

**Alien in Granada**  
by Heather Gragg

The German shepherd barking in the abbey's yard wakes me at seven before sunrise. My room is like a cell with its bare shelves and tile floor that magnifies the dog's bark. I left the balcony door open last night because the air soothes me and on Sundays only alcoholics numbly wander the streets so it's quiet. During the rest of the week teenagers suck from cans of Cruzcampo in the alleys after supper, flirt and scream in the streets, and I fall asleep suffocated by the space heater at the head of my bed. I'm afraid to adjust the heat. Wiping sleep from my eyes I hear a hammer pounding. On the 7<sup>th</sup> floor, two above mine, a water pipe has broken and men are repairing it. They work early and late and rest midday. The pounding goes on and the dog barks. "This is why Americans own guns," I think.

"Isabella?" My *señora* knocks on the door to wake me. "Now is the hour."

"*Sí, gracias,*" I say. My real name isn't Isabella. It's Helen but Pilar is from Jaen, where their j's are strong, and she can't pronounce Helen without saying something like "Heidi" and I won't live nine months answering to that. Isabella is a pseudonym and though it was my choice I feel

strange answering to it, like there are two foreigners living here.

I walk barefoot to the kitchen where Pilar has set out a bowl of *galletas* for me. The microwave hums, heating a cup of red tea.

“Look at your feet!” Pilar gasps. “You’re going to catch cold. You should wear slippers!”

I tell her that I don’t have slippers. I’d like to tell her that at home I walk barefoot for miles in town, stepping on the grass along the sidewalk when the concrete hurts my feet, but I’m too tired.

Shaking her head at my strangeness, Pilar asks, “*Una o dos tostadas?*”

“*Una,*” I say.

“*Muy poca.*”

“Usually I just eat an apple for breakfast.”

“That’s why you’re so skinny. Not fat like me.” She puts two slices of bread into the toaster as I seat myself. The biscuits are sweet and I eat them in pairs, eating an extra if the remaining number is odd. Pilar won’t let me make my own breakfast. I am a guest. I am a guest even though the second thing she said to me was, “I’m going to treat you like one daughter more.” The first thing she said

to me was, “Your suitcase is heavy. Is your boyfriend inside it?” With one slice of toast in her hand Pilar sits on a stool against the wall. “My back!” she groans.

“Your back hurts?”

Pilar drizzles olive oil onto her toast. “I had an operation because of two bad vertebrae. The doctor was black—he was American. But a good doctor! I still go to physical therapy on Thursdays. They tell me I need to lose weight.”

“Does it hurt often?”

“Some days the pain is unbearable. I can’t bend to pick up laundry. I can’t dust like I used to. That’s why Julia comes on Mondays.”

She gets up to take my tea from the microwave. It’s always too hot to drink.

“There’s peach and strawberry spread for your toast. For lunch today I’m making *garbanzo!*” She waves her hand at the glass bowl of chickpeas soaking in water. “I know how much you like it! It’s your favorite food, true? All the other Americans preferred my *lenteja* but not you! I can’t eat any of that. I’m on a diet.”

I munch the burnt toast smeared with gobs of peach jam. The clock says 7:45. I have to leave soon or I’ll be late

for grammar class. I can't stand being late. I was taught order in every aspect of life by my grandpa who was a Marine. When I was younger I thought time was a pair of thrice-folded socks in a drawer. Spaniards see time as evanescent, like smoke, and they disregard meetings, arriving ten minutes late if they're early and twenty-five minutes late if they're on time. I've learned to bring a book with me when meeting friends in a plaza because a good book is a comfort and a weapon and I'm always fifteen minutes early. I can't stand being late. When hurrying, I fear it will be obvious that I'm not from Granada. I know how to act in a crowd of ambling Spaniards but my rush is all American, with my foreign tennis shoes and long stride. I go back to my room, get dressed, and make my bed. Making my bed is the only thing I'm allowed to do by myself, to help Pilar, and I do it every morning. She stands in my doorway in her brown and sleeveless house dress.

“How pretty!” she says, touching my red sweater.

“I'm glad you're not wearing black. You always wear black.”

I explain again that I don't have a lot of clothes with me. With a large suitcase and a small suitcase for nine months I have to wear what I've got.

“Well—but a little makeup!” she insists. “You’re pretty but women wear makeup! Don’t you?”

I tell her I’m not interested in makeup.

“As you wish,” she says. “Paloma would paint your nails for you sometime. You’ll ask her.” Her youngest daughter lived in the apartment with us and had a pink salon in her bedroom. She was obsessed with Holstein cows. With a Holstein bedspread, figurines, stuffed toys, and photos, Paloma’s room looked like propaganda headquarters for bovine domination. “You look Spanish today!” Pilar continues. “After your stay in Granada you’ll be Spanish.”

To be polite, I tell her I hope so and then say that I must go to class.

“You study a lot,” Pilar muses, following me to the doorway. “While you’re busy thinking the other women will take all the men.”

