

## You Must Be This Tall

My father held a fishing pole in one hand and in the other, a cooler for the porgies, fluke, and bluefish we would catch off the Coney Island piers. We stopped at the bodega to get ice and a chocolate bar for my breakfast. My father greeted Tito, who was watching a small television next to the cash register: “Tito, you’re looking good today! That is a fine shirt you’re wearing.” Tito scratched the hairy space where he was missing a shirt button. He looked down at me and said, “Your father is very funny. Your house must be like a party every day,” and then handed me a dime and motioned toward the gumball machine with his chin. I reached up for it and said, “It’s fun when we play games.”

“I bet,” Tito said, as he handed change to the next customer.

My father hoisted the bag of ice on his shoulder. “Bye, Tito. Don’t break too many hearts today.”

Tito said “Next,” and waved us away.

My father tightened the straps on the backpack containing our lunches and a sweater that my mother stuck in there in case I got cold, despite its being July, before he bent down to fill the cooler. He tapped my cheek with his cold fingers. I giggled. A woman walked by, and my father put an ice cube in my hand and told me to hand it to her. He said, “Here you go, beautiful. Cool yourself down on this hot day. Have a good one.” She hesitated for a second but kept walking, then looked back and shook her head. I dropped the ice cube down my shirt and shook my shoulders from the chill.

As we walked by the whiskered, old ladies on brownstone stoops sitting on their wide, black-clad butts, he tapped the bill of his Yankees cap and said, “Buongiorno! Come state oggi le belle donne?” to which they answered, “Buongiorno, Signore. Bene, grazie.” Where did he learn Italian? I tugged on his belt loop and asked him what he said, and he told me he promised them many fish on our return. I laughed. They were usually disapproving of those who weren’t their own, but they

responded to him because of me, because he looked like a good father.

When we reached the subway, I ran under the turnstile as I had been instructed to do. While we stood on the platform, my father draped his arm over my shoulder even though I was old enough to know that I shouldn't run around or stand too close to the edge. But when the train arrived and its doors opened, I ran in to make sure I got a seat to kneel on, to get a view of the passing buildings through the clear spots of the graffiti-covered windows. I glimpsed a *TAKI 76*, my favorite tagger because the letters looked like limbs in motion, letters dancing over the burned-out buildings. The rattling felt like riding the Cyclone, the scariest thing I had ever done, and a secret I kept from my mother, after my father had instructed me to glide past the sign that said *You Must Be This Tall* when the attendant hadn't really been paying attention. When we got to the Coney Island stop, everyone burst out of the subway exit like tossed marbles. On the boardwalk, the world was brighter and colored by balloons floating in front of the sun.

We were greeted by a giant, shapely, green mermaid, hair embedded with twinkling green and blue lights, her breasts imprinted with electric starfish. There was a crazy clown with a big plastic water gun laughing so hard you didn't notice he was continuously shooting a thin, hard stream of water at his own temple. We lined up with the Chinese men and fished off Steeplechase Pier. My father cooed in my ear — how to pierce a sandworm. I held its tiny, squirming body and asked, "Papi, which part of the worm is this?"

"That's his spleen."

"I think it's his stomach."

"No, it's too far to the left."

"Oh, OK, Papi. Maybe it's his uni leg."

"Yes, it must be."

He let me lie on the planks, counting sandals and bare feet going by. I counted ants under the railing, congregating in nail holes, or lining up like perfection. When pigeon shit landed in fishing pails, I told a man next to us and he said, "OK. OK. It wash off." I never ate the fish we caught anyway.

