

## Morning Sickness

Hector stands at his stoop. One hand shades the sun; the other arm hugs his coatless body. His eyes are small as raisins behind his glasses. He kisses my forehead and pulls me close. His sweater smells of lemon soap. I turn away. “Your face is cold,” I say.

“Well I’ve been out here a while. You know, you just missed Mami by like fifteen minutes.”

“What luck,” I say.

Hector smirks like an embarrassed child. He jangles his keys and shoves the front door open with his foot. An old supermarket circular he’d used to catch the lock slides out, comes apart at the seam and whips with the wind, depositing its Veteran’s Day specials all over the sidewalk.

I follow Hector to his place, five familiar flights up and always too hot. The radiators hiss. Steam sweats out the stink of last night’s dinner – some sort of scorched meat, *chuletas* or chicken, with too much powdered garlic. Coupled with the lemon soap smell from Hector’s sweater, it’s too much. I break for the toilet, coat and all. Three months pregnant and three months queasy, and never once have I been able to throw up. Is this the day? Not even a bulimia-style forced finger down the throat helps. I gag. I spit. I give up. I rinse my mouth. My skin has become pale in the wrong way, thick and porous, like masking tape. Darkness has crept up under my eyes and settled around my nostrils. My chin and cheeks are discolored like I have a disease. I can’t decide what’s worse, the

nagging nausea, or the feeling that my body has been invaded without my permission.

I rotate bottles and jars in the medicine cabinet so their labels face me: an expired bottle of aspirin, wadded cotton still inside; a rolled, nearly empty tube of hydrocortisone cream; iodine tincture in a brown glass bottle with a broken cap. The fade cream smells like racks of dead peoples’ clothes at the Salvation Army. I dab some under my eyes, let it sink in. My face stares back at me, defiant, unchanged.

Hector knocks. “Everything okay?”

I roll my eyes. I put the cream back and unlock the door. Hector stands in the narrow hallway.

“Were you able to this time?”

“No,” I say, “but I’m fine.” I sidestep him. I rest my coat on the couch, a plastic-covered floral colossus that whistles at the seams when you sit on it. I am so used to Hector’s room that the living room is an alien place. On the mantle over the sealed fireplace, a white pillar candle, a glass of water on a plate, and a heap of rosaries surround a wood-framed picture of Hector’s dead brother Jimmy. Jimmy smiles like a child. The picture is three years old, from before the sickness took hold. In a few hours, people, mostly women, will gather in the apartment to pray for him, to help his waiting soul ascend into heaven. They’ll eat *queso blanco* and *pasta de guava* on soda crackers and talk about how tragic it all still is. They’ll cry and hug Hector and his mother, and they’ll wash it all down with extra sweet *café con leche*. A deathiversary party is what Hector calls it, his attempt to make light of something still so dark.

Prayer cards sit on the coffee table in two stacks. Both are in Spanish. One has prayers printed on them – Ave Maria and Padre Nuestro. The second, a resurrected open-armed Jesus Christ on the front, Jimmy’s full name (his real name was Jaime) and life story on the back. He was twenty-three. He liked to act and write poems. He wanted to be a photographer and a teacher. I turn the laminated card over in my hand several times before placing it back down. Nowhere on it does it say that he was gay or that he died of AIDS.

Even Hector kept these things from me at first. He had insisted, though not strongly, that it was cancer that killed his brother. And then

one day, while we were waiting for the F to Queens, I told him about my junkie uncle Frankie, how he got sick and died when I was thirteen, how my family insisted we never talk about it with anyone. Then Hector's truth came out. AIDS. A disease so pregnant, so unlike cancer, so filled with judgment against its victims, that I knew there had to be more to the story. There always was. Sure, it was possible Jimmy was an unfortunate hemophiliac, but let's be real, Hector and I were poor and Puerto Rican. That deadly combination meant only two things: *pato o tecato*. I figured Jimmy was gay by the way Hector's expression had rearranged, the way his smile had come apart with the slip of his tongue, by the fact that he never made any mention of Jimmy messing with drugs. After I thought enough time had passed, I asked how he felt about his brother's gayness. He was close-mouthed about it.

There had been a tape. Jimmy performed about a year before he died, at the gay youth shelter he lived in after he came out. The shelter mailed the tape to his mother, along with his personal things after they'd learned of his death. Hector translated the note that came with the package. When his mother found out what the tape contained, she cried and cradled this last remnant of her oldest son. It took months before they could watch. The quality was poor. Jimmy, dressed as a woman, with a wig and full makeup, danced alone on a darkened stage. It ran for just a minute or two before Hector's mother ejected it, opened the flap at the top, pulled the tape guts out, and balled the film in her hands.

