either theory because she preferred not to think about it. But had she been privy to the fact that Bladimir’s boss, Giorgio, and by association, Bladimir was embroiled in the greater movement, she might have stood up and paid attention. She might have cared.

Although he was not a revolutionary, Giorgio outwardly supported the movement because it was a way to open borders and ease the work of people traffickers and flow of drugs from one country to another. Had Elena

known, well, she would have stopped thinking right there, because who was she to judge the flow and the purpose of illegal drugs? Anyway, because of his selfish interests, you could say that Giorgio played a pivotal role in the cause for social justice. With contacts, especially in Venezuela and Europe, he helped with clandestine importation of people and weapons. He was a key player, albeit indirectly, in what Chile's president would later gingerly refer to as *un golpe blando*—a non-traditional government takeover. But that suggestion came well after the fact.

The current situation in Chile was extremely volatile. There were regular attacks on police stations up and down the country, with activists tossing Molotov cocktails and taking potshots at police. Although, there was nothing as terrifying as the initial days of fires and total destruction of metro stations, buses, and university and healthcare facilities, people continued to loot big and small stores, and to destroy infrastructure. In response, businesses and government authorities boarded up the center of the Capital. Small businesses folded. What remained was chaos. Civilians took it upon themselves to direct traffic because violent gangs had hauled down sophisticated traffic light systems and removed street signs and, in general, destroyed much of the transportation infrastructure.

Plaza Italia, which marks the division between west (less affluent) and east (wealthier) Santiago, and is the traditional muster point for football and political celebrations, was now a 24-hour war zone. People defaced buildings and destroyed sidewalks, lamp posts, signs, churches, and hotels. The plaza's emblematic statue of General Manuel Baquedano was covered with paint and graffiti by activists who tried in vain to pull it down entirely and then settled for climbing to its marred bronze summit to hang like gargoyles over the spoils of battle—grass and flowers trampled, garbage, bits and pieces of broken furniture, human feces and blood over gravel, under persistent clouds of tear gas. These were the victors, the guardians of violent change. They defied anyone to set foot onto their hallowed ruins. Surrounding residents vacated their apartments to seek refuge with family in relatively less agitated districts. At one point, the mayor of Providencia, who ventured onto the streets to assess the damage, was so aghast and shaken that she turned from reporters and ran for blocks, seemingly aimlessly but doubtless in an attempt to escape the insanity that had consumed the now fallen streets.

Up and down the country, los de la primera linea intimidated pedestrians and passengers alike. They blocked roads and, under threat to burn anything from small cars to transport trucks, they demanded people show their support for the cause by stepping out of their vehicles and performing a dance, during which they mocked and clapped. “*Así es. ¡Baila!*” “Come on. More enthusiasm. Swing. Move!” Holding their flaming torches high, they memorialized the humiliated dancers with videos on social media. One victim, an American resident who carried his pistol in his glove box, refused to dance and in the ensuing tumult, he shot a protestor in the leg. He was found guilty of this crime, and thrown in jail. The authorities found themselves unable to contain such events. They dared not go against current trends, so they fell in with the protesters who claimed freedom of expression and protection under human rights. The rest be damned.

As the weeks piled up and violence continued to blanket the country, working men and women began to resent the lack of public transport, the raging insecurity and the ruin of their small businesses. They appealed for protection, but the President was reluctant to call in the military for the simple reason that he didn’t want people to relate it to Chile’s 1973 military coup. He sought dialogue, some path to sanity amidst the mindless and stubborn animosity. Finally, he did call in troops, but he gave them limited powers. Yet the influence of social media organized by the front-liners was overwhelming and no matter how much the President succumbed to demands, he was portrayed as an assassin and torturer. The young social media experts spread the news to the rest of the world and people abroad mistakenly believed that in Santiago, you might find bodies left to rot along main streets and you might step on and squish eyeballs that had been shot out with rubber bullets. Nothing could quell the zeal. So the President tried even harder to demonstrate his desire to close the gap and to protect his own reputation. He yielded to the activists. Yet things continued to spiral out of hand. He and his authorities lost control. And that’s when the politicians clambered to do the only thing that someone could think of.

