JUNOT DÍAZ
(b. 1968)
Wildwood

Aptly described by one British newspaper as “a truly all-American writer” and by himself as “African diasporic, migrant, Caribbean, Dominican, Jersey boy,” MIT professor and MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” winner Junot Díaz lived in the Dominican Republic until age six, when he and the rest of his family joined his father in the United States. While his mother worked on a factory assembly line and his father, a former military policeman, drove a forklift, Díaz and his four siblings navigated life in what he calls a “very black, very Puerto Rican and very poor” New Jersey neighborhood. Díaz supported himself through college, earning a BA in English from Rutgers and a Cornell MFA. A year after graduating, Díaz published Drown (1996), a collection of interrelated short stories. A decade later, his novel, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007), won numerous prizes, including both a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Pulitzer. Oscar Wao is a tale of a lovelorn and utterly lovable “ghetto nerd,” who dreams of becoming the next J. R. R. Tolkien and three generations of his Dominican American family. Díaz published a second short-story collection, This Is How you Lose Her (2012), and cofounded the pioneering Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation to nurture the work of writers of color. “Wildwood,” published almost simultaneously as both a short story and a chapter of Oscar Wao, is something of a departure for Díaz thanks to its female narrator-protagonist. But it is characteristic in its creation of an entirely new fictional language to capture the unique voices, experiences, and outlooks of its funny, complicated, thoroughly all-American cast of characters.

It’s never the changes we want that change everything. This is how it all starts: with your mother calling you into the bathroom. You will remember what you were doing at that precise moment for the rest of your life: you were reading “Watership Down”! and the bucks and their does were making the dash for the raft and you didn’t want to stop reading, the book had to go back to your brother tomorrow, but then she called you again, louder, her I’m-not-fucking-around voice, and you mumbled irritably, Sí, señora.

1. Richard Adams’s classic novel (1972) about the adventures of a community of English rabbits who, inspired by the prophetic vision of one of their youngest and smallest members, must flee their doomed warren and create a new home.
She is standing in front of the medicine-cabinet mirror, naked from the waist up, her bra slung about her hips like a torn sail, the scar on her back as vast and inconsolable as the sea. You want to return to your book, to pretend you didn’t hear her, but it is too late. Her eyes meet yours, the same big smoky eyes you will have in the future. Ven acá, she commands. She is frowning at something on one of her breasts.

Your mother’s breasts are immensities. One of the wonders of the world. The only ones you’ve seen that are bigger are in nude magazines or on really fat ladies. They’re forty-two triple Ds and the aureoles are as big as saucers and black as pitch and at their edges are fierce hairs that sometimes she plucks and sometimes she doesn’t. These breasts have always embarrassed you and when you walk in public with her you are conscious of them. After her face and her hair, her tetas are what she is most proud of. Your father could never get enough of them, she always brags. But given the fact that he ran off on her after their third year of marriage it seemed in the end that he could.

You dread conversations with your mother. These one-sided dressing-downs. You figure that she has called you in to give you another earful about your diet. Your mom’s convinced that if you only eat more plátanos you will suddenly acquire her extraordinary train-wrecking secondary sex characteristics. Even at that age you are nothing if not your mother’s daughter. You are twelve years old and already as tall as her, a long slender-necked ibis of a girl. You have her straight hair, which makes you look more Hindu than Dominican, and a behind that the boys haven’t been able to stop talking about since the fifth grade and whose appeal you do not yet understand. You have her complexion, too, which means you are dark as night. But for all your similarities the tides of inheritance have yet to reach your chest. You have only the slightest hint of breasts: from most angles you’re flat as a board and you’re thinking she’s going to order you to stop wearing bras again because they’re suffocating your potential breasts, discouraging them from popping out. You’re ready to argue with her to the death, because you’re as possessive of your bras as you are of the pads you now buy yourself.

But no, she doesn’t say a word about eating more plátanos. Instead, she takes your right hand and guides you. Your mom is rough in all things, but this time she is gentle. You did not think her capable of it.

Do you feel that? she asks in her too familiar raspy voice.

At first all you feel is the density of the tissue and the heat of her, like a bread that never stopped rising. She kneads your fingers into her. You’re as close as you’ve ever been and your breathing is what you hear.

Don’t you feel that?