I shrug and Pilar smiles at me. “Come, *un besico*,” she says. I lean forward and she kisses me on the cheek. I press the button to call up the elevator.

“Pick up a copy of *20 minutos*,” Pilar says, referring to Granada’s daily free newspaper. She turns away from the door, patting her hair. “Then we’ll have things to talk

about.”

The elevator arrives and through the opaque glass of the door I see the silhouette of a large man. His name is Carlos and he terrifies me. I know who he is now because I asked Pilar two days ago.

“Pilar?” I stood in the doorway of the kitchen. She was heating a pizza in the microwave for my supper.

“Yes, Isabel, tell me.”

“That man in the building who’s always in the elevator, mornings. . . ?” I stopped. Pilar was confused.

“He’s big? The man that scares me. Do you know who he is?”

Pilar smacked the palm of her hand against her forehead. “Now I remember,” she said. “I asked the landlord. His name is Carlos. He’s eighteen and he has autism. He’s harmless. He only asks two questions, always. ‘What’s your name?’ and ‘what floor do you live on?’ He won’t hurt you. Just answer the questions.”

Every morning when I leave for class I’m afraid as the elevator rises. I fear the revelation. Now that the moment has arrived I feel strangely calm, almost hypnotized. It’s too late to take the stairs. Carlos opens the door for me. I think the devil would be as courteous. He’s

tall and appears massive in the tiny elevator. He wears a canary yellow jacket and has the blank face of an egg. The blond fuzz of his hair is shaved close to his skull. The elevator descends. “What’s your name?” he asks me.

“Isabella.” I don’t mind giving him that name since it’s a lie.

“What floor do you live on?” Carlos should know. We just left it and I see him a dozen times a month.

“*El cinco.*” The correct term is *el quinto*—the fifth, not the five. He doesn’t seem to notice. The elevator stops. He moves out, huge and slow as a boulder rolling off a tomb. I step out quickly. Some mornings he gets back in and rides the elevator for hours. Someone calls it to their floor and he goes too, murderously silent except for those two questions which he asks everyone like a summons.

This morning he walks to the corner between the stairwell and the mailboxes and stands with his face to the wall. He yells Spanish gibberish as I stumble towards the door. If it were English it would still be gibberish. I hurry down the street, *Poeta Manuel de Góngora*. I’m ashamed of my trembling hands and rapid pulse. Autism isn’t frightening back home but neither are busy streets. I laugh at my quailing heart. Here I suspect an unclaimed suitcase on a

train and men who sit close to me on benches. The air smells like exhaust from the public buses and the stench of fish comes in gusts from the *pescaderías*. I draw near the school-age gypsy boy crouched with his back to the shop window of the closed jewelers. He plays “The Anniversary Song” on an accordion. An *anciana* stoops to drop a coin into the box next to him. I pause, slipping my fingers into pockets normally heavy with one and two cent Euro coins but I find only keys and a corkscrew. I carry the corkscrew because it’s illegal to carry mace and knives in Granada. A corkscrew can pierce an eye. I smile at the boy but he doesn’t look at me. His is a life made safe by no eye contact. I pass the *pajarería*, all the caged birds crammed in a hot shop the size of a prison cell back home. The owner is smoking a cigarette in the middle of the sidewalk. Three leashed Pomeranians are sprawled next to him. I avoid them. Pomeranians bother me, like clowns made-up in red to cover the bloodstains. There is light rain and the cobblestones are slick. I cross the bridge over the *Genil*, a river fed by the melting snow in the Sierra Nevada. The season has been dry and the river trickles through Granada, not even able to keep empty Dorito bags afloat. A gaunt man huddles against one side of the bridge. He’s playing

the accordion as well. I wonder if he and the boy are related. I wonder many things here in Granada. Where do the priests go after giving mass? Which order of nuns lives in the abbey behind my apartment building? What happens to the gypsies at night? I'm unable to form these questions so I can't know the answers. My host family would wonder at my wondering.

“Why do you want to know?” Federico, my host dad, would ask.

“To know,” I'd reply.

“Why do you want to know a matter that isn't yours?”

I'd be silent. Everything concerns me, I want to say. Everything is mine. Yet my curiosity would be meaningless if it were alone. It would be void. If curiosity is all there is, curiosity dies. It must forever wrestle with some hard unknowable fact, like death.

I go by a Senegalese man hawking umbrellas.

“*Paraguas, paraguas, paraguas,*” he calls. He's probably illegal. I avoid his gaze. I walk down the pedestrian street in front of *El Corte Inglés*. I bought my watch there after a week of trying to determine the hour from the sun and the shadows it cast. Half of that week it was cloudy; luckily I

didn't have class. I wear the watch now, thick and blue. It was ridiculously expensive, 11 Euros.

"That's almost three glasses of Cutty Sark," my friend Serafina said mournfully when I paid the brusque cashier.

"You bitched because I was always asking you the time!" I snapped. I needed a backpack too but for the price of the cheapest one Serafina could have had fifteen glasses of Cutty Sark. There'd be no end to her complaining.