In November 2019, they announced a solution that would crush the protests and satisfy every Chilean resident. Their idea was to design a process for the creation of a new constitution, to be written not by politicians but by elected Pedros and Marias. Even as it got underway, the protests would not be entirely quelled. The young voices demanding change insisted on being heard. Elena was bored with it. For her, the new constitution was

an inconvenience and a path to nowhere. If the people and Chilean authorities themselves were not bound to obey current laws, what purpose would a new constitution serve? If white collar criminals embezzling millions of pesos were not held accountable, why should petty delinquents be deterred? Outwardly positive, politicians took advantage of innocent people who were overjoyed with the prospect of this brilliant, even miraculous solution. Many citizens, never truly understanding the process, placed their blind faith in the idea, and believed their lives would improve immediately. They naively assumed that once el pueblo accepted the new constitution, there would be equal access to property and opportunities and decent salaries and quality healthcare and education. They never questioned what steps had to be taken for this to happen; it was going to be a miraculous thing. If the Yes vote would win, they would wake up the next morning in an idyllic Chile. The honorable phrases in the new constitution, expressed in high legal language, would magically side-line corrupt individuals who lived on both sides of the ideological divide. How could they have known that certain of the left-wing faction (because surely it would be their proposals that would become part of the constitution) were already hard at work making lists—lists that would award politically-connected individuals with exclusive access to prime properties and high-paying jobs. How were people to know that a new constitution would not eliminate exclusive rights of politicians and their conveniently plugged-in friends? Politicians would replace the businessmen, they would become the exclusive granddotes, and they would pat themselves on the back for returning wealth to the state, the workings of which they would control and plunder.

Tonight, just as dusk fell over the city, and Elena had been passed out on her sofa for more than three hours, she was awakened by chants and shouts, “You’re next. We’ll get you!” How many voices she couldn’t tell. But the numbers grew. The voices were rolling in waves along the street in front of her building. Both deep and shrill, it was a clamorous incursion into the softening dusk of an innocent evening. “You’ll get yours!” the voices yelled. She stiffened. She stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, her ears pricked up and a chill ran over her body, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. The chants increased in volume and intensity. Trembling, she raised herself from the sofa, and crouched at the window to peer out from under the curtain. She saw a steady stream of men and women on bicycles, peddling casually past her building. Hundreds of them. If not for the shouts

and gestures, they could have been out for a leisurely spin. The bicycles all looked new, the day's last rays of light glinting off their silvery spokes. But the riders raised their hard fists with each threatening chant and they kept their eyes forward, cold, not acknowledging the people, who, one by one, were stepping onto balconies and peering from windows. Elena shivered.

A man on the third floor balcony of a building across the street rushed back inside his apartment and returned brandishing a pistol. He waved it in the air and yelled "Just try it, *hijos de puta!* We're ready for you."

It took a long time for the multitude of cyclists to pass and for their din to finally fade in the distance. Elena's heart was pounding. She watched as the neighbors, still gesturing threats to the disappearing mob and muttering to one another, finally retreated inside and pulled their blinds down. The cyclists had, at worst, succeeded in making these upper middle-class residents uncomfortable, and at best, they had sown fear. But it only set residents harder against them. How dare they roll down these streets with their righteous threats couched in violence? The episode was followed by an eerie silence, a dull, throbbing ache that overtook the street and, with an unnatural chill, spirited its way into her apartment. It was reminiscent of the minutes and hours after a 7.5 earthquake. The aftershocks repeated in her ears. "You're next, *cuicos culia'os.*"

She glanced at the door and for the first time, felt vulnerable in her own home. The door was too lightweight. The lock was too flimsy. She had nothing with which to defend herself. Elena needed a reassuring voice. She picked up the intercom to talk to the doorman. But he didn't answer. He was probably out there talking to his colleague from the adjacent building. She hung up and stood guard near the door, listening. Even in the absence of the protesters, the street pulsed a foreboding. It suddenly occurred to her that she needed a weapon. What if they returned and barged in and ransacked her place? What if they beat her up? She walked into the bedroom, opened the narrow closet door, and dumped her few jackets and sweaters from their hangers. She removed the short dowel from the closet and leaned it on the wall under the calendar. Someone had once told her that you could use a rod to poke a person's eyes out. That was all she had. She would use it if it came down to it.

