

LOC-ED OUT GETS RESPECT

Jonathan Blum

Early in Olivia Ledesma's senior year at Napa High, her father Angel started disappearing for two and three days at a time. Whole weekends no one would hear from him, and then when he did come home Monday night, it was silence throughout the house. No mention of anything wrong. At first Olivia ignored the situation, like her mother Carmen seemed to be doing. She stayed out later, spent more time with girlfriends, picked up extra shifts at work. When she did see her mother, she kept waiting for her to acknowledge Angel's disappearances, to say something about him like *this is his mood*, which she had said for years to explain any number of Angel's behaviors—as when he would come home late from work at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo and not speak to anyone for several evenings in a row or would sit in his study for most of an afternoon while guests were over. But Carmen was not making any explanations for Angel now, either to Olivia or to Olivia's sister Marcela, who was in the fifth grade. Carmen seemed to have lost faith in her own voice. Day by day her jowls became puffier as if she were being struck by someone; her eyes grew listless. She spoke in muted tones and only when necessary.

All through the fall semester Olivia continued to act as though her father's disappearances did not mean anything to her. Angel had gotten into his moods often when Olivia was younger, and by now she had learned to keep a distance from him. As a small girl, Olivia had taken her father's tough, gloomy, inaccessible faces to be signs that he thought more deeply and intelligently about things than other people. Her father was a Special Projects Engineer for the Navy with more education and a better job than anyone on either side of her family had ever had, and for years Olivia had assumed that Angel's mind was constantly racked by mathematical puzzles and aeronautical mysteries that the ordinary person could not grasp. This assumption made her proud of him; it made him very special to her. Still, his moods lasted, and sometimes she had wanted to blurt out to him that she loved him or whisper to him that she got worried when she saw him hold his face in his hands, but even sitting right beside her, Angel kept to himself. He made her afraid to address him; he expected her to be as

stubborn as he was. Carmen would assure Olivia that when her father acted aloof and indifferent that he still cared about her *it's just his way*, she would say. But Olivia began to doubt her. She took pride in being a girl with some attitude who could keep the boys around her in check, who was interested in older guys from other schools and neighborhoods anyway. By the time she got to Napa High, Olivia liked to think that she had turned out to be a fiercer little girl-child than her father ever thought he was going to raise.

As Angel stayed away more weekends, people close to Carmen noticed, and they came by more often with their kids on Sunday afternoons, bringing merengue CDs and six-packs and filling up Olivia's house with laughter and stories. Carmen liked these get-togethers and stayed busy in the kitchen with Marcela serving hot foiled trays of vegetables and lasagna. Olivia, when she was around, preferred to stay out in the backyard near to the men who knew her father. She enjoyed sitting out on the grass with all the men in wobbly chairs and on blankets, and she would drink cans of Modelo beer with them and pass around copies of her father's *discovery* magazines, hoping to catch wind of anything they might say about him. Sometimes a cousin of Carmen's or a family friend from St. John's parish would say to Olivia, "What's Uncle Sam got your papa doing today?" or "The man works too hard. He's too serious." But none of the men ever said he knew where Angel was. They would only ponder aloud now and then, laughing by the grill, that Angel was not the type to be out doing crazy things in the world, that he must be assigned to some classified project at Mare Island; and then they would go on talking about everything else under the sun and put on more music and have a good time. It wasn't until Olivia first saw her mother sleeping on the couch late one night during the winter that she realized how bad things had gotten with her parents. She was at the front end of the hall near her parents' bedroom, and with the light from the front porch, she could see Carmen in her nightrobe, lying cramped without a blanket on the two-seat living room sofa, her gray toes hanging over the armrest, her face out of view behind a far end cushion. For a moment, Olivia had an urge to go spit on her mother's head. If Angel was so impossible to live with, as her mother had begun saying outside his presence, then she should get up in his face and tell him about it. Stop being this stereotype of the weak Mexican wife who keeps letting the man of the house walk over her, who is always conceding. But Olivia did not disturb her mother on the couch. She reasoned that since her mother had gotten herself into the position she was now in, it was up to her mother to get herself out of it. The woman should just stop compromising so much; she should make her husband give her respect.

Yet as the weeks passed, Carmen became only more depressed. Olivia and Marcela both tried to comfort her. Once, Olivia even stepped between her mother and the washing machine, taking hold of her mother's chapped fingers and looking her in the eye, asking her please to think enough of herself to stop acting like her father's housekeeper. Did she really have to give such ground to Angel as their bedroom? Carmen answered that Olivia would understand things better when she got married and had children of her own and anyway that times were different, that girls now, thank God, grew up believing they had more choices

and control in their relationships than she had had when she married Angel at eighteen. Olivia insisted that the past didn't matter, that it was all about today, and she went on coaching her mother about what she should and shouldn't be willing to accept from Angel; but never, even after several such conversations, would Carmen confront her husband about his private business.