"The price includes warranty, certificate of authenticity, and a green velvet pouch for safekeeping," said the cashier. Serafina was not impressed. "Papers are just proof of how much they cheated you," she grumbled.

I pass through Puerta Real, a plaza in downtown Granada, accepting a copy of *20 minutos* from a man handing them out. I pass three huge sycamores bursting up from the spaces of earth left in the paved plaza. I hear the *motos* blare on the street. I walk up *Calle Varela* and hear the high school kids talking and two police officers talking as they watch the traffic but I'm no longer listening. It's easy to drop out of the world when you're living in a second language. You close your mind and the words become noise. I enter *El Centro de Lenguas Modernas*. I

am late.

I walk past the secretary's office. "*Buenos días!*" he calls. Francisco is bald with crooked teeth and a face that looks like it's been shaped out of clay by a child. He wears dress pants and a sweater vest over a nice shirt, typical of a Spaniard in his late fifties. His left leg is a prosthetic. He wears two shoes, shiny black, so the metal limb is only noticeable on windy days, when he's smoking a cigarette in the entryway and the wind flattens his pants against his legs. Mostly he stays in his office so I don't know how irregular his gait is. I've seen old men with one heel two or three inches higher than the other hobbling in the street and I wonder if their deformities are from years of civil war and famine. Francisco has always been friendly to me.

The only day I really talked with him was when the pigeon fluttered into the school through the main doors which were left open in the nice weather. It headed for the patio and rose towards the sunlight, slamming against the roof and bashing itself against the screens. It flapped madly through the corridors like a filthy avenging angel. It was the hour of *siesta*, lunchtime when the shops close from 2 o'clock to 5. A blond American girl in a pink hoodie shrieked when the pigeon fluttered past her, almost

dropping her laptop and losing the Internet connection she'd been using to talk to her boyfriend. I was seated on a bench outside an empty classroom, eating a *bocadillo* of tuna and tomato. That day I'd asked Pilar for a sack lunch so I could stay at school and read undisturbed. When the pigeon flew into the room I stood in the doorway and peered inside. Pigeons seemed to be the only animals in central Granada and I hated them. I shrank away from them in the streets for fear of contagion. The pigeon perched on top of a vacant chair, its eyes red and its chest heaving. Tufts of feathers floated through the air. I slunk across the room—if that rat with wings was diseased, I didn't want to startle it. I opened a window before chucking an eraser at the pigeon, hoping to make it fly outside. Instead it launched itself at me—I ducked and it landed on the top of the clock, flapping crazily. I opened the other window and retrieved the eraser, hurling it again. The pigeon flew frantically in a circle before lurching out the window. I left the room and folded the remains of my sandwich in foil. I wanted to throw it away but couldn't bear the wastefulness. I'd leave it in a plaza for a stray dog. Francisco saw me and laughed. He was holding that day's *El Mundo*, a rightist newspaper. "Are you afraid of birds?" he asked.

I said yes.

“They’re too big?” He stretched his arms to an exaggerated length and began to flail like a convert to Pentecostalism, implying not only the bird’s size but also the space it occupied in flight.

“Something like that,” I said, watching the front page of his paper float to the floor.

“Did it poop on you?”

I was caught mentally translating an upside-down headline. Bewildered, I ran my hands through my hair, worried that I was about to experience a repeat of Jodi’s birthday party in the fourth grade, when we picnicked in the shade of a maple tree and I unwittingly sat under a branch supporting a very busy bird’s nest.

“It’s good luck if a bird poops on you,” Francisco said.

Suddenly I understood why there were so many lottery vendors and kiosks in Granada. With so many pigeons and so many people the city was plastered with good fortune. I told him I didn’t believe in luck.

“*Claro!* Instead you Americans work very hard, no? Like the Chinese. Have you ever eaten Chinese food?”

I told him no because I hadn’t eaten any yet in

Spain. Eating Chinese in Spain seemed unnecessarily risky, like not wearing a seat belt.

“Don’t ever eat Chinese food. You know why there are so many of them in Granada? When one dies, they grind him up and put him in the rolls they serve in their restaurants. They give his paperwork to the next one sent over.”

I didn’t know what to say. In addition to having the nickname “Little America,” the school was attended by a sizable group of Asian students.

“It’s a joke!” laughed Francisco. “You’re so serious. But you speak Spanish very well!” He’d heard me speak very little but I felt complimented. With my grave face perhaps the Spaniards thought I lacked encouragement. I was quiet and if a person’s quiet and seen reading, more often than not a reputation for thoughtfulness arises.

“Is your father Spanish?” Francisco asked. “Or your mother?”

I said no. I didn’t see the importance of genetics. To my knowledge language wasn’t inherited like eye color or deafness.

“*Enhorabuena!*” he exclaimed. “To speak so well

when you aren't Spanish!" When you're an American, I suspected he meant to say.

"It's that I study," I protested. It was the polite way of acknowledging his compliment without actually accepting it.