After fishing, I would get on the kiddie rides at Astroland and watch my father talk to women every time I whizzed by in a rocket or glided up and down on a horse on the carousel. If the woman wasn't interested, he would be on to another one by the next time I went around. When I got off the ride, he would introduce me and then tell them he worked at a shoe factory and could get them free shoes. He promised custom-leather shoes that he no longer had the tools to make, tools

he'd had to sell before he left his country. He called himself an artist that could make any foot look good even though he was sure that their feet looked pretty good already. I had to wedge my flat, wide feet into stretchy jelly shoes, and begged my father for his magic. One woman once asked for platform boots, and I thought that was the coolest and pictured her stomping in them at a disco wearing a tube top and tight, shiny pants, so I asked my father to make me a matching pair, which he never made for either of us. I liked having extra ladies just as much as my father did. They were nice to him and they were even nicer to me. He would buy me a hot dog, which my mother forbade, and I would forget all about her as I ate it.

The man working the cart stabbed at the hot dogs like he was spear fishing and threw one on the open bun when he caught it. He opened the relish bin, but my father held up his hand and stopped him. The man asked, "Mustard? Ketchup?" and my father answered, "No, just the plain dog."

A lady behind us said, "I like mine plain too."

That's how we met Marilyn. She continued, "I don't like it when the mustard and ketchup make the bun soggy."

I lingered next to her after my father paid for my hot dog. I stared at her fringed handbag, the same peanut-butter color as her skin that was peeking out below her red shirt and above the waist of her tight blue jeans. I told her, "I don't even eat the bun and the hot dog together."

She said, "Hmm. That sounds wise. I'll try it."

The three of us walked away from the cart, and I showed her how I ate it, exaggerating my head tilt as I bit into the bun, avoiding the hot dog in the middle, and she tried it too. She said, "I think I like it this way." My father laughed and said, "Oh no. I have another crazy girl on my hands," as he moved to walk next to her. Marilyn ignored him but asked me the usual questions, like which subjects I was the best at, and which toys I liked. She seemed disappointed when I told her I liked to play with train sets and the bag of one hundred plastic soldiers on the thin, amoeba-shaped stands that hold their legs together. I already knew I needed to start playing with dolls, that there would be some sort of girly clue in their dead-eyed, pointy-toed, feminine grace I was lacking. I had to keep a couple of dolls that were gifts because my mother said that was proper. I ran my hands over their smooth, beige limbs, but that was it. What else could I do with them? In the past I had deconstructed dolls by prying off heads, arms, and legs. And I liked to see how the eyeballs were attached, studied the prismatic kaleidoscope of the irises close up. But, still, I always bored quickly.

I stared at the way Marilyn's smooth curls stuck to the sweat on her neck and wished my hair wasn't twisted up in braids. My father stared at her breasts, which were pushed up by a knot in her shirt like a small, wedged fist.

"Are you a model?" my father asked her.

"No." She shrugged. "I mean, I've had some pictures done but nothing serious."

"You're beautiful enough to be in a magazine." He nodded. "On the cover."

She scrunched up her nose and said, "What? How many brown Puerto Ricans do you see on the cover of anything?"

My father looked surprised and said, "Well, maybe you could be the first. If I had a magazine, I would put you on the cover."

"But you don't. And you clearly don't know anything about the fashion world."

His head snapped back. Then he laughed and said, "Wait a minute. I know shoes and . . ."

She put her hand up and said, "Stop. Where's her mother?"

Long pause. He moved slowly as he grabbed me by the shoulders and placed me in front of him. "Her mother is not around."

"Well, where is she?"

I looked up at him, then I pursed my lips, then I looked down at the moist dirt that collected in between the straps of my jellies. I pointed the tip of my right foot toward the tip of my left. This was fine. This was our usual routine.

My father patted my shoulders down for strength. "She's not with us."

"But where is she? Did she leave?"

My father shook his head. I sighed.

Marilyn added, "Is she dead?"

My father's hands fell away from me. I turned and looked up at his face for direction. We had never been questioned so directly by any of the women. The ones that didn't ignore us outright were coy or giggly. Some were mysterious and said things like, *That's for me to know and for you to find out*, and *I don't give it up that easy*, even though they leaned toward him as they said it.

He 'fessed up. "She's home."

Marilyn looked down at me and said, "You should get home to your mami." I said, "OK," because I wanted to seem obedient. Maybe it would change the way things were going. As soon as she turned from us, a guy on roller skates rolled right up to her.