In early March a notice came in the mail from the City of San Francisco addressed to Angel Ledesma. Olivia found it after school. The notice was a reminder to her father that he owed money for a parking ticket he had gotten in San Francisco on January 12 at 12:33 a.m. The ticket cited Angel's brown Honda sedan, and the address of the violation was given. Olivia put the piece of mail in her knapsack and opened some windows in the house. Although she wanted to just clear her head from the day and let the crossing of cool air through all the rooms calm her, she was so agitated she could hardly sit still. Somehow she had never imagined—actually imagined—where her father went when he didn't come home. At most she had wondered about his absences in brief, fleeting thoughts, never vividly constructed. Her father was a small, quiet man with very thin arms and legs who dressed in Mervyn's solid polyester-blend shirts and looked like a scientist. Her aunts and cousins sometimes called him a nerd behind his back, a numberhead. That he could be out at 12:33 on a Friday night in San Francisco getting a parking ticket had been unthinkable to Olivia before now.

Olivia kept the notice in her knapsack and didn't show it to anyone. For a couple weeks it just stayed there. During this time Angel would come home from work well after dinner had been eaten and put away, and would read or stand out in the backyard and smoke. And just as he had done since Olivia was a small girl, he would hold himself in a way that told the females of the house not to address him—that when he wished, he would address them. Olivia maintained her distance from her father. Then another Friday dinner came when Carmen and the daughters could sense that Angel wasn't going to come home from work, but this time at the table Olivia shot Carmen a crazy expression, like *You're Never Going To Do Shit About This, Are You*, and left the room. In the back of the house Olivia tried to picture her father on a busy sidewalk at that San Francisco address: 649 Jones. Meantime she was searching her thoughts for the name of even one person she knew who could help her get out of Napa right away and wouldn't bother her with questions. Fifteen minutes later she was dressed and on the way over to Chuy's.

Chuy was a roly-poly mama's boy from the neighborhood who'd had a crush on Olivia since the eighth grade. He lived a few streets away in a nice powder blue wooden house with red-and-white storm drains that looked like candy canes. Just recently his status at Napa High had gone up since his parents bought him a truck with a fine paint job and stereo system. Now younger girls with Raiders jackets and bangs ironed six inches high were climbing up in his lap afternoons in the school parking lot; and some of the most popular vatos in town wanted to hang out with him—the same toned, rush-seeking boys who had not previously given him the time of day.

As Olivia walked up Chuy's block, a fine drizzle was falling and she had

the hood of her oversized sweatshirt pulled up over her long wavy hair. The half-leaved plane trees along the quiet street were rustling, and there was a moon behind the rosemary-scented mist that you could feel all around you. Up ahead, Olivia saw Chuy's two-tone hardbody pickup with the four letters on the tailgate taken off of TOYOTA to spell YO. The truck had fat chrome rims, tinted side windows, and two silver silhouettes of reclining female nudes facing each other above the back fender. Chuy had parked the truck along the front curb next to a patch of mint, in the direction of the highway that led out of the Napa Valley.

Standing at the Lopezes' door, Olivia could hear lots of people back in the dining room. She could make out Chuy's parents, who owned a bakery in a shopping mall on the other side of town, a couple of Chuy's sisters, some older people. Soon Chuy came out onto the porch in a colorful T-shirt and a brown Dickies jacket with the backside of a clear pager hanging out of his front pocket. His large, dimpled cheeks were pink, and he looked like he had just finished a second helping of something delicious.

"Whassup, O!"

Chuy was peering down at Olivia with his new player eyes, lifting his head and eyebrows just slightly.

"What are you looking at?" she flirted.

"Aw, you know," Chuy moaned.

"You staying home all night with your family?"

"Why, you got something going on?" Chuy asked, grooming between his teeth with the end of his thumb and then breathing out slowly across all his fingernails.

"I always got it going on," Olivia busted.

She was leaning in toward Chuy, wiping away some droplets of water from her chest, while he stretched back against a powder blue railing and let his jeans sag farther down around his hips. She had not been this close to Chuy, just the two of them together, since his parents had bought him the truck, and he looked almost guilty of something to her. His expression was so sure of himself now, so different from when he had been the upright boy grinning at her in St. John's confirmation class or when he had sat in the park in their neighborhood only a year and a half ago with his hands on his knees, too nervous to ask if he could take her to a dance.