She turns toward you. Coño, muchacha, stop looking at me and feel.

So you close your eyes and your fingers are pushing down and you’re thinking of Helen Keller and how when you were little you wanted to be her except more nunnish and then suddenly you do feel something. A knot just beneath her skin, tight and secretive as a plot. And at that moment, for reasons you will never quite understand, you are overcome by the feeling, the premonition, that something in your life is about to change. You become light-headed and you can feel a throbbing in your blood, a rhythm, a drum. Bright lights zoom through you like photon torpedoes, like comets. You don’t know how or why you know this thing, but that you know it cannot be doubted. It is exhilarating. For as long as you’ve been alive you’ve had bruja ways; even your mother will not begrudge you that much. Hija de Liborio, she called you after you picked your tía’s winning numbers for her and when you guessed correctly how old to the day she’d been when she left home for the U.S. (a fact she’d never told anyone). You assumed Liborio was a relative. That was before Santo Domingo, before you knew about the Great Power of God. I feel it, you say, too loudly. Lo siento.

And like that, everything changes. Before the winter is out the doctors remove that breast you were kneading and its partner, along with the auxiliary lymph nodes. Because of the operations, your mother will have trouble lifting her arms over her head for the rest of her life. Her hair begins to fall out and one day she pulls it all out herself and puts it in a plastic bag. You change, too. Not right away, but it happens. And it’s in that bathroom that it all begins. That you begin.

A punk chick. That’s what I became. A Siouxsie and the Banshee-loving punk chick. The Puerto Rican kids on the block couldn’t stop laughing when they saw my hair; they called me Blacula. And the morenos, they didn’t know what to say; they just called me devil-bitch. Yo, devil-bitch, yo, yo! My tía Rubelka thought it was some kind of mental illness. Hija, she said while frying pastelitos, maybe you need help. But my mother was the worst. It’s the last straw, she screamed. The Last Straw. But it always was with her. Mornings when I came downstairs she’d be in the kitchen making her coffee in la greca and listening to Radio WADO and when she saw me and my hair she’d get mad all over again, as if during the night she’d forgotten who I was.

My mother was one of the tallest women in Paterson and her anger was just as tall. It pincered you in its long arms, and if you showed any weakness you were finished. Que muchacha tan fea, she said in disgust, splashing the rest of her coffee in the sink. Fea had become my name. It was nothing new, to tell the truth. She’d been saying stuff like that all our lives. My mother would never win any awards, believe me. You could call her an absentee parent: if she wasn’t at work she was sleeping and when she wasn’t sleeping all she did was scream and fit. As kids, me and Oscar were more scared of our mother than we were of the

5. Witch (Spanish).
6. Aunt’s (Spanish). Hija de Liborio: literally, child of Liborio (Spanish), an allusion to Oliviero Liborio Mateo (1876–1922), a peasant farmer turned messianic faith healer regarded by his followers as an incarnation of Christ; remnants of his once-powerful Liborista movement still survive.
7. I feel it (Spanish).
8. English rock band (1976–96) created and fronted by Siouxsie Sioux, hailed by the London Times as inventing "a form of post-punk discord [...] as influential as it was underrated."
9. Literally, brown (Spanish), a term for people with dark skin.
10. Spanish-language news and talk station owned by Univision. La greca: Italian-style aluminum stovetop espresso pot (Spanish).
11. New Jersey city in the New York Metropolitan area, home to many Hispanic and Middle Eastern immigrants.
12. What an ugly girl (Spanish).

2. Come here (Spanish).
3. Damn, girl (Dominican Spanish).
dark or el cuco. She would hit us anywhere, in front of anyone, always free with the chancas and the correa, but now with her cancer there wasn't much she could do anymore. The last time she tried to whale on me it was because of my hair, but instead of cringing or running I punched her hand. It was a reflex more than anything, but once it happened I knew I couldn't take it back, not ever, and so I just kept my fist clenched, waiting for whatever came next, for her to attack me with her teeth like she had this one lady in the Pathmark. But she just stood there shaking, in her stupid wig and her stupid bata with two huge foam prostheses in her bra, the smell of burning wig all around us. I almost felt sorry for her. This is how you treat your mother? she cried. And if I could I would have broken the entire length of my life across her face, but instead I screamed back. And this is how you treat your daughter?