My father said, “C’mon. Let’s get the fish home.”

I was already depressed. We would go home to stacks of laundry on the beds, and my mother would gut the fish even though it was too much work, but it reminded her of back home, of being on an island. I would have to run the plastic-bagged fish guts down the hallway to the garbage shoot before anything started crawling on them in our kitchen. She would serve the fish with rice and beans. My parents would reminisce about hot, salty breezes and drinking something called coco loco out of a coconut, and I wouldn’t know what they were talking about and why it was something to miss. The same every Sunday.

We ran and crouched under the turnstiles to make it to a train that was just entering the station. We spotted Marilyn as we made our way to empty seats. I don’t know if it was seeing her again or the shaking, the hot dogs, the shaking, the hot dogs. When I started puking, Marilyn and my father jumped up and rushed me between subway cars where you are not supposed to stand, and the two of them held my braids back. I cried and she told me it was going to be all right, that sometimes the hot dogs upset her stomach too. It was the part of the ride where the train goes above ground, and I pictured bits of hot dog mixed with the chocolate bar from the morning escaping between the rails and landing on someone’s head in the street below. I felt bad about this. When I was done, we all sat down, and I put my head on Marilyn’s lap for the rest of the ride.

We got off when she did, one stop before ours. My father turned to Marilyn and handed her a piece of paper. He said, “Here. This is the pay phone outside the bodega by our building. Call me if you want shoes.” She looked down at his hand. He added, “Or anything.”

She shook her head as she took the paper from his hand, sucked in her stomach, and slid it into the back pocket of her jeans. She put her hand on my forehead and said, “You feel a little warm. I hope you feel better, Serena.” I yelled above the noise of the rumbling train above us, “I will, Marilyn.”

Marilyn. I loved saying her name, It sounded like running my fingertips along the keys of the piano in the auditorium at school. My mother’s name is Augusta. What was I supposed to do with that? My father and I were surrounded by a hot bubble of Marilyn’s sweet perfume that smelled like cinnamon and flowers. I opened my mouth to suck in the scent. We held hands as we watched Marilyn walk away.

Even though I was sweating, my father put my sweater on me when we got closer to our building to hide the puke stain in the front of my

shirt, but there was trouble as soon as we stepped into our apartment. I trailed puke and sand as I ran into the bathroom.

I heard my mother yell, “Did she eat a hot dog?”

“She likes them. She has to eat.”

“And that’s why I went through the trouble of packing a lunch. She shouldn’t be eating whatever is in those things!”

I stepped out of the bathroom and lay down on the couch to watch them argue. I joined in.

“Papi didn’t buy me the hot dog.”

“What do you mean he didn’t buy it? Who bought it?”

I looked over at my father. I had to think fast. “The hot dog man gave it to me for free.”

“Why would he give you a free hot dog?”

“It fell for a second and he said I could have it.”

My father took a deep breath then looked away from me.

“What? It was on the floor? You fed her something from the floor?”

“No, no, no. I don’t know why she’s saying that. Drop it, OK?”

My mother put her hand in front of my father’s face, and then she turned to me. “Serena, why are you lying?”

“I’m not lying, Mami.”

“Serena, you are lying.”

“No, I’m not, Mami.”

He walked over to me and put his hand on my forehead and said, “She’s just sick. Let it go.”

I loved lying like I loved hot dogs and chocolate and the candy corn from Halloween that I had my father’s permission to eat. And I didn’t know how to account for the excitement of meeting Marilyn, which I felt was written all over my face. I was the luckiest girl in the world, and I wasn’t going to mess it up by telling the truth. Besides, my mother never asked me if he talked to women. I guess it hadn’t occurred to her to ask. Sometimes I dropped hints like: *There was a nice lady fishing next to us*, or *Papi had a nice lady take me to the bathroom*, to make it interesting, but she never asked me any questions about them.

I asked my father if we could play with our train set while my mother cooked, and he said, “OK, you start laying down the tracks. I’m going to the bodega to get some milk. I’ll be back in an hour.”