"I don't know, some of my people might be coming around here in a little while looking to ride."

Chuy rolled his body a little toward his truck but kept his eyes all over Olivia. His hair was whitewalled and slick on top.

"Please. You could stop acting like the pimp of the year around me," said Olivia, who was now backing Chuy up somewhat against the railing. "Like I don't know the person you really are."

"What are you talking about, ruca?" Chuy maintained. "Shit, I ain't fronting. I'm just getting my respect now. So you're going to have to get used to that."

Olivia held her position on the porch. She was mashing the toes of her black boots around in slow strokes on the muddy floorboards, reminding her-

self that she was on a mission, that she was going to find her father tonight no matter where he went and she was going to show him he could not keep turning away from his family in silence without somebody checking him.

"See, I just say to the females, 'Yo, hop on in, we gonna take a ride Chuy-style. And you know it's all good.'" Chuy started laughing out of his cheeks and busting himself up. "See, I'm getting mine now, you know what I'm saying? It's not like the old days. Times is all different now."

"Yeah, I already heard all about your females," Olivia said, now pressing even closer to Chuy and getting up in her friend's face. "I already heard enough about that."

"What'd you hear?" Chuy asked a little timidly.

"I heard you made Adrienne Gonzalez and Janelle Smith bow down on their knees to you last Saturday at Burger King and kiss your shoelaces in front of everybody," Olivia said. "And I could just see it, too. Now you got your new Vallejo friends, and Carlos and all them, writers, wannabe mobbersæyou go out anywhere you want any time, you think girls are just going to do whatever for you. You could treat them however you feel like it."

Chuy tried to keep an expression on his face like there were a million better things he could be doing right now. Olivia had moved to the other side of the porch and was picking old berries off a juniper bush. She was fighting back imagining strip places and dirty video stores on bright avenues in San Francisco. Inside the house it sounded like people were exchanging things. There were children's voices and clanging, someone like a great-uncle near the window crooning along with a Javier Solis tape. The block was misty and windows were lit. Chuy now looked sad. He held his belt loops and stared adoringly at Olivia.

"What'd you come over here for, man? Torture me?"

Olivia was smiling again at Chuy inside the hood of her sweatshirt and smoothing out the straps of her knapsack across her shoulder.

"Chuy, there's something you got to do for me tonight. I got to be somewhere pretty soon. Alone, I'm saying. It's a last minute situation, and it's going to take me a couple of hours."

"So what are youæ"

"I'm just saying help me out tonight with the truck, all right? Loyalty."

"You want to borrow the ride?"

"You know I'll be good."

"This is a serious request."

"I'm not going to beg you."

"You think I owe you something?"

"I think if you needed it, I'd do it for you."

"Shit. You know if anybody found out I borrowed you my ride."

"I ain't talking."

Olivia started walking toward the front path, letting Chuy see her from behind. "And I know you still love me anyhow," she said, flashing the wide blue pockets of her jeans. "No matter how large you think you're getting in the world."

At the driver's door Chuy was grinning like a foolish kid at Olivia. He picked her a sprig of mint, kissed her on the chin, and showed her what switches not to touch or the suspension on the truck would drop. He showed her the headlights, the wipers, and all that. Olivia pulled the bench up closer to the gas pedal, then held the top of the steering wheel.

"This is strictly business," she promised, and started up the street toward Highway 29.

Flying out of the valley felt a little like lifting off into space to Olivia. There were white lights and gauges and orange digital displays making signals across the dash, and the air in the cab seemed almost artificially stable and sweet like a cupcake. Crossing through the dark, hilly, oak-studded pastures and vineyards swirled with mustard grass, Olivia kept an eye out eastward beyond the topmost heights of the flickering mountains. At one moment, flying along, she wanted to tug at her father and make him look up into the uncurtaining sky, still hidden with stars and moon, and make him tell her what he saw there. Then she was gliding along a plain stretch of highway that led to Vallejo, planning all the things she would make him answer for when she finally got him cornered somewhere in the middle of the big city.

She got on the 80 freeway and followed the signs. Past Vallejo, past the refineries. There was no question now she was going to find him. She could feel herself catching up with him, could feel herself driving in the same lane he had driven in earlier this evening. If guys in other trucks were pulling up and checking her out, Olivia was looking only ahead, off and to the right, past the roofs of the clustered commuter houses to where San Francisco was. She was getting ready to finally meet her father one on one, she could feel it in the heels of her black boots.