Things had been bad between us all year. How could they not have been? She was my Old World Dominican mother who had come alone to the United States and I was her only daughter, the one she had raised herself with the help of nobody, which meant it was her duty to keep me crushed under her heel. I was fourteen and desperate for my own patch of world that had nothing to do with her. I wanted the life that I used to see when I watched "Big Blue Marble" as a kid, the life that drove me to make pen pals and to borrow atlases from school. The life that existed beyond Paterson, beyond my family, beyond Spanish. And as soon as she became sick I saw my chance and I'm not going to pretend or apologize: I saw my chance and eventually I took it.

If you didn't grow up like I did then you don't know and if you don't know it's probably better you don't judge. You don't know the hold our mothers have on us, even the ones that are never around—especially the ones that are never around. What it's like to be the perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave. You don't know what it's like to grow up with a mother who never said anything that wasn't negative, who was always suspicious, always tearing you down and splitting your dreams straight down the seams. On TV and in books mothers talk to daughters about life, about themselves, but on Main Street in Paterson mothers say not a word unless it's to hurt you. When my first pen pal, Tomoko, stopped writing me after three letters my mother was the one who said, You think someone's going to lose life writing to you? Of course I cried; I was eight and I had already planned that Tomoko and her family would adopt me. My mother, of course, saw clean into the marrow of those dreams and laughed. I wouldn't write to you, either, she said.

She was that kind of mother: who makes you doubt yourself, who would wipe you out if you let her. But I'm not going to pretend, either. For a long time I let her say what she wanted about me and, what was worse, for a long time I believed her. I was a fea, I was a worthless, I was an idiot. From ages two to thirteen I believed her and because I believed her I was the perfect hija. I was the one cooking, cleaning, doing the wash, buying groceries, writing letters to the bank to explain why a house payment was going to be late, translating. I had the best grades in my class. I never caused trouble, even when the moenas used to come after me with scissors because of my straight straight hair. I stayed at home and made sure my little brother Oscar was fed and everything ran right while she was at work. I raised him and I raised me. I was the one. You're my hija, she said, that's what you're supposed to be doing. When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what our neighbor had done she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs and my mind and within a year I couldn't have told you what he looked like or even his name. All you do is complain, she said to me, but you have no idea what life really is. Si, señora.

When she told me that I could go on my sixth-grade sleepaway to Bear Mountain and I bought a backpack with my own paper-route money and wrote Bobby Santos notes because he was promising to break into my cabin and kiss me in front of everyone I believed her and when on the morning of the trip she announced that I wasn't going and I said, But you promised, and she said, Muchacha del diablo, I promised you nothing, I didn't throw my backpack at her or pull out my hair, and when it was Laura Saenz who ended up kissing Bobby Santos, not me, I didn't say anything, either. I just lay in my room with my stupid Bear-Bear and sang under my breath, imagining where I would run away to when I grew up. To Japan maybe, where I would track down Tomoko, or to Austria, where my singing would inspire a remake of "The Sound of Music."

All my favorite books from that period were about runaways—"Watership Down," "The Incredible Journey," "My Side of the Mountain"—and when Ben乔vi's "Runaway" came out I imagined it was me they were singing about. No one had any idea. I was the tallest, dorkiest girl in school, the one who dressed up as Wonder Woman every Halloween, the one who never said a word. People saw me in my glasses and my hand-me-down clothes and could not have imagined what I was capable of. And then when I was twelve I got that feeling, the scary witchy one, and before I knew it my mother was sick and the wildness that I had been in me all along, that I had tried to tamp down with chores and with homework and with promises that once I reached college I would be able to do whatever I pleased, burst out. I couldn't help it. I tried to keep it down, but it just flooded through all my quiet spaces. It was a message more than a feeling, a message that tolled like a bell: Change, change, change.

