



BECKY BLAKE

“Becky Blake has woven an adventure of identity so engrossing that you’ll feel like you lived it yourself.”

— MICHELLE WINTERS, AUTHOR OF *I AM A TRUCK*



Proof I Was Here



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WAS

BECKY
BLAKE

HERE



A Buckrider Book

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For my sisters, blood and chosen.

Barcelona. Spring 2010.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a vertical cylindrical object, possibly a pen or pencil. The hand is positioned on the right side of the frame, with the thumb and index finger gripping the object. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a window with a view of a cityscape. The text "PART ONE" is overlaid in the center of the image in a bold, distressed, black font.

PART ONE



1

I pushed out through the front door of the building and walked away from the apartment that was no longer mine. Barcelona had turned ugly. The leaves of the palm trees were dead and brown, the cobblestones of the sidewalk broken and dirty. Even the sunlight looked damaged – gritty and soot streaked. I brushed away the first few tears that came, but after a while I didn't bother. Nobody was paying any attention to me. It was late Saturday afternoon and the Gothic Quarter was gridlocked with last-minute shoppers: teenagers with cell phones, parents with strollers, couples holding hands and taking up way too much space.

The old itch was starting under my skin, but I ignored it. I just needed to sit down somewhere and collect myself. A bar across the street looked dim inside and not too busy. I reached into the pocket of my trench coat for my wallet, then checked my other pocket. For a second, I thought I'd been robbed. Then I remembered the sign at the Boqueria market warning about pickpockets; that I'd moved my wallet into my shopping bag for safekeeping – a bag now sitting

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on Peter's kitchen counter. After throwing my keys at him, the only way to retrieve it would require doing things I couldn't face: standing on the wrong side of his locked door, and begging to be let back in.

The itch travelled up my arms and converged in the centre of my chest, a maddening spiky mass that needed to be torn out. I stepped into a souvenir shop and walked up one of the aisles, past the magnets, T-shirts and statuettes: tacky souvenir versions of all the attractions I hadn't had a chance to see yet. At a rack of postcards, I stopped. Slowly, I spun the carousel, reviewing its contents – famous paintings by Velázquez, Miró, Goya, Dalí.

I checked the mirror in the corner of the shop. The sales clerk was busy with a customer at the cash. I slipped a Picasso postcard into my pocket, and the prickling scratch in my chest was soothed for a moment by a warm rush of heat.

Time slowed as I moved toward the exit. I saw the cashier's finger pressing down hard on a ribbon she was tying, the customer shifting his weight from foot to foot. In the front window, the pages of a book had turned yellow from the sun. The bamboo wind chimes jangled like hollow bones as I opened the door to the street.

A block from the shop, I glanced back. No one was following me. In my pocket, the shiny surface of the postcard felt reassuring – I deserved to have at least this tiny thing. I walked for several minutes, feeling buoyant and indestructible. Peter wanted to send me back to Canada, but I wasn't going to go. I had a three-month tourist visa. Maybe by the time it ran out I'd have found some way to belong in this city without needing to be his wife.

"Niki, I can't marry you," he'd said. For a second I'd wondered if he could have found out about what I'd done on my last day back home, but I didn't think that was possible. Something else had happened. An affair with one of his new co-workers maybe, while I was busy packing up our apartment in Toronto. When he'd denied it, I

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called him a liar. So then he admitted the truth: “I didn’t miss you,” he’d said. “I didn’t miss you when you weren’t here.”

I pulled the postcard from my pocket. It was a portrait of an asymmetrical woman, the two sides of her face so dissimilar they could belong to different people. I stopped in the middle of the surging crowd on Portal de l’Àngel, unable to take another step. As I looked around, only two people made eye contact: an old woman begging in front of a restaurant and a homeless man sitting on a piece of cardboard beside the Zara entrance. The man had scabby bare feet and long dirty hair. His eyes pinned me in place. He knew what I knew: that in just one moment, everything could change; that the change could leave you invisible, except to others who were unlucky. I had a strong urge to go and sit beside him, to let myself sink down to the ground and then stay there.