"Ah, but studying a language doesn't mean *speaking* it," said Francisco. **X**

This morning three students are huddled around a British guy's laptop, looking at his pictures of Amsterdam. An American girl stands in the middle of the classroom, yakking on her cell phone while examining her eyebrows in a compact mirror. I arrive just before Professor Avila. He tells us to call him Adolfo. He's skinny with gray hair and glasses and usually dresses like a fifteen-year-old American boy, all t-shirts and jeans; today his t-shirt's purple. I hold the door open because he's carrying a Styrofoam cup of coffee in one hand and a stack of papers in the other. "Were you up late practicing *la lengua*, Helen?"

"I prefer to say 'studying'," I reply. All my professors can pronounce my real name and so at school I'm Helen. Sometimes I feel like Isabella exists only in Pilar's apartment, a subdued girl who always cleans her

plate and gets locked away in the closet once I'm ready for class.

“The anatomy of language interests us all,” Adolfo says, handing me a sheet of paper. “Complete the exercises through number ten. We'll discuss the answers as a class.”

I squeeze through the rows of occupied desks to the back of the room, tripping on the straps of backpacks and edging people's notebooks off their desks. The wooden shutters of the windows are closed. For a vacation spot that advertises its sunshine as much as Spain does, everything is awfully dim. Serafina sits in the corner desk. She's saved the spot next to her by draping her turquoise scarf on the back of the chair and putting her feet on the seat. Serafina's a Marxist or maybe an anarchist from Chicago with three eyebrow piercings and red hair to her waist. She gestures for me to copy from her sheet but I shake my head. I'd feel too guilty. A God capricious enough to curse a fig tree into barrenness would condemn me to hell for cheating on a grammar quiz. It wouldn't matter—we won't be graded and Adolfo is busy recommending his favorite bars to the eager black girl from Harvard. I look at the paper. I am to write down ten hypothetical situations in Spanish, using a different verb in each sentence and following the “if . . .

then” construct. Adolfo believes we should be beyond memorization at this level of grammar. He says robots can conjugate verbs but only human beings can be creative. At eight-thirty in the morning I feel distinctly robotic. “If Esperanza had known that she had an identical twin,” I write, “she would’ve robbed a bank and blamed her sister, then used the money for reconstructive surgery.” Chewing on my pen, I finish five more before Serafina pokes me. “What’s up?” she whispers. I frown and point at my quiz. Serafina huffs at my diligence. She unzips her bag and pulls out a *magdalena*, a mini muffin. It’s enclosed in cellophane and since we aren’t allowed to eat in class I wonder how she’ll open the package without drawing attention to herself. The room is quiet and the package crinkles. She takes out her corkscrew—she bought it the same day and place that I got mine, at a store we call the “Euro General”—and punctures the wrapping. As Serafina lifts the muffin, Adolfo turns to look at me. He wants to know if I’m done. Serafina ducks and crams the muffin into her mouth.

“Ten minutes,” I tell him. He makes an exasperated noise but another student agrees with me, an American whose breath and sweaty jeans I can smell from three rows

back. “If I were you,” I write, “I’d want to be me.”

Smirking, I show the sentence to Serafina and she mimes punching me in the head. I complete number ten: “If I were a work of art, I’d paint myself.” Sighing, I stick my pen in my mouth.

“What are you doing?” cries Serafina. I taste ink and realize that I’m biting the point and not the cap. I jerk it from my mouth, drawing a blue line across my cheek. “I’m stressed,” I tell Serafina, wetting my fingers with water from her bottle and rubbing them against my face.

“You need to live with me,” she says, flipping her ponytail over her shoulder and caressing it like a child.

“My *señora* is awesome. She makes tasty *crema de verduras* and fried pumpkin guts.” Serafina is a vegetarian.

This eccentricity is met with incredulity by the older Spaniards who host foreign students. To be a vegetarian is to be an extraterrestrial. Serafina has to constantly define what is and is not meat to her *señora*, who understands Serafina’s abstaining from beef and pork, these being red, but not her avoidance of chicken, lamb, rabbit, and veal. Anyway Spaniards don’t eat much meat—a chunk of sausage in a stew or a sliver of ham with wine is the typical portion for a meal. Serafina has the added disability of

being allergic to seafood (which also isn't meat to Spaniards). A week ago she broke out in hives after eating her senora's deviled eggs. They were stuffed with tuna. She drank half a bottle of Benadryl and still her throat almost swelled shut. "My *señora* likes to shop for clothes but doesn't force her fashion on me," Serafina continues. "We smoke after every meal and talk about politics." Serafina considers herself a pariah. She's always making vague threats against a figure she calls "The Man." When she walks through the streets in her leather jacket, blue blouse, and skinny jeans, some men yell, "*Put a pelirroja!*" She snubs them because they are rude and have nothing to give her. She puts up with worse—a retired mathematics professor who was overly familiar in a bar but kept the drinks coming. In Spain men like that are called *pulpos*, octopuses because they invade so much of one's space that it's hard to believe they have only two arms. Once after she'd downed three glasses of whiskey—"The entrée," she'd said—I asked why she drank liquor only on the rocks. "Because my life is a shipwreck," she replied.