It didn't happen overnight. Yes the wildness was in me, yes it kept my heart beating fast all the long day, yes it danced around me while I walked down the street, yes it let me look boys straight in the face when they stared at me, yes it turned my laugh from a cough into a wild fever, but I was still scared. How

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4. Mythical ghost-monster, a sort of Spanish-language "boogie-man."
6. Grocery store, part of a chain owned (as A&P is) by the Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company.
7. Bathrobe (Spanish).
8. American television series for children (1974–83); featuring stories about children around the world, the show sponsored an international pen-pal club.
9. New York state park, located in the mountains along the Hudson River.
10. Devil girl (Spanish).
11. 1959 novel about the adventures of a twelve-year-old boy who flees his family's cramped New York City apartment and learns to survive on his own in the Catskill Mountains. The Incredible Journey: novel (1961) and, later, a Disney movie (1963) about a bull terrier, a Siamese cat, and a Labrador retriever who trek through the Canadian wilderness in search of their human masters.
12. Earliest hit record by the rock band formed in New Jersey in 1983.
13. Fictional superhero featured in DC Comics since the 1940s and in an American television series (1975–79).
could I not be? I was my mother’s daughter. Her hold on me was stronger than love. And then one day I was walking home with Karen Cepeda, who at that
time was my friend. Karen did the goth thing really well; she had spiky Robert Smith5 hair and wore all black and had the skin color of a ghost. Walking with
her in Paterson was like walking with the bearded lady. Everybody would stare and it was the scariest thing and that was, I guess, why I did it.

We were walking down Main and being glared at by everybody and out of
nowhere I said, Karen, I want you to cut my hair. As soon as I said it I knew.
The feeling in my blood, the rattle, came over me again. Karen raised her eye-
brow: What about your mother? You see, it wasn’t just me—everybody was scared
of Belicia de León.

Fuck her, I said.

Karen looked at me like I was being stupid—I never cursed, but that was
something else that was about to change. The next day we locked ourselves in her
bathroom while downstairs her father and uncles were bellowing at some soccer
game. Well, how do you want it? she asked. I looked at the girl in the mirror for a
long time. All I knew was that I didn’t want to see her ever again. I put the clip-
ners in Karen’s hand, turned them on, and guided her hand until it was all gone.

So now you’re punk? Karen asked uncertainly.

Yes, I said.

The next day my mother threw the wig at me. You’re going to wear this.
You’re going to wear it every day. And if I see you without it I’m going to
kill you!

I didn’t say a word. I held the wig over the burner.

Don’t do it, she said as the burner clicked. Don’t you dare—

It went up in a flash, like gasoline, like a stupid hope, and if I hadn’t thrown
it in the sink it would have taken my hand. The smell was horrible, like all the
chemicals from all the factories in Elizabeth.6

That was when she slapped me, when I struck her hand and she snatched
it back, like I was the fire.

Of course everyone thought I was the worst daughter ever. My tía and our
neighbors kept saying, Hija, she’s your mother, she’s dying, but I wouldn’t listen.
When I hit her hand, a door opened. And I wasn’t about to turn my back on it.

But God how we fought! Sick or not, dying or not, my mother wasn’t going to
go down easy. She wasn’t una pendeja.7 I’d seen her slap grown men, push white police
officers onto their asses, curse a whole group of bochincheras.8 She had raised me
and my brother by herself, she had worked three jobs until she could buy this
house we lived in, she had survived being abandoned by my father, she had come
from Santo Domingo all by herself, and as a young girl she’d been beaten, set on
fire, left for dead. (This last part she didn’t tell me, my tía Rubelka did, in a whisper,
Your mother almost died, she almost died, and when I asked my mother about
it dinner she took her dinner and gave it to my brother.) That was my mother and

there was no way she was going to let me go without killing me first. Figurin de
miérda, she called me. You think you’re someone, but you ain’t nada.9

She dug hard, looking for my seams, wanting me to tear like always, but I
didn’t, I wasn’t going to. It was that feeling I had that my life was waiting for
me on the other side that made me fearless. When she threw away my Smiths
and Sisters of Mercy posters—aquí yo no quiero maricones!1—I bought replace-
ments. When she threatened to rip up my new clothes I started keeping them
in my locker and at Karen’s house. When she told me that I had to quit my job
at the Greek diner I explained to my boss that my mother was starting to lose
it because of her chemo, and when she called to say I couldn’t work there an-
ymore he just handed me the phone and stared out at his customers in embar-

asement. When she changed the locks on me—I had started staying out late,
going to the Limelight because even though it was fourteen I looked twenty-
five—I would knock on Oscar’s window and he would let me in, scared because
the next day my mother would run around the house screaming, Who the hell
let that hija de la gran puta10 in the house? Who? Who? And Oscar would be at
the breakfast table stammering, I don’t know, Mami, I don’t.