Beside me the roll-down door of a dress shop clattered shut. The woman closing up the store clicked a heavy lock in place, then pulled on her motorcycle helmet and hurried to the curb. She had somewhere to go, or someone to see. Those were the reasons that kept people moving – kept them from sinking to the ground. I needed a destination, but the only place I could think of was the Boqueria. I’d been shopping at the market every day – had been there just this morning. I loved the tall pyramids of brightly coloured produce, and the vendors who called out terms of endearment as I passed: *¡Carinho!* *¡Querida!* *¡Mi amor!* They sounded like a giant family all clamouring to feed me.

I looked around, trying to choose another destination while avoiding the homeless man’s eyes. Up ahead was a sign for the metro. As I walked toward it, I folded the postcard down the middle and dropped it in a trash can. At the entrance, I stepped onto a long silver escalator and let it carry me down. I would ride the trains until I figured out some other way to move.

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A line of people were waiting to feed their tickets into the automated turnstiles. When it was my turn, I just climbed over. The soles of my boots smacked loudly on the other side. I smoothed my skirt over my leggings, then headed off down a long damp hallway to a set of well-worn stairs. On the platform below, I waited for the train.

There was only one thing in my pocket – a paint chip sample I'd been planning to show Peter. As I touched its edge, I remembered the rush of stupid joy I'd felt holding up the little red square, imagining the white walls of our new home filling up with a colour that I loved.

The tracks of the metro seemed especially close. I turned and placed my hand on the tiled wall, feeling the solid surface beneath my fingers. After a moment, I began to draw with my fingertip, tracing the skyline view from Peter's balcony onto the wall: the Gothic cathedral's spiky roofline, and beyond it the wide avenue of art nouveau buildings, then the distant curve of mountains on the horizon.

When the train came, I got on and looked back at the blank stretch of tiles. Maybe if I stayed underground long enough, the city would look beautiful again when I came back up.



2

I rode the trains back and forth for hours, noticing the unloved people. They were suddenly everywhere. A thin woman in a window seat rocked herself back and forth. Quarter-sized bruises lined the inside of her arm. They reminded me of a shirt I'd shoplifted once – when I'd pulled off the security tag, it left splotches of permanent dye all down one sleeve. The thin woman rose and moved toward the exit, rubbing at her arm. People could also be ruined in ways that were impossible to reverse.

A man with a neck brace got on at the next stop and planted himself in the centre of the aisle. He was holding a display box full of small coloured lighters. “My friends, forgive me,” he called out. His Spanish was slow and basic like mine. “I am ashamed to be begging for your help. I am a strong man, but I cannot find work. Please, any help at all.” He held out a lighter in my direction and flicked it. I had nothing to give him except my attention.

He turned and walked off, starting his speech again from the beginning. At the far end of the car, a group of tall Black men slouched, loose and tired, in their seats. They were speaking French

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and I guessed they were from somewhere in West Africa. Each man had a large cloth bag between his feet. They were probably illegal street vendors – the kind who sold knock-off purses and sunglasses to tourists. One of the men dug in his pocket for some change and handed it to the guy with the neck brace. No one else gave him anything, and soon he moved on to the next car.

As it got later, the passengers got louder. Groups of teenage boys jostled each other, drinking and spilling cans of San Miguel. On one train a throng of people in Megadeth concert T-shirts crowded around me, smelling of weed and shouting to their friends about epic guitar solos.

Around 3:00 a.m., two security guards in bright orange vests got on at Plaça Catalunya station. They walked the length of the car with wide balanced steps. I sat up straighter as they passed, but they hardly looked at me. I checked my reflection in the window: a skinny tourist with staticky blond hair and a faint half moon of mascara under each of her eyes.

The security guard at the department store in Toronto had taken a lot longer to assess me. A balding man with thick biceps, he had locked the door of the store's security office, then pressed me down hard into a chair and taken my wallet out of my purse. Standing behind me, he tossed pieces of my ID onto the table: my credit card, my bank card, my driver's licence, the art gallery membership Peter had given me for my birthday, the found photographs I'd put into the photo sleeves as a joke to create a fake family for myself.

When he was finished, he bent down and spoke with his mouth so close to my ear that I could feel his breath on my neck.

“Spoiled,” he said. “I see women like you all the time.”

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When I told him he didn't know anything about me, he slammed a hand on the table and pointed to my belongings. "Tidy that up."

I worked to fit the cards and photos back in my wallet, while trying to keep an eye on his hands. "I swear I was going to pay," I said when my wallet was back in my purse. "I was just looking out the window to see if it was raining."