"Ready?" Adolfo asks. "Remember, this class is the *Mulhacen* of Spanish grammar, the peak. I don't expect you to achieve perfection but yes, I expect you to strive for

it. The hardest thing to understand in any language is love. Then jokes.” For ten minutes we correct the grammar exercises. The American who needs to shower complains because his answer is wrong. “Tell me your reasoning,” Adolfo demands.

“I heard it in the street,” he explains.

Adolfo snorts. “*Hombre*, you also find dog shit in the street, but that doesn’t mean you pick it up and bring it to class!” Serafina and I laugh. The guy keeps arguing with Adolfo so he gives us our break earlier than normal. Our autumn classes are two hours long so we get fifteen minutes to stretch or smoke or call our mothers. I accompany Serafina outside so she can smoke a cigarette. “You look cute today,” she tells me. “What’s the occasion?”

I say I had no alternative. My other clothes are dirty, though I wear each shirt three times before washing because Spain is experiencing a drought and I want to save Pilar money and work. (To be truthful, I do the same at home.)

“Most people wear their worst and grubbiest on laundry day,” Serafina laughs. “You won’t glam up until you don’t have a choice.” She licks her finger to test the

wind and moves to the other side of me. “I don’t want to pay your medical bills when you get lung cancer from my smoke,” she says.

I tell her that I like the smell of cigarette smoke. I’m getting my nicotine free, I say.

“And aren’t I a good friend, that I don’t charge you?” She exhales and coughs. “Did you get whistled at on the way to school?” She’s always asking me this, like Pilar.

I shrug.

“You need to loosen up, Helen. You need to get laid.”

Grammar is over at 10:30. I attend “Varieties of Spanish” for two hours and then a class about Islamic culture. When it ends at 2:30, I rush out of the Centro, surrounded by other American students. We push through the smokers in the entry and stop traffic on the narrow, one-way street outside. A helmeted man on a *moto* revs his engine and three guys inside a Honda honk the horn incessantly. This is what Spaniards call *ambiente*, which means “lively atmosphere.” I’m hungry and anxious to arrive on time. I’ll have fifteen minutes alone in my room if I get back by 3:00. Normally we eat at that hour but whenever Pilar makes *garbanzo* her son comes to lunch

and we wait for him to commute by bus. I could use the time to relax and listen to the silence. Silence is precious because it's familiar to me. As such it's gained a human quality, my grandfather sitting in his easy chair by the picture window in his brick house, waiting for my move in a game of checkers. I understand now why sacred areas are silent. To be sacred is to be apart from the mortality of the observer, and there's nothing more removed from the life of Spaniards than silence. Plenty of time for quiet when you're dead.

I walk down Calle Varela, weaving through groups of uniformed boys and passing the occasional young woman sent out to buy a loaf of bread. I hurry past downtown cafes that cater to sun-seeking British and German tourists. I cross the bridge over the river Genil. The gypsy man from this morning is gone and in his place a farmer from the mountains sits on a crate, selling *chirimoyas*, a heart-shaped green fruit piled on planks by his feet. The sun has burned his skin so brown as to be almost black. I walk past the Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart, which always seems to be closed. Attached to it are a school and a playground surrounded by a stone wall. I'm close to Pilar's apartment now, a five minute stroll at most.

I walk down the sidewalk, running my hand against the wall and lifting it where the stone's dotted with bird shit or splashed with interesting graffiti. I pause to admire one man-sized painting—a silver humanoid examining a tree with red berries. I often walk down this street just to see this picture. It's my favorite tree in Granada because pigeons can't roost in it. Next to the image of the creature with the tree is a painting of a dreamy girl cradling either a kitten or a puppy in her arms. Aside from her black pigtails the image is done in an array of blues. I continue down the sidewalk and stop in front of the open gates of the abbey. Pilar says this is a nice neighborhood, but her words are belied by the abbey's walls topped with barbed wire and shards of glass, and the gutted white house across the street, covered with orange spirals of nonsense and gang signs like I see on train cars at home.

Caught daydreaming, I don't notice the skinny guy with a ragged black beard until he's close enough to spit on me. I jump away from him, pawing in my coat pocket for my corkscrew.

“*Buenas tardes,*” he says, but he's too pale to be from here. His white skin suggests cloudy days and lots of rain. I clutch the corkscrew but keep it hidden. “*Hola,*” I

reply.

“I apologize for frightening you,” he says. “Are you from here?”

He looks familiar. “No. I’m an American. I study Spanish.”

In English he says, “My name’s John. I’m from Bristol.” He appears happy to have met another English speaker. It’s appropriate that his clothing looks like something John the Baptist would have worn. His shirt and pants could’ve been picked out of a compost heap.

“I’m Helen.” We shake hands.

“I thought I recognized you,” John says. “Did you tour an organic farm in the Alpujarras a week ago?”