My mother said, “That’s gonna take you an hour?”

My father ignored her and shut the door behind him.

I walked over to my tracks. The soldiers I had lined up next to the tracks were knocked down, and some of the tracks weren’t linked anymore. That means my mother had swept or cleaned in some way,

and I would need to salvage as much of the connected train tracks as I could. She always managed to disrupt my sequences. We couldn't afford a fancy set, but we could afford to buy a few lengths of track here and there. I figured out ways the trains could transport small things and built other vessels out of cereal boxes that I would balance on top of train cars. I studied my mother as I circled my trains and their cargo around the living room. I looked at her the way I thought my father might look at her — jeans too loose, shirt too buttoned up. Her hair was tied up in a knot with frizzy hair sticking out on the sides. I touched my braids — all three of them — two on the side and one in the back. I undid the clasps on the barrettes holding the braids together and started unraveling as she gutted a fish and the scent of its insides filled the air. I started feeling sick again, so I walked into the bathroom and rested my chin on the toilet seat. I imagined Marilyn's hands on my cheeks holding my head in place.

A hot dog showed up outside our door a month later — bunless. It was now August, and it sat there looking like the long, pink, skinny fetus of something. There had always been lots of stuff left out in the hallway: chicken bones, diapers, dominoes, beer cans, used bandages, and one time even a baby. My mother said people felt no pride in where they lived.

“What the hell is that?”

“Yay! It's a hot dog!” I said, as I bent down and picked it up by one of the ends.

My mother slapped it out of my hand. The hot dog fell on the ground like a freshly severed finger.

“Don't touch that. It's dirty.”

I knew not to eat it, and that it was meant for me, and for my father, and that made me happy. The hot dog was centered on the thin tissue paper the hot dog vendors used — a horizontal line blocking our exit. “Look, Papi, a hot dog!”

My father screamed, “A what?” from inside the apartment.

“These dirty pigs,” my mother said, as she turned away from it, “It looks like somebody left it there on purpose, lined up like that on the piece of paper. Something about it is too neat.”

My father and I didn't say anything to each other, but we knew.

*I got it, Marilyn. I don't know what your message means but — I got it.*

I said, “Maybe a woman left it.”

I giggled.

My mother turned away from the hot dog, looked at me and said, “You say the craziest things sometimes. What do you know about women?”

I was about to answer her, but my father moved me out of the doorway and said, “I’ll get rid of it,” as he picked it up off the floor.

I felt Marilyn’s presence like a light caress on my skin. I got goose bumps on my arms. My breath quickened, and I ran to the window to see if she was still out there, but all I saw was the guy across the street who sits on his windowsill and blows cigarette smoke out into the street as the fat of his thigh hangs over the sill. This time he was holding a little kid I’d never seen before on his lap. Later that night, I looked at the saint my mother made me pray to every night and prayed for Marilyn’s return. I said, “Our Father, who art in heaven . . .” out loud, but in my head I prayed “Our Father, please bring Marilyn back and I promise not to lie anymore. . . .” I didn’t know how it would happen, but I anticipated her return in my life, and she would become my best friend and she would have the leisure and patience to help me become more like a girl — a woman.

I’d been looking for her everywhere, keeping my eyes extra open, especially whenever we passed the hot dog vendor in the park a couple of blocks away from us, when we were coming and going from my cousin’s house, or when my mother made me go to the store with her. I wasn’t allowed out much more than that because my mother said it wasn’t safe.

There was another hot dog a few days later but still no Marilyn, and the big fat roaches had gotten to it before we did. I screamed and pushed my way past my mother and ran inside the apartment. My father ran after me, and my mother went after the hot dog and swept it down the hallway. When we left the house later in the day, it was still at the bottom of the steps covered in roaches. My mother put her hand over my eyes as I held on to her, stepping down as far away from the moving mess as possible.