The guard pulled a chair up to the table across from me. "Intent to deprive, that's all I need to prove."

"But I wasn't even outside the store. They're seriously not going to charge me for this. You should just let me go."

"What I *should* do," he countered, pointing his pen at me in a way that made me certain he'd held a weapon before, "is make sure you understand who's in charge here, and what things cost." He shoved the cashmere scarf across the table toward me.

I stared at the scarf as we waited for the police to arrive; I couldn't figure out why I'd taken it. As a kid I'd shoplifted food that my mom and I needed. As a teen I'd boosted clothes and makeup from big chain stores. But it had been years since I'd stolen anything. Plus, this time had felt different – more like the scarf had grabbed onto me instead of the other way around. It had been so soft. The colour so lovely, a perfectly cooked egg yolk. I had brought it to my face, thinking of another scarf I'd stolen. After that, it was in my purse.

When the cops arrived, a female officer greeted the guard by name, then scribbled in her notebook as she listened to his report: how he'd watched me slip the scarf into my purse and then move past the checkout counters to the front door.

"When I grabbed her, she elbowed me in the face." The guard rubbed his chin with a woeful look. "And then, when I let go of her for a second, she turned around and cut me with her key." Gingerly, he began to roll back his sleeve revealing a deep ugly gash on his arm.

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“Are you kidding me? I didn’t touch him!”

“Mike, you should go to the ER and get that looked at,” the policewoman said. She turned to me. “If you assaulted him, that’s a much more serious charge.”

“But I didn’t! If anything, I should be pressing charges against him. I probably have bruises all over me.” I could still feel the imprint of his fingers on my shoulders and arm.

The policewoman ignored me and read me my rights while her partner motioned for me to put my hands behind my back. The security guard gave me a small smirk as the cops walked me out.

In the tiny interrogation room at the police station, I waited alone, pacing and trying not to panic. When I asked for a lawyer, the on-duty counsellor called the phone in the room. I told him that the guard hated me for some reason, that he seemed like he might be dangerous, that he’d probably been in a fight; a key couldn’t make a gash that big – it must have been a knife or a piece of glass. The counsellor’s advice was to say nothing for now. It was the same advice he no doubt gave everyone, no matter what unfair shit they were dealing with.

Finally, a police officer with a crewcut let me out. At his desk, he made me sign a blue sheet of paper with the words *Promise to Appear* at the top. On it was a court date over six weeks away and a list of my charges: theft under five thousand dollars and minor assault.

“And don’t even think about not showing up,” he said. “Otherwise we’ll be adding an extra charge to that list and you’ll be spending some time in jail.”

The moment I was free to go, I went home to pick up my suitcase, then took a taxi to the airport and checked in early for my flight. I’d already been planning to leave and never come back, so nothing had really changed. I just couldn’t believe I’d done something

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so impulsive and almost ruined everything. I was worried it might happen again.

I was still feeling anxious as I cleared Spanish customs. But then the airport's automatic doors opened, and I smelled a different country's air for the first time, and spotted Peter's face in the crowd of people waiting for their loved ones.

Only a week had passed since then, but now everything was different. I rested my face against the window, letting my cheekbone bounce off the surface each time the train stopped and started, imagining a bruise forming and then spreading, my whole cheek caving in like a rotten apple. I welcomed that level of damage; I deserved it for trusting Peter.

When the train reached the end of the line again, I crossed to the other side of the tracks and settled into a seat on a train that was heading the other way. Travelling back and forth across the city, I was digging a groove, deeper and deeper, into the ground, like an eraser rubbing at the same stubborn mark. There were so many feelings I would need to forget: the rush of pride whenever Peter walked toward me in a room, my gratitude each time his family welcomed me on holidays, the thrill of being Peter's "plus one" at art openings and my secret hope that one of his colleagues might someday want to show my paintings. Love – I'd felt that too. For the first time I'd let it take me over completely.

The view from my window was mostly dirty grey walls punctuated by red plastic tubing. The stations were gaudy baubles strung far apart on a dingy cord of tunnel. After 5:00 a.m. the train slowed down, stopping in each station for longer. I wasn't hungry, felt nothing in my body, and was thankful for that. The metro would shut

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down for a few hours on Sunday night, but that still gave me almost a whole day to decide where to go next. Eventually I would have to return to the apartment for my wallet and passport. I wondered how long I could survive with nothing in my pockets. Maybe a few days. Maybe longer. A few days of staying away from my mother's apartment had turned into six years. Six years and counting.