I nod. That’s where I’d seen him before. I gesture at the abbey’s open gates. “Would you like to explore the grounds with me?” My palms are clammy. We can walk while we talk and he can look at something other than me. The nuns’ German shepherd runs at us when we enter, growling and then barking, but he’s tied and the rope chokes him as he yanks at it.

“I thought the dogs in Granada were as small as teakettles!” John says.

“Maybe the dog reminds the nuns that they’re sheep

in need of guidance,” I say.

John doesn't answer. He's inspecting what looks like a hut of bamboo. The abbey is a two-story building connected to a church. I see no nuns.

“Are you studying Spanish on your own, for fun?”

John calls.

I walk over to him slowly so I don't further antagonize the dog. “I don't have the money. I'm here through my university.” I didn't know bamboo grew in this part of the world. “I didn't know what to do with my life,” I say, “so I went to college.”

“That's why I didn't go,” John laughs. “I didn't want to go into overdraft.” We wander past a derelict building that looks like it was once a stable for donkeys or mules. John tells me that he's twenty, my age. “My father is a carpenter. I worked for him after graduation, but my friends weren't around and I was bored. I wanted to see the world.” One corner of the grounds is plowed as if for a garden but I see no plants.

“Do you like it here?” John asks.

“There are too many people.”

“Yeah, I can imagine you'd miss the space of that enormous country. That's why I'm at that farm in the

mountains. A man can breathe his own air and there's plenty left for the stars."

"What are you doing there?" I ask.

"I'm working for a family of Swedes until February."

We walk back towards the gates. I see no nuns. We pass through a rose garden but the blooms have dropped off and the thorns are prominent on the stems.

"I have to get back for lunch," I say.

"That's too bad," John replies. "I have a tin of Dutch butter cookies at the hostel."

"I'm sorry," I say. I don't have a cell phone. I don't know how to give out my phone number anyway. I don't know anything.

It seems we're at an impasse. I've had my silence and I feel like I've been standing here forever. It's hard to believe that moments outside of this one exist. The U.S. seems like a dream in contrast to the reality of Granada. Once I leave, the U.S. will become substantial again and Granada will seem improbable.

Whatever happens will be the will of God and his all-knowing, ever-present indifference.

I turn the corner of Poeta Manuel de Góngora,

passing by a bakery full of old ladies with perms who gossip and clutch the sweaty hands of their grandchildren. The kids fuss and quarrel, impatient for bonbons. In front of the apartment complex, a man and woman stack *peros*, mandarin oranges, and bananas into crates. My key jams in the lock so I jiggle it. As I heave the door open a man looms behind me and I glimpse Carlos's vacant face and blond hair. I walk towards the elevator. It's been called to another floor and I can't bear the wait. Carlos babbles. I hurry towards the stairs and he follows me. I race up the first four steps.

“You aren't taking the elevator?” he asks. He seems distraught and his fingers pluck at the air.

“I prefer the stairs,” I say. “I'm sorry.”

Carlos jolts forward, as if to pursue me, then strides away, humming an eerie falsetto.

I walk up the steps, concentrating on my feet in the dimness because the glass of the windows opening onto the patio is opaque. I switch on the lights as I arrive at each landing. I reach the 5<sup>th</sup> floor and unlock the heavy wooden door, easing my backpack to the ground. “*Hola!*” I call, glancing into the kitchen, where Pilar is digging through the silverware drawer, before continuing to my room.

“You’re late!” she cries.

I toss my backpack onto my desk, shrugging off my jacket and kicking off my worn black shoes. I don’t want to scuff the gleaming yellow tile. I lean out of my bedroom.

“I’m really late?”

Federico, her husband, nods brusquely from the doorway of the living room. He’s short with glasses and a craggy face. At night I can hear him snoring through two closed doors. Sometimes I think he’s a piece of the mountains that broke away and became human, curious as to how we live and die, puzzled by our vehement brevity.

“Today you eat no *garbanzo!*” he proclaims.

“I’m so hungry!” I complain. “I’m poor and the only richness in the world is *garbanzo!*”

Federico laughs and pinches my cheek as I head for the kitchen.

“Where have you been?” Pilar asks me, stirring the pot of stew.

“I passed by the abbey—to see the roses.” I inhale the scent of simmering chicken. “The apartment is so clean!”

“I like everything spotless, though I can’t scrub the floor. Do you see how the cupboards shine?” Pilar sets out

a stack of pink napkins.

“Can I help you?”

She points at the cupboard. “Take four plates and grab some bread.”

I carry the loaf and dishes into the living room, where Federico is watching the news on Channel 3 and Nino, their youngest, sits on the white couch reading *XL Semanal*, a magazine that comes every Sunday with the local newspaper *Ideal*. He’s pale and ridiculously skinny. He’d look like a boy showing off in his father’s dress shirt if not for his receding hairline.

“*Hola*, Isabella!” he cries. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you!” He’s not exaggerating. I’m gone on excursions almost every week and he’s busy selecting furniture for the house he bought for his fiancé.