Her rage filled the house, like flat stale smoke. It got into everything, into our
hair and our food, like the fallout they told us about in school that would one
day drift down soft as snow. My brother didn’t know what to do. He stayed in
his room, though sometimes he would lamely try to ask me what was going on.
Nothing. You can tell me, Lola, he said, and I could only laugh. You need to lose
weight, I told him.

In those final weeks I knew better than to go near my mother. Most of the
time she just looked at me with the stink eye, but sometimes without warning
she would grab me by my throat and hang on until I cried her fingers off. She
didn’t bother talking to me unless it was to make death threats: When you grow
up you’ll meet me in a dark alley when you least expect it and then I’ll kill you
and nobody will know I did it! Glouting as she said this.

You’re crazy, I told her.

You don’t call me crazy, she said, and then she sat down panting.

It was bad, but no one expected what came next. So obvious when you think
about it.

All my life I’d been swearing that one day I would just disappear.

And one day I did.

I ran off, diqué,3 because of a boy.

What can I really tell you about him? He was like all boys: beautiful and cal-
low and, like an insect, he couldn’t sit still. Un blanquito4 with long hairy legs
who I met one night at the Limelight.

His name was Aldo.

5. Former Siouxsie and the Banshees guitarist (b. 1959) and (since 1976) lead singer-songwriter of the
English rock band the Cure.
6. Elizabeth, New Jersey is home to a major oil refinery consistently ranked as among the nation’s
worst polluters.
7. Dumbass, fool, pushover, or coward (Spanish).
8. Gossip (Spanish).
9. Nothing (Spanish). Figurin de miérda: literally, perhaps something like figure made of crap; figurative-
ly, a phony, something that only looks refined (Spanish).
10. I don’t want to have those faggots here (Spanish). Smiths and Sisters of Mercy: influential British alter-
native rock bands of the 1980s, fronted by highly literary singer-songwriter Morrissey (who once
described himself as “homosexual”) and Andrew Eldritch.
11. Daughter of a bitch (Spanish).
12. Supposedly or so they say (Dominican Spanish).
13. Little white boy (Spanish).
He was nineteen and lived down at the Jersey Shore with his seventy-four-year-old father. In the back of his Oldsmobile on University I pulled my leather skirt up and my fishnet stockings down and the smell of me was everywhere. I didn't let him go all the way, but still. The spring of my sophomore year we wrote and called each other at least once a day. I even drove down with Karen to visit him in Wildwood (she had a license, I didn't). He lived and worked near the boardwalk, one of three guys who operated theumper cars, the only one without tattoos. You should stay, he told me that night while Karen walked ahead of us on the beach. Where would I live? I asked, and he smiled. With me. Don't lie, I said, but he looked out at the surf. I want you to come, he said seriously.

He asked me three times. I counted, I know.

That summer my brother announced that he was going to dedicate his life to designing role-playing games, and my mother was trying to keep a second job for the first time since her operation. It wasn't working out. She was coming home exhausted, and since I wasn't helping, nothing around the house was getting done. Some weekends my tía Rubelka would help out with the cooking and cleaning and would lecture us both, but she had her own family to look after, so most of the time we were on our own. Come, he said on the phone. And then in August Karen left for Slippery Rock. She had graduated from high school a year early. If I don't see Paterson again it will be too soon, she said before she left. Five days later, school started. I cut class six times in the first two weeks. I just couldn't do school anymore. Something inside wouldn't let me. It didn't help that I was reading "The Fountainhead" and had decided that I was Dom- inique and Aldo was Roark. And finally what we'd all been waiting for happened. My mother announced at dinner, quietly, I want you both to listen to me: the doctor is running more tests on me.

Oscar looked like he was going to cry. He put his head down. And my reaction? I looked at her and said, Could you please pass the salt?

These days I don't blame her for smacking me across my face, but right then it was all I needed. We jumped on each other and the table fell and the sand-cho spattered all over the floor and Oscar just stood in the corner bellowing. Stop it, stop it, stop it!

Hija de tu maldita madre! she shrieked. And I said, This time I hope you die from it.