The train passed along a brief stretch of aboveground track, and the dawn-diluted sky looked bleached and empty. I'd been thinking about my mother more than usual over the last few weeks – how moving to Spain meant I'd probably never see her again. I'd even sent her a postcard the day after my arrival, the ocean between us making contact feel safe for the first time; there was no chance she could ask to see me. I'd also wanted to show off, let her know that I'd moved into a gorgeous apartment in Barcelona and that I was getting married. Now, if I ever spoke to her again, I'd have to admit that everything I'd been bragging about – all the differences between her life and mine – had disappeared. She might even think I'd been lying. All I could hope for was that maybe she'd moved, and the postcard would end up in the trash.

By 8:00 a.m., the train had picked up speed, and there were people around me again, sitting tall and self-important in their church clothes. The artificial light exposed everyone's flaws: their undyed roots, razor-burned chins and sweat stains. I closed my eyes and didn't bother to open them again, even when passengers sat down beside me. For a long time, there was only the weight of strangers' bodies coming and going.

One particular body eventually caught my attention because it smelled like the outdoors: sea air mixed with soil and exhaust. I shifted slightly away, then thought I felt something touch me. I reached my hand into my pocket before remembering – I had no

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keys, no money to protect. Instead I felt the brush of retreating fingers. I straightened up and opened my eyes.

Sitting beside me was a young guy with gold-brown skin and dark eyes. He wore a folded bandana over a mess of black hair and a dirty leather cuff around each of his wrists. Both hands were on his knees now where I could see them. He was looking down at his fingers.

“Mejor quédate despierta,” he said.

The sense of his words burst in on me without knocking. Growing up, when my mom was working late, our neighbour Rosa had always said the same thing to me if I started to fall asleep on her couch. “It’s better if you stay awake.”

I took a moment to rearrange my limited Spanish vocabulary, then told him that I didn’t need to stay awake; there was nothing in my pockets.

He turned to study me, and the light in the metro flickered. For a second he looked like a small boy, vulnerable, then he was a young man again, a thief. Something raw and open passed between us. It felt like recognition.

He handed me the paint chip he’d taken from my pocket and stood up.

I watched him walk down the length of the train, nobody looking as he passed. A tourist couple was blocking one of the doors, pointing up at a metro map. The woman had a knapsack on her back and the pickpocket stopped behind her. The train made a sudden snaking motion as it entered a new tunnel, and the woman stumbled, then regained her balance. It had happened so fast, I wasn’t sure I’d really seen him do it – just a quick flash of motion behind her back. I almost called out to the tourists, but I changed my mind. They were laughing together, the woman holding onto

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the man's arm. Honeymooners maybe. It was stupid to live like that, like children in adult bodies, so trusting and unprotected.

A recorded voice announced the name of the next station, Urquinaona, and the train began to slow. The pickpocket glanced back at me then disappeared through the open door.

All the blood in my body rushed to my legs as I stood up, propelled by one thought only: I needed to go where he was going. I stepped off the train just as the doors were closing. The pickpocket was already on the escalator, halfway to the top. I squeezed my way around people until I was almost close enough to touch him. Through his thin T-shirt, his shoulder blades looked like handles I could grab.

Outside, the sunlight was blinding. I followed him for a block, keeping a little distance between us. At the corner, he stopped at a red light, and I came up beside him, my heart knocking hard. He turned, and I forced myself to meet his gaze. One of his dark eyes was a little sleepy, and beneath it a constellation of freckles was scattered across his cheek. His nose pointed slightly in the other direction as though it had been badly broken.

When the light changed from red to green, he gave me a small nod, and I felt like we were making a deal; I wasn't sure for what. We began to walk together, first along the top edge of the Gothic Quarter, then into El Raval, the neighbourhood on the opposite side of La Rambla. I'd been to El Raval a few nights before with Peter. We had planned to eat dinner there, but we hadn't really felt safe. There were fewer street lamps, and after taking a wrong turn, we'd ended up in a dark alley full of beggars and junkies that led to a street lined with prostitutes. I'd seen a splash of fresh blood on the cobblestones.