This incident was not the first and wouldn't be the last. It wasn't something you could easily dismiss. The estallido social had taken over the news cycles and conversations had gotten into people's heads. The ongoing street violence was feared. People argued about its relevance, they discussed its necessity. They exaggerated the police response, they cried 'torture' and 'rape' and 'murder'. They questioned the curfew and any military presence and they pointed fingers at authorities, who pointed right back. For Elena it was just another reason to stay indoors.

Given all of this, the question of whether to replace the haunting speculations about violence and threats of revolution with, you might say, small-minded and stupid musings about BJ, was a no-brainer. His face and his eyes, were right up there, triumphant over the unwanted thorns of social upheaval. The memory of this stranger's face often even clouded that of her father's.

She admitted to being infatuated again. How long since the last time? The years passed quickly but her juvenile penchant for an exciting affair had not entirely died out. Most often she was, as a matter of practice, smitten from afar and never actually made contact with the target of her obsession. Apart from relationships that ended in nothing after a few months, she hadn't experienced a whole lot of romantic love in her life. None of the relationships had been rocky. But they all lacked a certain spirit, the definition of which escaped her, but which she believed should have existed. Perhaps she sought mystery, seduction, or something else quite elusive. So in the end, rather than terminating in pain and conflict, her relationships simply lacked oxygen or fuel or both, and they flickered and died out. She often joked wryly with her mother that she should have gone into the convent because she liked to be alone, she was studious and, especially since she was approaching 60 years, she didn't fantasize about sex. The convent idea was a joke because although she had a kind heart and was generous without fault, she felt no calling to seek out and help underprivileged souls. She was too wrapped up in thoughts and analysis about her own sheltered life and besides, even if she could have joined a cloistered religious order, she had absolutely no faith.

5 | CITY OF THE DEAD

January 5, 2020

“*Cambia... Todo cambia...* It changes... everything changes,” the sonorous voice of Mercedes Sosa was too much for the radio to constrain and too important for the tool shed to hold. The music spilled out into the air around the cemetery patio, rising up to the tips of the palms and shimmering back down through their fronds. The notes lingered, reverberating between the niche-lined walls, serenading the tired bodies that had long since been laid to rest. November 1st, the Day of the Dead, which happened to be her birthday, was also unceremoniously long gone, terminated without fanfare because of the violence of the social uprising. Huge ornate gates locked. Families’ hearts broken. She had longed to spend her birthday with her father. Now it felt like years since she had visited him here. The cemetery was still under guard against violence, and it was bereft of the usual visitors who leaned in for advice and murmured as they picked dead leaves and dusted ornaments in the windows of burial niches. Santiago’s city for the dead was vulnerable to delinquents. It would not be the first time anarchists had left their marks. She worried that if she didn’t see her father today, it would be a long time before her next opportunity. What if the mausoleum had been disturbed? Pain shot across her chest. She had hoped the barbarity would have fizzled out by now. But she had been wrong, and, who knows, crossing town might even become more dangerous in the next months.

The tool shed that was the source of the music was a standard green metal one with a narrow door on which hung a rusty padlock. Elena could hear a woman shuffling around inside. She would be the freelance patio caretaker. She was singing along to the radio, jars clattering as she rearranged them on shelves. She tossed old rags out over her shoulder and

her husky voice jumped off-key with the effort "... and that which changed yesterday will have to change again tomorrow...". One of the rags landed at Elena's feet and she kicked it aside. She was standing beside the wheelbarrow, waiting and listening. She had entered the main gates only a few minutes ago, and had been clipping along the path that would lead to her father's tomb when the music of Mercedes Sosa gave her pause. This song had been one of her father's favorites. "You'll see," he used to tell her. "You'll see how it all changes. You'll understand it when you're older." And he was right. Mercedes Sosa was right. It all changes. But love remains steady.