The hot dogs prompted my mother to consult the santera near her job at the pen factory because somebody was putting a hot dog hex on us, and my mother was going to protect her family against it. We were Catholic, and she considered witchcraft a sin but still, one heard things, one knew that protection was sometimes needed. Santera or not, everybody knew what the signs were: chicken bones, a tuft of hair, smeared (*animal?*) blood, etc. But, no one had ever heard of the hot dog hex. My mother kept the amulet by the door nailed above the painted-over peephole.



The third hot dog was wedged into where the wall met the floor across from our door. Nothing had crawled on it yet, so I suspected Marilyn had just placed it. I ran down the hallway to see if I could catch her and then ran back and scooted the hot dog down along the hallway with the end of an umbrella until it fell between a space in the handrail four flights down to where I hoped something or someone would take care of it. I was starting to get a little bit mad at Marilyn. She needed to show herself, declare her intentions. I didn't tell anyone about it. I thought my father would get mad. We were supposed to go to Coney Island one last time before school started, but he didn't want to, didn't even want to leave the apartment to throw out the garbage in the shoot in the hallway or get the mail downstairs. He sat down with me on the floor, pretending to play with me. I had placed soldiers along the tracks, guarding against my mother's broom. I ran the train wheels over his fingers to get his attention. He said he wanted to rest. We spent most of the day at home watching TV even though it was really hot. My mother didn't like that we were home. The santera didn't tell my mother what was in the amulet or my mother had decided not to tell us. Every time she passed by the door she said she felt nauseous, that the smell was making her sick. My father and I couldn't smell it. We all found out about the baby a few weeks later.

I caught my mother sitting at the kitchen table, rubbing her belly, which wasn't very big yet. She still needed to do all the things that she needed to do, but she was very tired and wanted to sleep all the time, so now I had to help. I didn't like it. She was teaching me how to do things like fold laundry and make lunch sandwiches. I ate the free lunch at school, so they weren't even my own sandwiches. And it meant I spent less time with my father. I didn't like that either.

I went up to her and asked if I could touch her belly. I glided my hand, barely touching the fabric of her shirt. She took my hand and placed it on top of mine. I said, "I don't feel anything."

"It's too small to kick. Your brother's or sister's legs will grow soon and they will kick you." She laughed. I slid my hand off. I didn't want to think of growing limbs beneath the surface of my mother's skin. I asked, "What happens if it doesn't grow legs?"

"Ay, Serena! The baby will grow legs. Please don't say things like that! It's good to wish for good things. Think good thoughts so that the baby is born healthy."

I said, "OK, Mami," as I thought about the power of my thoughts and wishes. I wished that it be cute and do whatever I tell it, my own

living doll that might keep my interest a little longer than the toy ones. And I wished that it doesn't take up too much space. I'd heard them talking about wedging a crib somewhere, crowding me out into sleeping in the living room. Right now, we were all in a bedroom separated by a sheet tacked up to the ceiling. If I was going to share my life with it, then I needed some sort of compensation. School would be starting soon but it was still hot, and I was getting antsy. I kept leaving things around the house, and my mother kept tripping on them. I was demanding, too, asking for the extra nice school supplies with Snoopy or Olivia Newton John and John Travolta on them, and the pen with the four interchangeable color inks, the ones my parents had said were too expensive.

She stood up, and I saw a red splotch on her pants. I said, "Mami, your butt." She turned around and said, "What?" as the red spread out to her front like a red rose blooming out of her crotch.

My father ran out to find a ride to the hospital. She screamed for me to help her, to get the pads she had put away from their usual place under the bathroom sink to the closet, the ones I still didn't fully understand why she needed them in the first place. She tugged down on her pants, stepped out of them and left them crumpled on the floor — something I'd never seen her do. I was scared because I didn't know if my mother or the baby were bleeding. And it was possible that I'd caused this with my thoughts.

We were fast, and the hospital was slow, but in the end, they told my mother she just needed to rest, and my parents looked at the doctor like they didn't understand what he was saying even though he spoke to them in Spanish.