The pickpocket shifted closer to me on the sidewalk as we squeezed by a group of men gathered in front of a butcher shop.

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They were talking in a language I didn't recognize, and they watched us as we passed. Above my head, laundry flapped from balconies. I heard babies crying, and somewhere a car alarm was going off.

A tall man in a suit shuffled by. There was something wrong with his feet. When I turned to look, I saw that one of his legs was fake – it had twisted around and was pointing in the wrong direction. The sadness in the city kept creeping up behind me, tapping me on the shoulder. Look, it seemed to be saying. Look here, and here, and here.

I followed the pickpocket through a stone archway. A tarnished plaque said we were entering the grounds of the city's first hospital, no longer in use. There was a damp, hurt smell coming from inside the courtyard. When we walked toward it, I saw a man pulling a needle out of his arm. Another washing his shirt in the fountain. Two others were yelling back and forth, hands in the air. All of them stopped as we entered, and I stopped too.

The pickpocket looked back to see if I was coming, and I searched his face for a promise of safety that wasn't there. When I moved toward him again, he led me into a shadowed corner that smelled like piss and orange blossoms. Behind a pillar he bent down and swung open a metal grate. Inside was a dusty green knapsack. I heard him rummaging through the pockets, and when he turned, he handed me a cream-filled pastry in a plastic wrapper. His fingernails were dirty.

"Tienes que comer," he said. "You have to eat."

I took the pastry. *"Gracias."*

"De nada."

He lifted his T-shirt and pulled the tourist's wallet from the waistband of his jeans. He was very thin, and he had a shiny pink scar snaking across his stomach.

I took a couple small bites of the pastry, then stuck the rest of it back in the wrapper. Eating sweet things always made me feel sick – they weren't really food.

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The pickpocket was looking through the wallet and pulling out the money. It was a sensible, beige canvas wallet with snap pockets for change. Empty plastic photo sleeves dangled from its spine. The tourists would be mourning its loss now, their day refocused around cancelling their credit cards, making expensive phone calls, trying not to blame each other.

The pickpocket wrapped the wallet in a piece of newspaper and walked over to stuff it in a trash can. When he returned, he asked for my name.

“Jane,” I said. It was an alias I hadn’t used since I’d been caught shoplifting as a teen.

He put his hand on his chest. “Manu.”

It was either his name, or the name of something that lived inside him. “Manu,” I repeated, and he nodded.

As it got dark, more people joined us in the courtyard, flopping down on the grass, tired or drunk, and calling out to each other in loud friendly voices. Manu and I were sitting on his blanket, and he was trying to organize his belongings. He repacked his knapsack, starting with a pair of workboots and a small stack of clothes, then a collection of papers and photos sealed in a Ziploc bag. Into the side pockets, he tucked some items he’d been carrying with him: a pack of cigarettes, some money and a folding knife. We weren’t talking too much, but other people kept coming over to visit. Many of them seemed to be missing something: a shoe, an eye, a finger. It was hard not to stare at them, to wonder what Manu might be missing.

A foul-smelling old man in a ripped overcoat stood looking down at us for a moment, then lurched in my direction, laughing and grabbing at his crotch. He didn’t have any teeth. As I leaned away from him, my thumb moved instinctively to the band of my

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engagement ring. It was a gesture of security: I am loved, I am safe. But those things were no longer true.

Manu asked the old pervert to leave me alone, assuring him that we both knew what a ladies' man he must have been in his prime. The old man seemed to like this, and immediately began telling Manu a story about a woman he'd slept with. I waited until neither of them was looking, then slipped off my ring and put it in the inside pocket of my coat. Maybe I could sell it. I wondered how much it was worth.

The old man looked over at me again. “¿*De dónde eres?*” he asked. “*De Canadá.*”

“¿*Y por qué estás aquí?*”

I didn't know if he was asking why I was in Spain, or why I was in the courtyard. Before I could find out, two policemen in black-and-yellow jackets arrived, and the old man grumbled and wandered off, heading toward the exit.

“Mossos,” Manu explained, glancing toward the cops. He shoved the rest of his stuff back into his knapsack, and we joined the others who were filing out of the courtyard.