"What happened to it," I asked, "the tape, I mean?"

Hector pressed his lips together before answering. "Couldn't be fixed," he said.

I let him drop the subject.

Once, when Hector left to get us some pizza and I was alone in his bedroom, I looked through his drawers and found the tangled mess. A single label, JIMMY R.'S DANCE, was handwritten in bold capital letters on the case. The tape was tangled, much of it folded and bent out of shape, a knot about the size of a tennis ball. I worked my fingers through in places, careful not to stretch or rip the film, before giving up and returning it to its hiding place in the very back of Hector's underwear drawer.

Hector sits beside me now. "What time is the appointment again?" he asks.

"You'll get back in time," I say. I cross my legs and fold my arms. Hector moves closer, pulls my head to his chest and rakes his fingers through my hair.

"You nervous?" he asks.

He holds me against him. I feel impatient, restless; being pregnant when you don't want to be is like having hiccups that don't end. It's all I can focus on, this stutter in my life. Nervous? Nervous was months ago. Held hostage, claustrophobic is more like it. Stupid Hector. I hate him touching me.



I knew I was pregnant early, within a month of missing my period, within four months of meeting Hector, but I didn't want to believe. Abortion was for those girls in high school who never made guys wear condoms. I used to be more careful. Now I had to choke on my words.

It had to be the day I practiced my Cyrillic pronunciation, my conjugations, when Hector pulled at my pants and then at my panties. I pushed him away at first, but he loved when I did my Russian homework face down on his bed. And I was too tired to stop him. He entered me from behind. I faked my way through it, hoping he'd finish quickly. When he saw me still reading, he fondled, grabbed, thrust until I could no longer see the writing in the chapter. I remember his stale breath, as if he hadn't eaten a thing all day. "Don't come in me," I said. I closed my textbook. But Hector wasn't skilled enough.

It took two and a half months of bloating and swelling, moodiness and nausea before I accepted reality. And then I didn't panic, not really – that would've been too TV. Instead I went to the bookstore and read pregnancy books on the floor of the mostly empty occult section. The images were all the same pastel palettes and delicate rattles and baby bottles and cherubic bears in diapers and bows, the same smiling pregnant models, wedding-banded hands hugging rounded bellies. I scanned through the index. Four whole pages devoted to morning sickness. I kept seeing the words "natural" and "normal" in conjunction with all the changes taking place in the pregnant body, even though they felt anything but natural or normal in *my* pregnant body. It's natural to feel nauseous and queasy. It's

normal to feel moody and tired. I wondered if it was natural and normal to feel angry at my body, angry at this virus, this parasite, this unwanted thing feeding off of me, making me sick, making me ugly, making my jeans' button not want to stay closed.

I thought of throwing myself down the long flight of stairs in Hector's building. The tumble would be spectacular. I imagined my womb and crotch, a pulpy mess at the landing, a victorious smirk on my face, as I'm strapped onto a gurney. Every time I approached the staircase, I considered my first step carefully. But I wasn't brave enough. I took to sleeping on my stomach instead, in the off chance I could suffocate it, in the off chance I could smother it away. I thought of my mother and the baby boy she lost before I was born. I thought of her pact with God to raise me Catholic if He'd let me live. She had done as promised. I am perpetually guilty – even now I feel guilt, not for wanting to get rid of my baby, but because I *don't* feel guilty for wanting it dead.

Hector knows nothing of these urges. All he knows is that my period never came.

After I found out, I was too anxious to sit so I blurted it. "I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant."

Hector let his textbook fall to his lap. He grabbed thick wads of pages and flicked them. The gush of air ruffled his hair. He did this for about five minutes.

"So what's gonna happen?" he finally asked.

I didn't answer right away. But it was understood there would be an abortion. What else was there? Too-young college-dropout-parenthood, the inevitable break up after we grow up, lapsed child support payments, court dates, custody disputes, a resented child in the middle of it all?

"I called the clinic, they have an opening on the twenty-first," I said.

"The twenty-first? That's the day of Jimmy's thing."

I knew this when I'd called. They had one other date available before I would slip into the second trimester and would need the more expensive, more invasive procedure. But I was angry with Hector. I convinced myself it was his fault I was pregnant. I wanted to test him to see if he would sacrifice this day for me. If he would put me before Jimmy, before

his mother. So I pretended to forget the deathiversary until it was too late to do anything about it.