When we got back from the hospital, my father said, "C'mon, Serena. Let's go to the bodega. Let your mami sleep," and I tripped on a train track when I ran to get my sandals. I wanted to leave the house because I was scared of doing the wrong thing. I pictured the baby rolling into a ball of itself, like the only pet I'd ever had, a newt named Peep who escaped and who we found weeks later, dried up and curled up behind the couch.

I grabbed my father's hand and tried to swing our arms while we walked to make things seem more fun than they were, but he let go of my hand. He cracked his knuckles instead.

"What are we buying?"

He didn't answer me. I needed to know so that I could help him find it. I had always attempted to be helpful at the bodega, but Tito

never put anything in the same place, and my efforts to help look for guava jelly, Wonder bread, and canned Vienna sausages, which I didn't like (nope, not the same), always failed.

When we got to the bodega, he told me to wait for him inside for a few minutes while he went to do something. He bought me a Kit Kat and said, "I'll be back before you finish it. Don't put one foot outside. You hear me?"

He turned to Tito and said, "Watch her for a sec, will you?" and Tito answered, "It better be a sec," and shook his head.

"No, Papi. Don't leave me here. I want to go with you." I grabbed his wrist and held on.

"I have to get something. I'll be right back."

"Are you going to see Marilyn?"

"Forget about Marilyn, OK? Marilyn is doing a bad thing," he said, as he peeled my fingers off his wrist one by one and walked out of the bodega, digging into one of his pockets as he reached the pay phone outside, and then we could see only his legs. After a few seconds, we both heard the phone receiver slam and saw my father walk away.

Tito said, "Well, make yourself useful."

I told Tito about all the things I was going to make the baby do. My thoughts were that it would spend its first few years learning all the chores. This made the baby more alive in my thoughts, which would have to be good ones from now on. I had to give it a job so it had a reason to live. Tito asked, "What if it's a boy?" and I answered, "I don't know." I hadn't really thought that its life would be different if it were a boy. I thought of the baby working like my mother and father said they had done when they were kids. My father always talked about balancing on his head the shoes his uncle had made, the shoe boxes teetering for miles to a store in the colonial zone; and my mother helped her mother, my grandmother, do the washing in a big house. They always reminded me that I was lucky, that I could go to school like a normal kid.

When my father came back an hour later, I was sitting on a stool next to Tito watching the baseball game. I ran around the counter. "Papi! Tito let me take money out of the cash register and give it to people. I got all the change right and told them to have a nice day."

"Of course you did. You're my good girl."

He turned to Tito and said, "Thanks for the solid, my man."

Tito shook his head at my father and said, "My man? This is not happening again. You hear me, my man?"

My father grabbed me by the hand and said, "Understood."

The baby was born on Easter Sunday. They gave him my father's name, so he was a junior. I was glad I wasn't my mother's junior. He was cute, but needy. My mother cried when the baby cried. She was tired and so were we. My father picked up extra work doing odd jobs on Sundays, sometimes cleaning at the shoe factory. I helped her with chores or watched the baby while she ate or took a shower. I had to keep my train sets off the floor so my mother wouldn't trip while she walked around with the baby in her arms.

We walked a few blocks to a cousin's apartment, the four of us, like a family, and people stopped us in the street to meet the baby and congratulate us. My father pushed the stroller, and my mother and I watched as the women peered into the stroller. Everyone called my brother "cute," and my father said, "Like his father!" every time.

We saw Marilyn walking into my cousin's building, and we all stopped moving. Finally! She was wearing a red bandanna around her head and long earrings made of feathers. She looked like a hippie bird, beautiful. But it had been so long. I didn't know what to do. She said, "Hi, Serena."

"Don't speak to my daughter." My mother put her hand up in front of me. She turned to my father and asked, "She knows our daughter?"

