

THE SPANIARD



Two days before Jenny's sixteenth birthday she got sick at school.

They couldn't reach her mother, so they gave her bus fare and sent her home on the RTD. She had chills and her head hurt, but she wasn't throwing up. We don't want those germs around here, the school secretary had said. It wasn't unusual to send a sick kid out the school gates with a dollar fifty in her pocket. On the bus, Jenny leaned her head against the tinted brown glass. Los Angeles, April 1984, palm trees and cement drifted past her window. She thought about her bed, her comforter with pink roses. She felt its soft, quilted cotton press against her cheek.

When Jenny got home, her mother's Volvo was parked in the driveway. No one answered the doorbell. She walked around the house, through the gate to the backyard. She slid the pot of her mother's white petunias and picked up the key hidden underneath, though when she tried the back door, she found it unlocked. She walked through the laundry room, down a narrow hall toward the kitchen, where she would get a glass of water on the way to her bedroom. Suddenly, in the middle of the silent house, she

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

heard a girlish twitter, unfamiliar, yet she knew it was her mother's voice. Her mother must be on the phone.

But in the kitchen, her mother faced the miniature espresso machine, watching coffee drip into a tiny cup. She wore a waistless baby doll dress that showed off her tennis legs. Pink satin with white-laced edges. A dark-haired man with glowing olive skin sat at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette, plate of ashes by his right hand. He nodded at Jenny like she was a fellow patron at the coffee shop looking for a table, and cleared his throat. A foreigner in a foreign land, Jenny thought, and then, as two streams of gray wisp blew out the man's polished nose, *Smoking kills*.

Her mother nearly dropped the little cup on her way to serve it.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"I'm sick."

"Oh." Her mother looked her over. Jenny wondered if she looked sick. She slumped her shoulders forward.

"This is my friend Federico," her mother said.

Jenny turned to the olive-skinned man. "Hello, Federico."

He bowed his shiny black head toward her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you. I did not know that Celia's daughter has the same fire eyes." His accent leaned on the *Ce* in *Celia* so it sounded like "Seeeeeeeee-ya." Jenny's eyes were brown like her father's, Celia's hazel. Federico brought the tiny cup to his lips and drank his espresso in one swig. "And now," he said, as if he were a magician about to conjure a rabbit from the pocket of his sleek trousers, "I must leave you beautiful ladies." His teeth were pure white.

Federico paused in the doorway and raised his hand in a flat palm wave, then the front door thudded shut. Celia stood flushed and preening

THE SPANIARD

in the middle of the yellow-tiled kitchen. Jenny pulled a glass from the cupboard and held its wide mouth under the tap.

“I want a car for my birthday, or I’m telling Dad.”



“Federico may not be Spanish,” Sam said. Jenny’s brother slid his finger down the list of Member States in his *Model UN Handbook*. Jenny and Sam were eighteen months apart, Irish twins, their mother called them, as if they were a gang sent to torment her. Sam was fourteen, younger and smarter. In Model UN, Sam represented Belize, a new Member State, with a Caribbean, British, and Latin American history. And that’s not even considering the undersized but oil-rich country’s Mayan ancestry, he would add. Belize had a small population, with sugarcane, bananas, barrier reefs, and oil deposits. Sam worked hard to establish liaisons in support of their tourism and export industries. It turned out that Belize was a Commonwealth nation, and Sam was the only ninth grader in the United States, Jenny assumed, with a poster of Queen Elizabeth II on the back of his bedroom door.

Sam frowned at the next page of Member States. “He could be Argentinian, or Brazilian. At the fall conference, I met a kid at the water fountain who called himself Federico, and he was the Italian ambassador.”

Sam’s Belizean name was Sam.

“Does it really matter which one?” Jenny wanted to talk about the car, her car.

“They’re Latin, southern cultures. The men are passionate lovers. If he were from England, say, or Canada . . .” Sam leaned back in his chair and pushed a foot off his desk to send the chair spinning.

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

“What?”

“He might confuse lust with love and marry her. We’d have a broken home.” Sam said *passionate lovers* and *lust* and *broken home* without a snicker. He assimilated details like a calculator figured numbers. Her parents deferred to him when they purchased appliances. Sam was partial to Whirlpool and KitchenAid.

“He’s Latin,” Jenny said. She stretched out on Sam’s bed. She was a full-bodied girl, marooned in this sunny land of California waifs, nymphs like her mother. Mr. T the Cat slept on Sam’s pillow. She pulled Mr. T onto her stomach, which had started to ache, though the chills had stopped, and Mr. T curled into a ball.

Sam spun and spun in the chair, his eyes on the ceiling.

“Federico wears cologne,” Jenny said. “He stinks like that skunk in the cartoon who falls in love with the white cat.” Though she had only smelled smoke coming off Federico, and the slight soapy scent of her father after he showered.

“Pepé Le Pew is French,” Sam said. “If you tell Dad, he’ll move out.” His hazel eyes, their mother’s eyes, lit up. “I bet I could get a sailboat,” he said. The fathers always moved out to condos in the Marina.

“So Mom won’t get me the car, Dad’s leaving, and you’re getting a boat?”