Less than an hour later, she pulled up to one of the toll stops at the Oakland side of the Bay Bridge. Everything inside the cab of the truck felt shaggy and good. *We on a mission*, the Conscious Daughters were rapping, steady and intrepid, *a funky expedition*. Olivia got an idea that Chuy should pay the dollar toll, and she searched through every compartment she could find for change. Rummaging around, she found two markers, a girl's hairband stuck with blond hair, a bunched-up report card, some rolling papers, and an empty sample of Polo cologne, but no money. She paid the toll herself, then began to climb up the first stretch of the immense bridge.

The shapes and lights of San Francisco looked sexy to Olivia. The last time she had been to the city, over Christmas break, she and two girlfriends had gone out dancing at a place on Townsend Street. Everyone had found guys that night, there was somebody for everybody in there. College guys, muscle guys, guys in double-breasted suits with cellualars, guys in makeup dancing like spiders. Olivia had spent half the night on the top level of the club making out with a longhaired student from Belgium named Arnold. Arnold had a beautiful jaw and wore silver hoops in both ears, but he'd turned out to be a moron and Olivia had written him a bogus phone number in brown lipstick at the end of the night. She remembered his mystified face when she tried to explain how she didn't speak

Spanish and had never been to Tijuana or Cancún. "I am an American," she had belted straight into the guy's ear over the pulsing house beat. "Born here," she pointed. "Never been to Mexico. My father's family has been in the U.S., here, four generations." Olivia picked a south-of-Market exit and looked for the right place to ask directions to 649 Jones. She didn't know quite where she was, but things felt like they were falling into place anyhow, converging as she felt she had powers. Maybe it was the big bass boom of the truck bumping California G-funk all around her or the fat, shiny moon now glowing high behind a scrim of clouds, but her heart was thumping as if she were about to step into the ring for a title fight and win. This was not their house or Napa any more. Her father had to deal with her now. The rules were different. He could not ignore her here.

Olivia pulled the truck up alongside the entrance to a flat one-story building with a clapboard exterior that she could soon see was a gay bar or club, YOUR OLD MAN, and she called over the first two guys whose attention she could get.

She told them through the passenger window where she wanted to go. "Sounds like the Tenderloin," the one dressed in a polo shirt and chinos told Olivia. He seemed like a businessman, pale middle-aged white face, with slightly crossed eyes, a waistline, and a half-dozen gold chains and bracelets. He was staying a full step back from the truck.

"Could be Theater District," his younger friend contradicted. He was the cuter of the two, a black, charismatic-faced boy in a tight blue vinyl jacket with zippers in every direction and some kind of gauze top underneath, who was swaying to the music coming out from the disco. He had walked all the way to the curb after Olivia arrived and had looked inside the window warmly at her.

"I'm sorry, but Jones Street doesn't go through the Theater District, dear," the gentleman with the gold said to his friend.

"Well then, Theater District adjacent."

"You think she's going to know where that is?"

"You don't need to patronize."

"What are you really looking for?" the older gentleman asked Olivia. "Maybe that would help."

"A man."

"A man," the younger one sighed, looking up at the sky with stagey wonder. "Any old man?" he asked, tapping the purple hardshell of Chuy's truck.

"My father," Olivia said, surprised immediately that she had told them.

"He live at that address?"

"You're newsy, you know that?" said the older gentleman. "She said she's looking for him."

"It's funny, isn't it. They're never looking for you," the older one said.

Olivia liked these guys; she was happy to stay here and talk a while. She found she was even pleased that she had told a couple of strangers she was in San Francisco looking for her father. It felt as if telling them now guaranteed that her mission would succeed.

"I'm not really sure where he lives," Olivia said through the passenger

window. "I guess that's why I want to find him. And I heard from somewhere he might be at that address, so I drove down here to check it out."

"From where?" the boy asked.

"The Napa Valley."

"That's heavy," he said, resting his chin on the base of the window. His friend, who now looked at least twenty-five years older than he, was standing just behind him. "You never met your dad?" the boy asked.

"No, I met him," Olivia said.

"She's got father issues, I can tell," the businessman said. "We've all got father issues, dear," he said to Olivia.

Olivia laughed. She watched the cars and trucks ahead divide like a wishbone into two directions and disappear up one-way streets. Couples and groups were walking into YOUR OLD MAN past a small, thin doorman in an out-of-date policeman's uniform who was stretching his fingers around a nightstick.

"At least she's dealing," said the young one.

"I've always been daddy's little faggot myself," the businessman said.

"You go on up to Jones Street and do what you got to do," the young guy in the blue vinyl jacket said to Olivia. "We're with you."