For a couple of days the house was a war zone, and then on Friday she let me out of my room and I was allowed to sit next to her on the sofa and watch novels with her. She was waiting for her blood work to come back, but you would never have known her life was in the balance. She watched the TV like it was the only thing that mattered, and whenever one of the characters did something

underhanded she would start waving her arms: Someone has to stop her! Can't they see what that puta1 is up to?

I hate you, I said very quietly, but she didn't hear.

Go get me some water, she said. Put an ice cube in it.

That was the last thing I did for her. The next morning I was on the bus bound for the shore. One bag, two hundred dollars in tips, Tio2 Rudoñio's old knife, and the only picture my mother had of my father, which she had hidden under her bed (she was in the picture, too, but I pretended not to notice). I was so scared. I couldn't stop shaking. The whole ride down I was expecting the sky to split open and my mother to reach down and shake me. But it didn't happen. Nobody but the man across the aisle noticed me. You're really beautiful, he said. Like a girl I once knew.

I didn't write him a note. That's how much I hated them. Her.

That night while Aldo and I lay in his sweltering kitty-litter-infested room I told him: I want you to do it to me.

He started unbuttoning his pants. Are you sure?

Definitely, I said grimly.

He had a long thin dick that hurt like hell, but the whole time I just said, Oh yes, Aldo, yes, because that was what I imagined you were supposed to say while you were losing your virginity to some boy you thought you loved.

It was like the stupidest thing I ever did. I was miserable. And so bored. But of course I wouldn't admit it. I had run away, so I was happy! Happy!

Aldo had neglected to mention, all those times he asked me to live with him, that his father hated him like I hated my mother. Aldo, Sr., had been in the Second World War and he'd never forgiven the "Japs" for all the friends he had lost. My dad's so full of shit, Aldo said. He never left Fort Dix. I don't think his father said nine words to me the whole time I lived with them. He was one mean vicjito3 and even had a padlock on the refrigerator. Stay the hell out of it, he told me. We couldn't even get ice cubes out.

Aldo and his dad lived in one of the cheapest little bungalows on New Jersey Avenue, and me and Aldo slept in a room where his father kept the litter box for his two cats, and at night we would move it out into the hallway, but he always woke up before us and put it back in the room: I told you to leave my crap alone! Which is funny when you think about it. But it wasn't funny then. I got a job selling French fries on the boardwalk and between the hot oil and the cat piss I couldn't smell anything else. On my days off I would drink with Aldo or I would sit in the sand dressed in all black and try to write in my journal, which I was sure would form the foundation for a utopian society after we blew ourselves into radioactive kibble. Sometimes boys would walk up to me and throw lines at me like, Who fuckin' died? They would sit down next to me in the sand. You a good-looking girl, you should be in a bikini. Why, so you can rape me? Jesus Christ, one of them said, jumping to his feet. What the hell is wrong with you?

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5. Beachfront community on the Jersey shore; the town's population surges from around 5,000 in the off-season to over 200,000 in season.
7. Influential and controversial best seller (1943) by Ayn Rand; a celebration of individualism, it chronicles young architect Howard Roark's struggles to achieve success without compromising, even with the equally headstrong architect's daughter (Dominique Francon) with whom he eventually falls in love.
8. Thick soup or stew common in South America and the Caribbean.
9. Child of a motherfucker, considered one of the worst possible insults in Dominican Spanish.

1. Whore (Spanish).
2. Uncle (Spanish).
4. Old man (Spanish).
To this day I don't know how I lasted. At the beginning of October I was laid off from the French-fry palace; by then most of the boardwalk was closed up and I had nothing to do except hang out at the public library, which was even smaller than my high-school one. Aldo had moved on to working with his dad at his garage, which only made them more pissed off at each other and by extension more pissed off at me. When they got home they would drink Schlitz and complain about the Phillies. I guess I should count myself lucky that they didn't decide to bury the hatchet by gangbanging me. I stayed out as much as I could and waited for the feeling to come back to me, to tell me what I should do next, but I was bone dry, bereft, no visions whatsoever. I started to think that maybe it was like in the books: as soon as I lost my virginity I lost my power. I got really mad at Aldo after that. You're a drunk, I told him. And an idiot. So what, he shot back. Your pussy smells. Then stay out of it! I will!