"Love." She said it out loud. But her voice was as weak as her sigh. It would change nothing. Lack of love, like love itself, was also a constant.

She suddenly sensed someone's presence behind her and when she turned, she knew the real reason she had come here today.

"It's you," she said, as she looked up into the dark eyes.

He smiled down at her. His eyes crinkled pleasantly at the corners. "*Hola*. We meet again."

He was holding a paper bag. He clutched it tightly to his side and then thinking better of it, he rolled down the top and made it small enough to shove into his jacket pocket. Then he pointed with his chin towards the cement bench on the other side of the path and headed towards it. Elena was a few steps behind. She sat down at the opposite end of the bench and dropped her head back to squint up past the fluorescent purple of the jacaranda blossoms and into the depths of the bright blue beyond. It was a beautiful day. Her father would wait for a few minutes longer.

She turned to the man and pretended, "BJ, right?" Of course she knew his name. It had been in her head and on her lips for nearly two weeks.

"Yup. BJ." He nodded. Just like the day in the park, he didn't ask her name and she didn't offer.

Like two old friends, they sat in a comfortable silence, she leaned back looking into the sky and he leaned forward studying his shoes. Then as if by signal, they turned to look at one another and they both smiled.

"Well," she said. "I'm going to visit my father. Do you want to come?"

“Where is he?” he asked.

“Straight down this path, to the left and into the patio with some of the more traditional but poetic—can I say poetic? ... for me they are—mausoleums. Right now, my Dad is still on his own. But there’s space for all of us. Many more than all of us.” She smiled again and stood up. “Come on. I’ll take you.” She felt satisfied, as though everything had clicked into place. Here she was, about to present the man with whom she was obsessed to the man she loved most.

Bladimir stood up, patted his left pocket where he’d shoved the paper bag. “Yeah, okay. Why not?”

Their hands almost but not quite touched as they strolled down the wide path. A stray dog walked past and sniffed Bladimir’s pocket and Bladimir leaned down to pat his head and caress his ears before shooing him off. “Go on. I don’t have anything for you.”

“Who are you here to see?” Elena glanced up at him and then abruptly looked straight ahead because otherwise she’d be consumed by his eyes. They advanced several steps before he replied.

“You.” He said.

She stopped. “What?”

He grinned and she was tripped up by the eyes. They caught her off guard. Again.

“I saw you come in the gate back there,” he said and he pointed to the main entrance.

“Oh,” she said. “Are you stalking me?”

“Another coincidence,” he said, as though trying to put her at ease. “A lucky one,” he added with a wink.

She turned away with a half smile and picked up her pace. He strode along beside her, now leaning into her, and she felt the tingle of his hand next to hers. But she didn’t move away. She wasn’t inclined to run from him. She liked the strange closeness, its magnetism.

“Here,” she pointed. “Turn here.”

They walked towards a mausoleum and he stopped several meters from the steps and looked up at the name that was carved into the pink marble above the arched doorway. Traditional serif font, all upper case. Familia Lenz-Weber. “This is your family?” Inside, on the far crypt, her father’s name was carved into grey marble. “Vicente Harold Lenz-Weber, our dearly beloved father and husband. 1935-1969.” Elena always thought the inscription was too cold, that her mother could have and should have managed something more, something that truly reflected their deep loss and abiding love.

Bladimir pronounced the man’s full name under his breath, letting his tongue follow through, then he closed his lips with a slight pop, bringing the name to its final, foreign end.

“Do you feel like you have to apologize for that?” He was accusing her.

At first she thought he was referring the dates inscribed there, to how young her father was when he died. Did he know she felt guilty? Or did he know about her father’s history, his role in Chilean politics, and was he in disagreement? “Apologize for what?”

“The name. I mean, it’s German, right?”

Surely, he couldn’t be serious. Was he calling her a Nazi? Incredible. Or was he connecting her to Paul Schaefer, the notorious German cult leader who was finally extradited from Argentina after he escaped Chilean justice. Either way, she bristled at his too unsubtle, malicious insinuation.