"Yes, good luck," the other one said. "You're going to give papa the night of his life."

Above Market Street there was traffic. Soon Olivia recognized Union Square and drove around the plaza, remembering a Christmas shopping trip she had taken there with her family years before in her aunt's van. Her father had come along with them that year, one of the few times he did anything like that with the family. Olivia had sat next to him on the bench behind her aunt, and as a joke she had put one end of her seatbelt into one end of his. He had been annoyed. Later, in the city, she had wanted him to split off from the family and take her into the stores she knew he would want to visit: the tobacconist's, Computerville, the shop with the carved marble chess pieces in the window. Instead he had stood on the windy corner of Stockton and O'Farrell peeling off bills for her and Marcela to take into the department stores and use wisely. She recalled his taut red Indian features that day, his compact and serious forehead. She recalled how long she had already been frightened to look into his eyes and say anything directly to him and how she could not remember ever having felt any other way about him.

She drove toward Jones Street according to the directions the two guys at YOUR OLD MAN had given her. Now she was in the Theater District: a big show had let out and the last of the silver-haired ladies in shiny knee-length dresses was pulling her husband across the street by his hand through the stopped cars. A uniformed valet was whistling for a taxi, two young streetwalkers were tying bows in each other's blouse strings, a man was hopping backwards begging for change. There were hotels on both sides of the street offering "Western hospitality" and "highest quality accomodations." Up and down side streets were signs for places named Les Nuits de Paris Massage and Sauna, Aloha Spa, and Saigon Nights. It was after 11 p.m. She did not see anyone who looked

Mexican.

Olivia passed Jones just as she saw the street sign for it, and she made three quick right turns so that she could be driving down it. Now her eyes were divided between searching rows of cars for brown Hondas, searching curbside markers for the site of the parking violation, and searching for her father himself. The neighborhood she was in still felt a little sleazy to her even though its physical qualities had changed in the past several blocks. This was now a neighborhood of cleaners, restaurants, small bookshops, courtyards; handsome hotels and apartment houses were five to ten stories high with fire escapes down the front; many buildings had impressive stone foundations cut to fit the slope of the block on which they stood.

Olivia passed the spot where 649 should have been but did not see anything conspicuous. Continuing down the hill, she found a parking space and then climbed back up the street with her knapsack across her shoulder. The air was fresh and cool and very pleasant, the way it gets after a rain when the moon is out and some of the clouds still remain but you can already tell tomorrow will be magnificent and clear. He'd better have a good excuse, Olivia kept saying to herself in a chastening voice as her legs pushed up the sidewalk. Meanwhile she was covering her face more carefully with the hood of her navy blue sweatshirt so that there would be no chance her father might see her before she saw him.

At 649 Jones Olivia found an unassuming painted-brick building, set back considerably from the sidewalk, called the Western Worth Hotel. Old-fashioned lantern lights were stationed at both sides of its arched terrace entryway, and outside the sill of a dark casement window to her right a bed of marigolds and primrose hung at street level. Brick steps led up from the terrace to an unoccupied lobby, and through the front door Olivia could see a tall bouquet of lilies next to a pair of lyre-backed chairs and a torch lamp. There was no check-in desk. The room was freshly upholstered. A square sign on the front glass said, "Monthly Rates for Permanent Guests: Inquire Within."

Reading that sign, understanding that it meant her father might be regularly expected someplace other than at home, by someone other than Carmen, Olivia felt for the first time since intercepting her father's parking ticket that she did not want to know where Angel went nights like tonight—and that what her mother should do was leave her father, not confront him. At that moment she was afraid of her father and afraid of whatever power he had that could keep her mother so obedient to him all these years. Words Olivia had been speaking in her head in recent weeks about Carmen—*pathetic, slave, coward*—now seemed immature to her, exaggerations of the true situation between her parents. As never before, Olivia thought she could imagine what terribly strong force had once made her mother marry her father; had made her cook his meals since she was eighteen, wash his undershirts, put up with his moods, give him her beauty and devotion; had made her compromise her dreams, look away from his secret trips and disappearances; had made her defend him in any situation at any cost. Olivia saw that she was not so different from Carmen, that she too had defended her father through the years, if mostly to herself. For as long as she could re-

member, she had taken for granted that her father had the same fundamental loyalty to her mother as her mother had to him, no matter how indirect and stubborn he was about displaying it. Now, Olivia saw her parents' relationship as something grossly out of balance, misshaped. A cover-up. A lie. And to think that she had not perceived it this way sooner shook her through her fingers to the bones of her feet.