One policeman stared at me as we passed. He probably thought I seemed out of place, but the truth was I'd been around rundown people for most of my life. Growing up, the streets around my apartment building in Parkdale were full of them. At school, I pretended I was from a nicer part of the neighbourhood, making sure I only hung out with girls who lived in the big houses further north, girls who came from proper two-parent/two-job families and had braces and university funds. Brigid was the only one of those girls who knew where I really lived. As teenagers, my apartment was a good place for us to hang out because my mother was hardly ever home. After I got kicked out, Brigid's parents took me in so I could finish high school. Staying in the guest room of their giant house, I had

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thought maybe the memories of my mother's building and street would fade, but they hadn't.

Manu and I exited through the archway. The others from the courtyard were all heading off in different directions, some of them trailing blankets, like children who were half asleep. Manu looked uncertain, as if he didn't know what to do with me.

"Let's go somewhere else," I said. "I don't care where."

"Okay." He indicated a direction, and we crossed the street, then walked down the same dark alley that I'd stumbled into with Peter—the one that led to a street full of prostitutes. Tonight, I looked at them more closely. They were young mostly, a wide selection of Eastern European and sub-Saharan girls with gold or silver hot pants and dark glossy lips. Unloved and far from home. The city's sadness was heavy now, two hands pressing on my shoulders instead of tapping.

A woman with an orange Afro beckoned to us with a long fingernail as we passed. Manu said something to her that I didn't catch, and she smiled, leaning back against the wall.

At the end of the street we came to a construction site enclosed by a temporary fence of whitewashed boards. One part of the fence featured a picture of how the finished building would look. It was going to be a hotel; tall, black and cylindrical, modern and expensive. Someone had spray-painted the fence with graffiti. Two words jumped out at me: *gentrificación*, *PIGS*.

Above the fence, the hotel's half-finished skeleton rose into the night sky, its inner workings exposed: iron girders, rusted piping, thick cables. We walked around the perimeter until we came to a gap in the fence. Manu pushed his bag through the opening and squeezed in sideways after it. To follow him I had to suck in my breath, and even still, raw-edged wood scraped me front and back. Inside the fence, I froze. There was a security guard sitting on a chair, listening to a small radio. I was ready to run, but he didn't

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look up. Manu took two cans of beer from his knapsack and placed them on the ground near the guard, then motioned for me to keep moving. There were wires and broken bricks underfoot. I held out my arms to the sides as we climbed a set of concrete stairs. After being underground the night before, it didn't feel good to be going so high up. I tried to count the floors to distract myself, but I kept losing track.

When we reached the top, maybe the tenth or twelfth floor, Manu walked straight to the unfinished edge of one of the rooms and sat down with his legs dangling out into the open air. I could see the lights of Montjuïc beyond him; we were as high up as the mountain. Some of those lights were coming from the art museum where Peter now worked. I wondered if he was looking for me somewhere in the city down below, wishing maybe that he'd bought me a cell phone that worked here.

Manu turned. "*Venga.*"

I shook my head. I was too dizzy to join him at the edge. Instead, I sat down on the dusty floor, but I couldn't escape the view. I'd never been afraid of heights before, but now the open space was pulling me like a magnet while sadness pushed me from behind. There was a cemetery on the other side of Montjuïc – it was one of the first things I'd seen driving in from the airport – and I thought about how easy it would be to stand up and walk toward it. Five seconds to the edge, then five seconds of falling, maybe ten. I hugged my knees to my chest. I needed to contain those thoughts.

Manu got up and came over to where I was sitting. He took the thin blanket out of his pack and spread it on the ground. I shifted over and he sat beside me. From down below, the shouts of the prostitutes, beer sellers and drunken tourists rose up. Distorted and tangled by the distance, they combined into a racket that spiked and dropped in unpredictable patterns, impossible to block out. I was

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grateful for the noise; I didn't want to fall asleep. I had a sudden urge to reach out my hand and slip it under the edge of Manu's T-shirt. I wanted to trace the pink line of his scar, but that was just another thought I needed to contain.

I stared down at my empty hands, at the thin white tan line on my ring finger that looked like a scar of my own. "I don't know what I'm doing here," I said.

Manu picked up some pebbles from the floor and tossed them toward the edge of the room. A few of them skittered over the side and fell. "We're looking at the city," he said in Spanish.

Then we sat beside each other for a long time, breathing all the emptiness in and out.