Federico turns up the volume on the TV.

“How are you?” Nino asks. “How are classes going?”

“I’m well. My grammar class is difficult.” I sit down and tuck my hair behind my ears.

Pilar sets the pot of *garbanzo* on the table. “She’s always studying. She never goes out! Young people go out. But I don’t mind! As long as you’re happy,” she says,

grabbing my bowl and filling it to the brim with stew, “you can do what you want. I don’t judge. I’m glad you’re not wearing black today though. You always wear black.”

“I have two suitcases for nine months,” I say.

“You have to wear what you’ve brought,” Nino says. “That’s plenty!” he chides his mother, moving his bowl away from her eagerness with the ladle.

Pilar dips a spoon into her bowl of clear broth.

“You don’t eat *garbanzo*?” I ask.

“I can’t because beans upset my stomach. I’m on a diet. The physical therapist tells me I need to lose weight. For lunch I eat this and a cup of yogurt, maybe a small piece of fruit, and that’s all. Usually I don’t eat supper.”

“All afternoon you pick at the food in the kitchen,” Nino says.

Federico sits facing the TV, devouring chunks of potato, using a hunk of bread to nudge green beans onto his spoon with an efficiency that I still lack. “What do you call this?” he quizzes me, holding up his fork.

“I don’t remember.”

“*Tenedor*,” he declares. He lifts his glass. “And this?”

“*Un vaso*.”

He thumps the table. “And this?”

“*La mesa.*”

“Let the girl eat!” Pilar exclaims. “You don’t like the food?” she asks Nino.

“Of course I like it. I’m full.” He talks with Pilar about something related to their *pueblo* and his new house. Their accent gets stronger, as if talking about their hometown sends them into the past, when people in these parts spoke a strange dialect of Spanish and Arabic. Federico watches the TV. I shift in my chair to see what he’s watching. The newscaster reports that two men fought outside a bar in Sevilla and one stabbed the other, killing him.

“People are crazy,” Pilar comments.

Nino says, “I don’t remember so many murders when I was young. Did I not hear about them or are people worse now?”

The camera zooms in on bloody pavement and I look away before the meat in my mouth nauseates me. I finish my serving too quickly and Pilar loads my plate while I drink a glass of water. “Eat more bread!” she commands, thrusting a fourth of a baguette at me. Without turning his gaze from the TV, Federico refills my glass.

This time I savor my portion, and Pilar regretfully takes the pot away while I sip a spoonful of broth. She returns with a basket of apples and kiwi. I reject the bruised apples and brush lint off the furred kiwis. I love kiwis but choose an apple because I eat kiwis whole, unskinned, and I'd be embarrassed doing so in front of these people who are already peeling their fruit with their knives. I never use knives. My mother forbid me until I was a teenager and now knives at the table are useless to me in my ham-handed ignorance. I bite my apple and listen to Pilar and Nino chattering. They drop the ends of words like cigarette butts. I distinguish the word "refrigerator." Not comprehending a story is lonely.

"Are you well, Isabella?" Pilar asks. I swallow some apple seeds and a lump of core.

"Yes. Why?"

"You're so serious," Nino remarks.

"I don't understand what you're saying," I say.

"With the accent, not that I don't like it, but I'm still learning."

"We Granadians speak badly," Nino says.

"It's not bad, just different," I reply.

Federico leans across the table, the knife in his fist

still glistening with apple juice. “If you don’t understand something, ask.”

“Okay,” I say. I pop the rest of the apple in my mouth, leaving the stem wrapped in my napkin.

“Have you eaten the whole apple?” Nino asks.

“Yes.”

“All the nutrients are in the peel,” Pilar says, struggling to her feet. “The pain is unbearable!” she gasps, gripping her back.

I put my plate in the sink—“So clean, it barely needs to be washed!” Pilar says. I make my daily offer to help with the dishes but she waves me away. I go to my room and shut the door. I sprawl on my bed, on top of the covers, and listen to the voices of Nino and Federico in the other room. The aroma of warm potatoes lingers in the air. With my eyes closed, I imagine I’ve just eaten Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma’s house. I’m ten and drowsing on the pile of coats thrown on the bed in the spare room. If I nap I won’t sleep tonight. Insomnia in a foreign country is worse than at home. I groan and reach for a notebook.

“Isabella?” Pilar knocks at my door and then opens it. “Are you studying already?”

“No. I’m writing a letter to my mother.”

“Tell her I take good care of you. Tell her you’re allowed to have seconds and thirds and that your balcony has a marvelous view.” Pilar sits next to me on the bed.

“Look.” She hands me a jewelry catalogue. “Paloma sells rings, necklaces, and bracelets. They would be good gifts for your friends in the U.S.”

I turn the pages. Pilar points at a necklace with a mother-of-pearl pendant shaped like a lily. “Isn’t that lovely?” She struggles to her feet. “Look at the catalogue if you like. You don’t have to buy anything.” She pauses at the door. “You’re welcome to study in the living room too. You don’t have to stay in here. As you wish.”