Hector caresses me slower now, his breathing calm. I smell him in the fabric of his T-shirt, a mixture of deodorant, that lemon soap, and skin. I feel sick again.

"It's time," I say, pushing myself away.

Hector smooths the wrinkles from his sweatshirt before putting it on. He buttons his coat, loops his arms through both straps of his backpack, and pulls them so his bag lays flat, his fists tightly wrapped around them. He looks like a ten-year-old.

"You ready?" he asks, reaching his long arms out to me. Hector is nearly six foot four and thin with just the slightest hint of a spare tire left over from his fat-boy days. He is broad-shouldered but narrow-chested, with pointy elbows and knees, pencil calves. Not the boy I thought I'd end up with.

I nod. And in his fussy annoying way, Hector helps me off the couch. Ever since I told him, he treats me like something delicate and breakable, a form of worship I am not comfortable with. He holds my bag under his arm and opens my coat for me. When he goes to button it, I stop him. "I'm not broken, you know," I say.

He pulls a white envelope, thick with twenties, from his back pocket and counts the bills. He insists on paying the entire clinic fee. He had to cash his second financial aid check to do so. It looks like drug money, the way he folds the envelope and stuffs it into an inner pocket.

Hector walks slowly in front of me down the narrow hall that leads to the door. Just then his mother appears, arms filled with grocery bags, keys in the air, ready to unlock it. She dumps the bags in his arms and pushes past him into the kitchen. She looks at me. I say "hi." She mumbles the same, gives Hector the look, the devastating look only mothers can give, that one that reduces a grown child to a pile of rubble in a matter of seconds.

“We have school but I’ll come right home after,” Hector promises. He sets the groceries on the counter. “Okay?” he says. But she moves around him and clears the table without acknowledging him any further.

I’d first met her two months ago. I was getting dressed after spending most of the day at his place when he insisted I stay for dinner. I didn’t want to. Meeting her would mean we were a couple, and I didn’t want to acknowledge the possibility that we were more than just sex. I protested and made a motion to leave. Then Hector, in what I thought was a final act of desperation, went and told me he was in love with me. I didn’t know if I loved him back, but because sometimes love can be wielded like a weapon, I felt bullied into saying I did. Then I felt obligated to his love for me, responsible for it. It was up to me to care for that love, and for him – after all, I’d forced his most vulnerable secret out, the shame he felt surrounding his brother’s death.

Her handshake was quick and rough. She looked me in the eye. She knew me already. She knew me for the midnight calls Hector had been receiving, a single shrill telephone ring, Hector’s hushed “hello.” She knew me as the reason Hector came home late from school every night and went straight to bed without so much as a hug for his mother. She knew me as the reason Hector was never hungry for the massive meals she prepared. (She never quite figured out how to cook for just the two of them.) She knew me as the reason she threw out so many leftovers, the reason her son was no longer a virgin, the reason his semen-crusting socks stopped appearing in the laundry. She smirked when I tried to say “nice to meet you” in my broken Spanish.



“We’ll make it,” he tells me. “Don’t worry.” He leads the way down the stairs.

We don’t speak on the short train ride to the clinic. I stare at Hector who stares out the window. He looks tired. His eyes crease at the sides. He looks, at this moment, a little more like the man that waits behind the eighteen-year-old face.

I remember our first date. We had public speaking together. We bonded over our shared love of the back seats of the lecture hall, whispered jokes about our bucktoothed, balding professor, and counted the

minutes together, terrified of being called on. One day our class was cancelled, so we walked to the Chinese place on Grand Concourse and split a shrimp lo mein. Hector insisted he knew how to eat with chopsticks. He struggled with the oily noodles, winding them around the sticks with his fingers, trimming the longer noodles with his teeth and letting the excess drizzle back down on to the plate.

He talked a lot between bites, like it had been years since someone showed interest in him. He told bad jokes and laughed too loudly at them. I was put off by him but flattered that he liked me. I asked him if he had any siblings.

“Well I guess I should say no,” he said. He stopped laughing.

“What do you mean *you guess?*”

“Well, I had an older brother,” Hector said, “but he died. So technically, no, I don’t have any siblings anymore.”

I swirled my fork in my side of the lo mein.