Back on Jones Street, Olivia wandered further up the hill and spotted a Honda like Angel's but then walked closer and saw that it was not brown and did not have a military security parking sticker on the back window. This is bullshit, she started saying to herself as she paced about, stretching her neck around nearby corners, looking for traces of her father. Who knew whether he really came to the Western Worth Hotel? January 12 he may have simply parked in front of it and then gone anywhere in the city. Perhaps that night was the only night he ever came to this address. Olivia felt she had no business disturbing anyone in this hotel, or even speaking to anyone in this neighborhood. There were galleries here, antique stores, places that were making her feel unwanted and small. Then she heard herself say that these voices in her head urging her to shrink and turn away from her mission were just her mother's weaknesses coming out in her, her mind playing tricks on her, and she pledged not to go back to Napa tonight unsatisfied.

Olivia set out to cover every block of this neighborhood until she saw her father or his car. Her eyes above the steering wheel hunted and measured each tile doorway and unloading zone she passed in the area. Nothing inessential held her attention. When a man about her father's age and height in a dark snap-brim cap walked with a woman out of a storefront market past a lottery sign, Olivia slowed to track him, but once she confirmed he was not her father, she passed him by. She rode on and stopped and was bobbing her head to the beats; and she retraced steps from minutes before, kept pursuing Angel because she knew he was here; she knew it, could feel it, the proof was in her heart; and she kept pursuing him because it was up to her now, and how committed was she to making him see he couldn't get away with this one time more.

Riding along Post Street, creeping, predatory and rhythmic, as if she were cruising Jefferson Boulevard in Napa on a Saturday night with all the players in lowered trucks and waxed, dented hoopedies, Olivia saw her father's car. There it was, apparent as a prize egg, parked in front of an awning that stretched from the edge of the sidewalk to a tall, elegant building with a carved stone façade. Olivia didn't need to look twice at the car. She circled the block, then pulled in a few feet behind it in the same strip of curb painted No Parking in red. Without pausing she headed straight for the entrance to the place. At the grand double front doors, she shook the brass handles, then rested her fists on one of the glass panes. A security phone box on the thick oak doorframe listed no names. She stepped out from under the awning to look up at lit windows. Two carved grapevines rose up the façade in parallel, voluptuous clusters of immaculately detailed fruit and leaf. She counted stories to the top: fifteen. She reread the bold letters in glass above the front doors: Majesty Towers.

There were few people out on the street and only the occasional sounds of

passing cars, horns, and, once or twice, yelling from down the hill, but now Olivia could not stop turning around suddenly, as if someone were about to come up behind her and charge her with an offense—loitering, attempted trespassing. She would twist her head fiercely toward the two vehicles in the red zone, then look back inside again at the vast lobby. There behind the glass doors were several sets of polished tables and chairs spread throughout the room on Oriental area rugs, each set separated by a group of chalk-white decorative columns that did not nearly reach the ceiling. At the very back of the room, behind a wall that contained an oval mirror, there seemed to be a lobby within a lobby, a private enclave, but Olivia could not make out what was back there. She did see an older man with dyed hair in a maroon security guard blazer at one of the far tables, hunched over a crossword puzzle with a pencil. Closer to the front, a winding, iron stairway went up one side of the lobby to nowhere she could see, and there were many paintings hung high on the side walls, neutral landscapes and flat ocean scenes in gold plaster frames. The room looked full of old secrets to Olivia and of past meetings by invitation. She still could not tell whether the Majesty Towers was a residence, a hotel, or something else.

Now it was around midnight, and Olivia knew she was about to set eyes on her father in San Francisco, and she wanted to be in the truck when it happened. The snug, silent cab that still smelled easy like frosted sugar and game. Olivia waited behind the windshield in ambush, her mind tossing with common sayings of her father's that were ringing with near-ecstatic significance for her: *Things in the world work according to certain principles*, for example, and *For every action in life there is an equal and opposite reaction*. She was hearing her father use these phrases, tell her in his detached tone of authority that she could do anything she set her mind to, that she would get out of an experience what she put into it. She could not tell now whether these phrases were empty or actually valuable. Now she just felt her body ready to spring up and at him when he arrived, ready to strip him in public of whatever authority he had.

She was also remembering the last good conversation she had had with her father, not long before Carmen started sleeping on the couch. That evening in his study Angel had told Olivia that he would give her a certain amount of money every month next fall if she decided to move down to Oakland with one of her friends to go to junior college. The conversation had been short, hardly a conversation really, but in it her father had pledged to support Olivia in school and on her own. He had done most of the talking, his words efficient, meant to solve in the least time possible whatever problems he perceived she had, but without doubt he had cared about her. He had said that he would like to see her get a well-rounded education and transfer after two years to a UC. He had not said in words that he thought she could succeed in any career she aspired to—he had not even asked her what specifically she would want to study in college—but she had felt that evening that he did believe in her. That she was his oldest and had the duty to make him proud.