But of course I was happy! Happy! I kept waiting to run into my family posting flyers of me on the boardwalk—my mom, the tallest blackesthestieg thing in sight, Oscar looking like the Brown Blob, my tía Rubelka, maybe even my tío if they could get him off the heroin long enough—but the closest I came to any of that was some flyers someone had put up for a lost cat. That's white people for you. They lose a cat and it's an all-points bulletin, but we Dominicans lose a daughter and we might not even cancel our appointment at the salon.

By November I was so finished. I would sit there with Aldo and his putrid father and the old shows would come on the TV, the ones me and my brother used to watch when we were kids, "Three's Company," "What's Happening!!, "The Jeffersons," and my disappointment would grind against some organ that was very soft and tender. It was starting to get cold, too, and wind just walked right into the bungalow and got under your blankets or jumped in the shower with you. It was awful. I kept having these stupid visions of my brother trying to cook for himself. Don't ask me why. I was the one who cooked for us. The only thing Oscar knew how to make was grilled cheese. I imagined him thin as a reed, wandering around the kitchen, opening cabinets forlornly. I even started dreaming about my mother, except in my dreams she was young, my age, and it was because of those dreams that I realized something obvious: she had run away, too, and that was why we were all in the United States.

I put away the photo of her and my father, but the dreams didn't stop. I guess when a person is with you they're only with you when they're with you, but when they're gone, when they're really gone, they're with you forever.

And then at the end of November Aldo, my wonderful boyfriend, decided to be cute. I knew he was getting unhappy with us, but I didn't know exactly how bad it was until one night he had his friends over. His father had gone to Atlantic City and they were all drinking and smoking and telling dumb jokes and suddenly Aldo says, Do you know what Pontiac stands for? Poor Old Nigger Thinks It's A Cadillac. Who was he looking at when he told his punch line? He was looking straight at me. That night he wanted me but I pushed his hand away. Don't touch me. Don't get sore, he said, putting my hand on his cock. It wasn't nothing. And then he laughed.

So what did I do a couple days later—a really dumb thing. I called home. The first time no one answered. The second time it was Oscar. The de León residence, how may I direct your call? That was my brother for you. This is why everybody in the world hated his guts.

It's me, dumb-ass.

Lola. He was so quiet and then I realized he was crying. Where are you?

You don't want to know. I switched ears, trying to keep my voice casual. How is everybody?

Lola, Mami's going to kill you.

Dumb-ass, could you keep your voice down. Mami isn't home, is she?

She's working.

What a surprise, I said. Mami working. On the last minute of the last hour of the last day my mother would be at work. She would be at work when the missiles were in the air.

I guess I must have missed him real bad or I just wanted to see somebody who knew anything about me, or the cat piss had damaged my common sense, because I gave him the address of a coffee shop on the boardwalk and told him to bring my clothes and some of my books.

Bring me money, too.

He paused. I don't know where Mami keeps it.

You know, Mister. Just bring it.

How much? he asked timidly.

All of it.

That's a lot of money, Lola.

Just bring me the money, Oscar.

O.K., O.K. He inhaled deeply. Will you at least tell me if you're O.K. or not?

I'm O.K., I said, and that was the only point in the conversation where I almost cried. I kept quiet until I could speak again and then I asked him how he was going to get down here without our mother finding out.

You know me, he said weakly. I might be a dork, but I'm a resourceful dork.

I should have known not to trust anybody whose favorite books as a child were Encyclopedia Brown. But I wasn't really thinking; I was so looking forward to seeing him.

By then I had this plan. I was going to convince my brother to run away with me. My plan was that we would go to Dublin. I had met a bunch of Irish guys on the boardwalk and they had sold me on their country. I would become a

5. Notoriously cheap American beer.
6. Like Three's Company (1977–84) and What's Happening!! (1976–79), a popular American sitcom (1975–85). Where What's Happening!! focuses on three working-class African American teens in Los Angeles, both The Jeffersons and Three's Company focus partly on the conflicts and humor arising from particular living arrangements: the former features a newly affluent African American family who moved from working-class Queens into a luxurious Manhattan high-rise; in the latter, which has an all-Caucasian cast, two young women can maintain their apartment only by convincing their landlord that their male roommate is gay.
7. Somewhat rundown New Jersey beach town renowned for its casinos.