Hunched against the drizzle, Serafina and I slip on the cobblestones of the deserted street.

“*Why* did you want to go out tonight?” I huff.

“I need a drink! We only have a week left and I wanted to say goodbye to Sean. I figured the crappy weather would keep the freaks inside.”

“They’re probably the only ones skulking in the plazas tonight, aside from clueless Americans.”

We stumble through the unlit entrance of Hannigan

& Son's, an Irish pub. The owner, Sean, prefers to receive customers by word of mouth. He keeps his establishment dark to discourage rowdy bar-hopping youths with their skinny jeans and mullets.

Serafina strides across the room as I unzip my coat. Scythes, bow saws, and shears are pegged on the walls, Sean's heirlooms from Ireland. The TV broadcasts a rugby match between Swansea and Cardiff.

"What's up, Sean?" Serafina asks.

He's tall and bald with a brogue so thick I prefer to speak with him in Spanish.

"What can I get you?" he asks.

"A glass of Cutty Sark on the rocks for me,"

Serafina says.

"I'd like a *tinto de verano*," I say.

Serafina unbuttons her leather jacket and loosens her sapphire scarf. "I'm going to miss smoking where I want," she grumbles.

"I'll miss speaking Spanish," I say.

Sean sets our drinks on the bar and is called over to a group of guys. They sound British but one is wearing a blue plaid kilt.

"What do they want Sean for?" Serafina gripes. She

quaffs her whiskey.

A Spanish man sits two stools down from her. His hair is dark and matted and his clothes are only distinguishable from rags because he's wearing them. Most Spanish men are highly conscious of their appearance. This guy is either dangerously charming or very poor. He murmurs to Sean, who fetches him a can of Cruzcampo.

“Was Pilar surprised that you were going out?”

Serafina asks.

“After all her haranguing on the lifestyles of Spanish youth, she was disappointingly subdued. She was visiting with some neighbors when I left.”

The grubby man to Serafina's left is staring at her. She's wrapped against the cold except for her red ponytail which hangs down her black jacket like a beacon. He leans over and asks her something I can't hear. She laughs and turns away.

“What did he want?” I ask.

“He wanted to know where I was from.”

“Did you lie?”

“Why should I?”

I gulp my red wine and Fanta. I have no desire to witness the developing situation.

Sean carries six empty glasses behind the bar. “Is that guy bothering you?” he asks Serafina in English.

“No. He just asked me a question.”

“I’d rather you ignore him. He’s usually quiet but when a girl seems receptive he gets affectionate and difficult.”

The British crowd hails Sean again. The man mumbles to Serafina and she leans over to reply. I don’t know why she’s encouraging him. He can’t afford what she’s drinking. Serafina straightens in her seat.

“If you’d sit facing me, we could pretend to have a conversation,” I suggest in English. “Maybe he’d go away.”

The man scoots over and presses two dirty fingers on Serafina’s shoulder. Now I’m uncomfortable, as if he’s touching me.

Sean marches over, taking the man’s beer and tossing it into a bucket under the bar. “You need to leave,” he commands in Spanish.

“What did I do?” the man protests.

“Everything here is *tranquilo*,” Sean responds. “I don’t want any problems. Just go.”

The man staggers out, scowling at Serafina.

“I wish you wouldn’t have talked to him,” Sean says. “Your body language was too inviting. You were facing him and smiling.”

“Sorry,” Serafina says. “I didn’t think there’d be a problem.”

“Well, there wasn’t, because I prevented it. You need to learn how to ignore men in pubs so bartenders like me don’t have to deal with your problems. He’s not a bad man.” He grasps a bottle of Vodka. “Now I feel bad. I’m going to make each of you a free Sex on the Beach because you’ve been hassled.” He shakes his head as he stirs in the cranberry juice. “Especially with your long hair, Serafina. Spanish men—all men—love beautiful hair. Have you read F. Scott Fitzgerald?”

“I’ve read The Great Gatsby,” I say.

“You should read “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.”

As I taste my drink one of the British guys steps to the bar, counting out Euros.

“Helen?” I glance up and see John. He seems happy. He’s gripping the counter and swaying a little. “Was it you causing the ruckus?”

“Not me,” I snort. “My hair’s tucked down inside my sweater.”

John slouches on the seat to my right. His beery breath makes my nose tingle. “Are you drinking one of those girly, sugary drinks?” he asks. “No wonder all you Americans have diabetes.”

“It’s nice to see you too,” I say. “Have you ever wanted to make it with an American girl?” I stand and zip up my jacket. “John, meet my friend, Serafina.” He smiles at her woozily.

“He’s British,” I whisper to Serafina. “That means he’s distantly related to the Queen—they all are. Being royalty, I’m sure he’s got enough on him for a couple more glasses of your premium beverage.” Rolling my shoulders, I walk to the door. I hate walking home alone but that doesn’t change a thing. I’ll just have to hurry and be vigilant. I’ll be glad when I’m home in America and can wear normal tennis shoes again.