For more than a half-hour no one went in or out of the Majesty Towers. Then at 12:43 a.m. Angel Ledesma came out of the double glass doors of the

building with two other persons, both younger-looking than he, a man and a woman. As he emerged between them, Angel lowered his head and dropped his shoulders like a defendant leaving a courtroom who doesn't want to speak with the press. Shorter than either of his companions, Mr. Ledesma was wearing nothing out of the ordinary, the day's work clothes from Mare Island and a navy blue bomber jacket. The awning above him made him look especially small. As the group stepped down the long black rubber mat toward a gold-ensigned crown at the foot of the walkway, the two members of Angel's party remained on either side of him. Then at his car Angel let the man with wispy blond hair into the back seat. He continued standing at the door until the woman had stroked the top of his hand, folded her skirt underneath her legs, and settled into the passenger's seat. Standing there on the circling of the crown, Angel seemed to notice the shiny red and purple pickup truck with lots of chrome parked close behind his car but did not pay special attention to it. For a moment he glanced up above the apartment buildings across Post Street and saw the sort of round, solitary moon leaning forward in a clear sky that people say is watching you. Afterwards he walked around the front end of his Honda to let himself in the car.

Olivia was waiting behind the windshield of Chuy's vehicle for the right moment to nab her father, but the right moment wasn't coming, and now her father was about to disappear again. Her hand was squeezing the red permanent marker she had taken out of Chuy's glove compartment, grinding the cap into the bench seat. She could see her father was about to drive away with these two strangers and not come home to his family until he was ready and satisfied. She was sure he was thinking about sex—the sex he was about to have, the sex he had just had, the sex he must already be used to having in a numbered room behind moonlit curtains where somebody slips off his pale blue boxer shorts and tells him how to give it to them. Finally Angel looks back at the blazing truck. From his face Olivia can't tell what he is seeing. She pokes half her head out the driver's side window and tries to look her father straight in the brown of his eyes. Her mouth is sealed shut like his. For an instant he seems to recognize her, but then he gets in the car so quickly, she can't tell whether he knows who she is.

Her father leaves down the next street, and Olivia's throat catches like there is a story she can't hold inside any longer and if no one wants to hear it, now she is going to make someone hear it. She breaks again for the doors to the Majesty Towers. Mother Fucking Loc-ed Bitch, she is repeating under her fast breaths—mixed with Papa, That's You? There is a chilly wind blowing up the hill across Post Street. At the black rubber mat Olivia stops and walks back to the truck. Gasping with purpose, she finds the second marker, then returns to the front entrance of the building and writes *Mother Fucking Olivia Gets Respect* across the wooden doorframe in red and *M.F.O.G.R.* across the security phone box in green. Me, she is saying to herself. Me Me Me Me Me. Right Here. The old guard at the back of the lobby is still sitting ignorantly in the same spot, combing back his oiled strands of hair and then tapping his pencil on the table. Olivia starts trying to carve a big, wide O with Chuy's ignition key on

one of the locked glass doors, an O her father cannot miss seeing every time he comes to this building, and at last the old guard's ears stand up. Putting on a face to let anyone out there know he's in charge, the guard straightens his jacket sleeves and pulls out the walkie-talkie from his belt. He appears to be Filipino. Olivia continues to scratch the glass with the truck key until he is two or three steps away. Even when the guard gets outside, Olivia doesn't budge.

"I call the police on you, little girl. You in big trouble. Don't you move anywhere and go anyplace fast."

"I'll do whatever the fuck I want, Security," Olivia said with both hands in fists inside her sweatshirt pocket. "I can stand here if I feel like it. I'm not doing anything you need to criticize. Get back in your chair and do your crossword puzzle."

"I saw you doing this," he said, motioning to the graffiti on the glass and the wall. "You didn't see anything. You got broken eyes."

"I saw you and now you go to the police. I don't care if you're a gang girl or what you are. I'm not scared of you."

The guard was trying to grasp Olivia's wrist and pull her inside the lobby.

"Your eyes are broken, cabron. You didn't see anything. And keep your hands to yourself."

The guard persisted in groping for Olivia, first stammering something into his walkie-talkie and then tossing it down on the sidewalk, but Olivia danced out of his reach and laughed wildly at him as she dipped back toward the truck.