“No. I mean... no. I don’t.” She had already mounted the three steps to the mausoleum entrance and was standing there, her fingers gripping the wrought iron grill, looking into the golden light that penetrated the small window at the back. The mausoleum housed six crypts upstairs and eight in the subterranean level, all of which were still empty except for this one. There was room for a big family. Her mother had overshot, gone to extremes. Again. She half-turned to face BJ.

“My family name is German but we’re Chilean through and through.” She forced her chin out. “I’m fourth generation, as a matter of fact.”

“Yeah, but I bet you’re fluent in German. Right?”

“Yes, and proud of it.”

“Do you know Paul Schaefer?”

“What kind of a question is that?” He was trying to wind her up now. He was clearly an asshole with beguiling eyes. “Do you just assume that all Chileans of German descent would associate with that pedophile?”

He smirked, hands in pockets, eyes glinting and she couldn’t tell if he was amused by her discomfort or if it was a smile of disdain for a family that might have been connected to Colonia Dignidad, as though they too might have routinely abused children and collaborated with Pinochet.

“My family is originally from Valdivia,” was all she could summon in her defense. It was true, and Valdivia was a long way from Paul Schaefer’s colony. “And my family is a very, very long way from someone like him. See the name there? See Vicente Harold Lenz-Weber? For your information, my father was a well-respected senator. If you knew your history, you’d know what he stood for. And you’d also know that he died way too early.” She turned to swipe her eyes before tears became obvious. The last thing she wanted to do was let this guy see her cry. “He died in a car accident. It was tragic. And unfair. His life was cut short.” By now her voice was breaking. “He was a good man. A very good man. And why am I telling you, anyway? You don’t even deserve to know.”

Her cheeks were hot. “It’s time for you to go,” she said without looking at him. “I want to visit my father in peace.” She almost added, “And I don’t like you.” Even so, she wasn’t sure that was true.

He nodded, traces of his wry smile remaining, and without another word, he turned and walked away. She watched him disappear around the corner, nonchalant, hands in pockets, and she realized that he still hadn’t asked her first name. And she hadn’t offered.

Elena didn’t unlock the grill at the entrance of the mausoleum. Rather she just leaned her forehead into the bars, as though trying to escape this reality and gently push into that of her father. She glanced at the date and name, both carved with such precision and symmetry. She focused on her

father's crypt, directly across from her, at the back, under the altar. He was at the head, as though there'd be a table around which, unless there was a miracle, she'd be the only other soul present. Her mother had designed the mausoleum, and she was in charge. Elena never asked if her mother planned to join him there because she was pretty sure the answer was No.

"Did you see that man with me, Papá?" Elena squinted into the feeble interior light and paused, hoping for the miracle of a response. There would be none coming. "Well, he's insolent. Of course he is. He's also obviously from a family of little education. But you know what, Papá? I like him. I can admit to you that I think he's beautiful. Isn't he? I don't mean just on the outside. I mean he embodies certain qualities. Excitement. Mystery. A dark enchantment. It's very seductive. To be honest, there's something of death around him. And that, well, that's where you are, isn't it?" She gazed in, pushing her cheeks into the bars, almost kissing the cool air inside. She inhaled deeply and pushed her hips forward, brushing against the large, engraved metal flower that formed part of the latch and under which hung a heavy padlock. She felt the squareness of it at her thighs and tightened her muscles so she was taut against it, imagining the bruise that would develop and show itself tomorrow. She touched her thigh there. "Proof," she thought. "Proof that I was here. Proof that I visited, that today I managed to resist the temptation to enter this quiet eternity, to fall into this peace. Proof that I will live another day. It looks like heaven will wait a little longer." She grinned to herself. "Or hell."

She leaned out, her feet planted at the base of the wrought iron and her elbows locked, hands gripping the grill, and she dropped her head to look backwards up at the sky. A green budgie flew over to perch on a bowed, long-hanging branch of an araucaria tree. The bird cocked his little head and stared at her. "We're all just waiting," he chirped. "We sing to celebrate the inevitable end."

Elena smiled at the bird and thought about going home. Home. Not her apartment and not her mother's house. But home, here, where they would all meet one day. Sweet temptation.

—END OF SAMPLE—

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