“He just died, like, six months ago,” Hector continued. He played with the chopsticks in his fingers while he told about his brother, who called himself Jimmy to disassociate from their long-gone father, also named Jaime. Jimmy ran away for a few years, and when he returned he was very sick. Hector never visited him in the hospital. He choked up when he said that part but he didn’t cry. Instead he removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache. His eyes without his glasses were freakishly large. I noticed the creases, the way his mouth was permanently down-turned, even when he smiled. His shoulders slumped so much I thought he might cave in on himself. It was the hospital thing. The guilt he felt about that, about Jimmy’s death, tinged every aspect of his personality, made him a thousand times more interesting. I slept with him that very day.



At the clinic, I wear nothing but a paper gown and a pair of paper slippers. I am ushered through a series of progressively smaller waiting rooms, then finally a rectangular office with an exam table in the center. My gown splits as I sit. The tissue paper barrier between the cold table and my body is thin as a communion wafer. One of the slippers nearly slides off my foot. I clench it between my toes. I hear music, faint and

far away, an instrumental version of an old song I wish I knew the lyrics to now. I hum along in my head while I wait.

After a moment, a nurse returns with a doctor, a thin-lipped, pointy nosed man. He seems fused to his spinning stool, rotating left and right, thumbing through pages on a clipboard and speaking to me about the procedure through my parted thighs. His expression is as smug and unsympathetic as a math teacher's.

I feel a kind of freeze come over me. At first I think it's the anesthesia. But this is a dull, deep kind of freeze. I feel it in my fingers, my toes, the tip of my nose. I can feel my nakedness, this strange man tinkering around between my legs, this exposure of my body, this humiliation. I think of my mother who must know how pregnant I am but who is probably too shocked or too disappointed to say anything about it. It is easy enough to avoid conversation and confrontation. We don't have the kind of relationship where I can confess things. My mother works forty-hour weeks. She comes home distracted and tired. Between school and Hector's house, which I pass off as an after school study group, she hardly even sees me. I wonder what she would think if she saw me now. I wonder if she would feel like she had failed me as well as God.

The nurse takes my hand. I want her to keep her hand in mine, but she pulls away, tucks a stress-relief ball in its place. I clamp my entire hand around it. I feel sorry for myself. I want to cry. But the sadness, like the cold, is too far away to reach. I imagine myself floating above the table, watching my helpless body, the sounds of the tools clanging against the tray like utensils at a cafeteria. *This will end soon... This will end soon...* I chant to myself as the dilation rods invade my uterus. It's more pressure than pain, uncomfortable and annoying, like a thumb jammed into my navel. And then, a low hum. The vacuum. The virus gone, I look up at the ceiling panels, I imagine tiny people in the patterns.

"Okay," the doctor says. "We're done here." He closes my thighs as if shutting the hood of a car. In the recovery room, I am given a cup of instant chicken soup and a packet of saltines, and am sat in a reclining chair. At the edge of the chair, on a small table with a bucket on it, I throw up the neon yellow soup with little effort. I ball up on the chair and cover myself with the blanket the nurse gives me. I sleep deeply for

an hour before they wake me. The anesthesia has worn off, and though my cramps are sharp and intensely painful, I am relieved.

I stumble towards Hector who waits, half asleep with pamphlets rolled in his fists. I wake him as I reach for my coat. "It's done," I say.

"How're you feeling?" he asks as we walk toward the train. He stutters the way he did that first day of public speaking, when he asked to borrow a pen he never returned. I don't respond. I wish I could get rid of him too.

The train back to the Bronx is delayed. It finally arrives, stuffed with people. My stomach feels gutted, empty, as if my pregnancy had been replaced with a black hole. It takes everything to stop myself from imploding. I want to fall to the ground, but Hector leans against a pole, locks me safely in his arms and I fall asleep standing up.

We get back later than promised. His mother has prepared the party alone. She cleared the couch and set out metal folding chairs. She dyed the gray out of her short hair, held it back with jeweled pins, and changed into a sleeveless black dress, stockings and fuzzy pink slippers. She looks at Hector, then at me, then back at him. She shakes her head. The blackness swirls inside me again. I want to vanish inside of it. Hector begins to say something but only manages a puff of air. He stands out of her way, flaccid-faced.

"People will be here soon. I couldn't wait any longer," she says, changing out of her slippers and into her shoes.

I want to explain to her that it's not Hector's fault, that I had set him up. "I felt sick," I say – whisper really. I want to be in my own home. I want my own mother.