"Your problem, Security, you don't even know what's going on in your own fucking building. Somebody's probably up there getting injured right nowæa serious injuryæand you're down here trifling with me. Step back."

Olivia spun away from the curb and drove around San Francisco cursing at the entire city that now reminded her only of her father and his tough, unreachable face turning away from her again. "You will *not* dismiss me," she was shouting over a booming West Coast beat on the radio. Then she was pounding on the steering wheel with the heels of her hands and turning up the volume in the cab. "Maybe her, but not me."

Olivia drifted through the streets of the Tenderloin lost and hissing at every man in a bus stop who seemed to think she was out cruising the neighborhood tonight looking to get with him. Men in newsstands, men crouched against the peeling walls of 25-cent peep shows. Meanwhile she could picture a tall young lady in the front seat of her father's car scratching his scalp and telling him how impressed she was with his knowledge of the night sky. His tiny waist twitching. And Carmen, who cannot sleep, whispering with Marcela in the kitchen or else watching television in the family room by herself.

She finds the way to the Golden Gate Bridge and decides to take the long way back to Napa where she doesn't have to pass Vallejo or anything that will remind her of her father. This was the way her mother liked to drive home from San Francisco after a day trip, *the scenic way*, she would say, across the rolling fields of Sonoma County, past the wharves at the top of the bay, along the windy two-lane roads with anise and yarrow growing in the shoulders, through

eucalyptus groves and vineyards and livestock pastures, past fruit stands, the dairy, stacks of lumber, and the enormous compost heap on Route 121 that was always covered by a white tarp and old auto tires, where little purple flowers grew out the front. The radio was off, and Olivia had the valley air of her earliest memories blowing in through the truck, exhilarating and also calming her. She was going to talk to Carmen as soon as she got home. She was going to curl in beside her on the sofa and tell her everything, spell out for her exactly what she had seen so that her mother could invent no justification for her father, no apology or song and dance, and then Olivia was going to teach her mother about respect once and for all.

Olivia switched off the truck in front of the Lopezes' driveway and put the keys quietly in their mailbox. The porch light was on, and soon she heard steps coming closer on the wood floor. It was Mr. Lopez behind the screen door. He was in knee-length underwear and black socks. The block was silent. Not a cat in any yard. There were the warm, faint smells of caramel and candle smoke from inside.

"Ah, goodnight, Olivia," Mr. Lopez said.

Olivia looked back at Chuy's father, this sweet, friendly baker she had known half her life, this easygoing bear of a man who always loved making children happy, and she all of a sudden wondered which two or three nights he didn't come home, which nights his father had not come home, which nights Chuy would one day not come home. She thought of the house next door and the one next door to that. About all of Napa High. She wondered what anybody else was doing about this situation.

Inside her own house, Olivia threw off her sweatshirt onto the pile of shoes and umbrellas by the milagro at the front door and looked around in the dark for her mother. She was not on the couch, not in the family room, and not in her own bed. She was down the hall in the daughters' room, snuggled in next to Marcela in Marcela's single bed, Marcela's arm over her shoulder. Carmen's eyes were closed, but Olivia knew that she was awake.

"Mami," she said.

Marcela's face popped up from behind Carmen's hair, which was wavy all over the pillow.

"Mami, listen," Olivia said again, kneeling beside the bed. "I'm not in trouble, okay?"

Marcela's dark oval face was locked tight with suspicion, but her eyes continued to search out over her mother's graying hair with astonished interest at her big sister. "I know where he goes," Olivia said.

Carmen shifted slightly on top of the bedsheet, but still maintained the appearance of sleep.

"I went to San Francisco tonight."

Marcela's cheeks clenched. Then Carmen's lidded eyes tightened as if she were just coming to the worst part of a bad dream. She sighed quietly under her breath.

"We all love him, but we're not staying in this house any longer."

Olivia could feel herself getting ready to put her hand on her mother's head

and guide her. Her mother's worried eyebrows, skin carved from prayer and waiting.

"It's wrong," Olivia said. "You will never be happy."

She was still kneeling beside her mother, and now she was raising her hand to deliver the promise to Carmen.

"It will be hard, but then it will get better. We'll figure out what to do."

Olivia's fingers were in her mother's hair, assuring her, holding her still, keeping her from being too alarmed or scared. Then Carmen's eyes opened, and she blinked them into focus.

She looked at her daughter, the bold one, strong. Olivia. In that moment she imagines her two children in a simple house with a pitched roof, nearer to the mountains, with different colors, different walls. Both of them close to her, on either side.

"We have to, Mama," Olivia said. "He's already made the choice."