Neither of us answered her. I tried to catch Marilyn's eyes, but she only stared at my mother, my brother. She looked like she was about to cry. I felt as if I had been left out of some negotiation that happened without my knowledge. My mother pushed my father to the side, grabbed the handles of the stroller and lurched forward with my brother, as my father and I trailed her. My father's face was turned to the opposite direction of all of us, somewhere across the street where some people were sitting on a front stoop while someone handed them plates of food and bottles of beer out of a first-floor window in the building.

We continued, and my father opened the door and held it for my mother and the stroller, but I ran around them and into the lobby where there was no sign of Marilyn, just the sound of the stairwell door slam, echoing behind her.

My father pushed the button to the elevator, and when it arrived he held the door and said, "Go ahead. We don't all fit with the stroller."

We heard something that sounded like a kitten — my brother waking up.

"No," my mother said. "Take her upstairs. I'll wait for the next one."

My father shook his head, then a man walked in and asked us if we were getting in the elevator or what, and my father got in with him. He held the door for me, but my brother started screaming, and I stepped

back and held the handles of the stroller as my mother lifted him out.

My mother barely spoke the rest of the day, but nobody noticed, too busy doting on my brother. My father drank and talked with the men, the usual, until he left to work a late Sunday shift. I didn't ask my mother, but I knew that she and Marilyn had somehow found each other. Those hot dogs weren't for me. She'd been trying to tell my mother something. I ripped the arms off my cousin's paper dolls and got in trouble.

A few weeks later, I went to the bodega by myself for the first time because my father wasn't home, and somebody had to go. My mother quizzed me before I left: *What will you do if you see a friend? Say hi. Keep walking. What do you do if a stranger talks to you? Nothing. Keep walking. Will you cross the street against the light even if there aren't any cars coming? No. Stop. Don't walk.* As I answered her questions, all I thought about was the chocolate bar I would buy and eat on my way back home without telling her. I had some money from my allowance, so I would return with the correct change anyway.

There would be no more hot dogs. Sometime in the last year this kid at school, David, picked up the hot dog off his tray and put the end of it on his butt and did a little dance until the cafeteria monitor came by and told him to cut it out. When he sat down, he told everybody what was in the dogs, that it was lips and elbows and assholes and God knows what. The others shrugged and bit into their hot dogs — but I couldn't. My father wasn't playing with me anymore, and the train sets were gone, replaced by my brother darting around the apartment in a little basket-like thing with wheels on it, like he was in a real-life pinball machine and he was the metal ball. Too much had been taken from me. I thought about what David had said when I got outside. The hot dog man was across the street with his red and yellow umbrella shielding him from the sun, hiding the faces of his devotees. I walked on.

There were some men I recognized sitting on milk crates, playing dominoes on a small folding table outside the bodega. One of them was the father of one of my classmates; two others, men who lived in my building. They looked up and didn't say hello; they didn't look at my face at all. One of them looked slightly angry or confused as he stared at my shirt, then down my legs all the way down to my jelly shoes, as he licked his lips and tapped two dominoes against each other, which I heard through the sound of a car blasting salsa out of its open windows, and a kid calling another kid a little bitch as he punched him in the arm. I walked by them and into the store, aware

of my pink shorts with the heart-shaped pockets on the butt. I stuck my hands in them, feeling the quarter earmarked for the chocolate in one, and the folded dollar bill for the milk in the other. I walked into the bodega this way, with my elbows pointing backward, awkward, moving crab-like, everything reversed.

Tito asked, "Where is he?"

"He's working. My mother sent me to get milk."

"Well, hurry up. She'll get worried."

I showed him the milk and stood on my toes to give him the dollar. He stood up and loomed over me across the counter and handed me the change. I handed him the chocolate bar and the quarter at the same time. He handed back the chocolate and I said, "Thanks, Tito."

He said, "Don't talk to nobody."

"I know," I said.

I stood there and crammed the warm, disgusting chocolate bar in my mouth and ate the whole thing in a few bites. I hugged the cold milk carton to my chest, wrapping my arms around it, savoring its coolness against me, as I walked out into the heat. I licked the melted chocolate off the corners of my mouth, sucked the evidence away from my teeth, my tongue.