She turns her back on us and continues to arrange the room. She holds a package of foam cups. It swings in her hand as she walks to the kitchen. Hector is close behind her. I lift one of the rosary necklaces from the mantle. The hollow plastic cross is lighter than it looks. I finger the little Jesus figure, jam him sharply into my thumb until it hurts. When the pain fades, I do it again and again and again, until Hector returns to my side.

We slip like ghosts into the bedroom. I fall to the bed. Hector lies beside me. He presses his body against mine. He kisses the back of my neck and plays with my hair. I clutch at the emptiness in me, as if

I could hold it and cradle it. The sky dulls to a November blue. I don't feel myself fall asleep, so I am shocked awake when the chanting in the living room begins. A woman's voice leads Spanish prayers, pauses for Spanish "Amen's." The deathiversary.

Hector, still in the bed with me, stares up at the ceiling. His eyes, large without his glasses, are so dark that the whites glow in the light of the street lamps.

"They've started," I say.

"I know."

Cramps push through the emptiness in my stomach. I can't help but feel broken. I look to Hector, but he continues to stare into the dark nothingness above him.

"I saw him in the hospital, you know," he says. "Once, I went once. It was a month before he died. Mami got on me the whole time he was in there, you know. She spent her nights in a chair by his bed, every night. *Your brother is sick*, she would say. *You have to see him*. I said I would go but then I always made up all kinds of excuses. Homework or school or something. I just wanted her to get out of my face about it. *Miss a day of school*, she said. *Go see your brother*. I don't do hospitals, Ma. That's what I said to her.

"Months passed and I still hadn't gone. Mami, she got tired of fighting with me. One day she came home, didn't say hello, didn't make dinner. *Jimmy is going to die*, that was all she said, then she locked herself in her room.

"I went the next day. Mami was so certain, you know. I signed in at the desk and I went to his floor and I stood outside his room. But I couldn't move. There was a small window looking in. I could see his legs, his arms. His skin looked tight and brown. It wrapped his bones – no meat, no muscle, just bones. Plastic bags filled with liquids and tubes taped onto his face and arms. All this shit, just exploded out of him like it was a part of him that was waiting to be tucked back inside, if only they would just fix him.

"He had a remote control in his hand. Someone had set the TV on one of those religious channels. Some preacher guy, far away from Jimmy, far away from us, begging for our money, going on and on about our sins. That pissed me off. All I could think about was the fact that Jimmy had to listen to that shit as he lay there, that it could be the last thing

he would hear. And still I didn't move. Then he turned his head towards the door. I swore he saw me. I swore he knew I was watching him suffer. I got scared. I left him there.

"Mami didn't say anything about it. Maybe he couldn't tell her how I never came in, how I walked away from him. I hated him for seeing me. I told myself it wasn't him in that bed. But every time someone said his name, every time I remembered us as kids, it was *that* Jimmy I saw. *That* sick skinny Jimmy, his insides out for all to see. And the next time I saw him, he was gone, my big brother in a casket wearing a suit three times too big."

I clutch at my stomach. The chanting outside the room beats like a pulse. "Maybe you should go out there," I say.

"It wouldn't be right."

"Why not?" I ask, but he doesn't answer me.

He turns his body to face mine. He reaches for me in the dark, traces my body with his hand. He stops at my pelvis, and then rubs gently.

"Our baby would've been born in June," he says.

Even in the pitch blackness I can see he is crying. A tear splashes hot against my arm before turning cold and seeping onto the bed. He removes his hand from my stomach and wipes at his cheeks. I had never given thought to when it would've been born, not even when they gave me my pregnancy test results and due date. For me it was just a date that loomed, a deadline for a life I had no desire to live. I had never seen it as a real live baby; it never once occurred to me that Hector had.

"I think it would've been a boy. I would've wanted to name him Jimmy, for my brother. He would've liked that."

"You miss him," I say. It just slips. Of course he misses him. It's a stupid thing to say but I don't know what else there is.

Hector turns over onto his stomach and after a moment, falls asleep. I watch the rising and collapsing of his body, the kind of breathing one can only breathe in deep sleep, and maybe, just before death. I sit on the floor and attempt to control my own breathing, my own pain, my own empty guilt; the cramps now cause my limbs to quiver. I dig through Hector's drawer, pull out the broken Jimmy tape and, in the city's faint glowing light, begin to untangle and re-spool the film. At first it seems impossible, but the repetition, the spool's ability to take everything back

in as if it were never damaged, the ease with which it recoils, coupled with the women's Spanish praying, the calling, the responding, the ascending, it soothes me, brings me my own sense of peace. ●