“I see,” Sam said, studying her. “You’re going with Idle Threat.” He enunciated so she could feel the capitalization.

“Far from idle,” Jenny said.

She’d wanted a car every second of every day since the wearisome horrors of high school. Jenny had fallen between the cliques. She was lazy for the smart kids, shy for the theater freaks, klutzy for sports, and the drug-gies resented her sarcasm. The car would be her own land, her territory of

THE SPANIARD

oneness. She was a loser walking the sidewalks alone. On the road in a car, *wearing sunglasses*, she was someone else. Her sixteenth birthday: her car in the driveway wrapped in a bow like on TV. She imagined driving the coast highway in her red VW Scirocco, thick, salty air whipping her face. Her freedom and her mother's penance bound together at sixty miles per hour.

Sam watched the queen staring at them from the back of his bedroom door. He nodded slowly to Elizabeth II. Jenny liked to assume Sam was with her, a twin on her side as her mother claimed, and yet he ran a sovereign nation. He had negotiated favorable trade agreements for a third world country with the prime minister of Great Britain.

"What if she doesn't believe you?" he said.

"She believes me," Jenny said. She patted Mr. T harder on the head, dragging his cat eyes wide open with the force of her palm.

Sam put the tips of his fingers together and gazed into their emptiness.

"What if she doesn't care?" he said.

Jenny thought of her mother in the pink silk dress, her eyes specked with yellow light, her wavy brown hair rolling down the middle of her back. Her mother had the legs and the temperament, the hair and the golden eyes (wasted on Sam), for husbands and Federicos, Canadians and Englishmen.

"She better care," Jenny said.



Her father was home for dinner, sitting at the table where Federico had stubbed out his Camel or Lucky Strike or, more likely, Marlboro Man cigarette. Her mother was doling out soggy lumps of chicken chow mein

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

onto the plate in front of him when the phone rang. Jenny leaned back in her chair and picked up the receiver hanging on the wall. She watched her mother, but her mother was looking down at the chow mein, slopping the brown mess onto Sam's plate.

"Hello?" Jenny said. *Federico?*

The caller waited a few seconds, and then she heard the click of the receiver.

"They hung up."

Her mother sat down beside her father. She pinned squishy noodles, sprouts, and water chestnuts with her fork, while her dad eyed Jenny as if he were in on her joke, as if she had one. Her father had the straightforward gaze, capable gait, and quick, hungry smile of a fighter pilot. He'd joined the Air Force to avoid the draft. Sam annoyed her when he pointed out that their father never flew anything, not even a bug-eyed Bell helicopter.

"A hanger-upper, eh?" her father said, and swept a pile of water chestnuts into his mouth.

"If it was for me, they would've said something." Jenny sipped her chicken broth and nibbled at the toast her mother had prepared for her tender stomach.

"Not if he didn't have the nerve," he said. He sat back and raised his thick eyebrows at Jenny. He wasn't tan like Federico, but he understood his appeal; in that way, they were comparable. He had strong shoulders. Her father thought boys called girls, even girls who looked like Jenny. She hoped he was right, that he could see further ahead. That her swelling body was on its way to beautiful. With her father around, she felt her soft teenage shape could be a stage to overcome, like acne.

The phone rang again. Before Jenny could reach for it, her mother rose

THE SPANIARD

and picked up the receiver. "Hello?" she said, and waited. "No thank you, we're not interested at this time."

Jenny looked across the table at Sam, *at this time*.

He mouthed, "Pants on fire."

"Someone selling garden hoses of all things," her mother said, carrying over a bowl of fruit salad for dessert. The patio was still wet from where she'd dragged their hose from pot to pot to douse her herbs and strawberries that afternoon. Alibi, Jenny thought, but not alibi. Liar.

"Garden hoses," her father said. "What an idiot."

Her mother looked down at the brown noodles she was catching with her fork.

"He cares about plants," Jenny said.

"Saving the petunias," her father said, and nodded. "Honorable."

"I don't believe making money off the needs of another guy's flowers is honorable," Sam said, and Jenny kicked him under the table. He kicked her back, his sneaker scraping her bare ankle, but she didn't flinch.

Her father winked at Sam, then looked at Jenny.

"What do you think, Jen? Isn't that commerce?"

"Just as easy to go to the store than have it sent to the house and not know what you're getting," Jenny said.

Her mother sat back from the chow mein and sipped her wine.

"It's about convenience," her mother said.

Sam faked a sneeze into his napkin. He wanted Jenny to look at him. He wanted both of them to turn hysterical.

"Are you getting sick, too?" her mother said to Sam.

"Maybe," Sam said.

"I like going to the store," Jenny said.

"I agree with Jen," her father said. His eyes twinkled. He had twinkling

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

eyes, her father, and he loved roller coasters. They rode in the front car and never held on to the safety rail. Put your arms up in the air, he would say, and scream.

She could've asked her father for the car, but then he'd ask her mother, and her mother would never have agreed. Her mother worked against extravagance in children. And if her father had to choose between Jenny and her mother, he would choose her mother. He would choose her mother over everybody.



The next day Jenny went to school. When she got home from band practice, her mother was *at a movie with Barbara from down the street* and her father was watching the Dodgers on TV. Sam was out playing Dungeons & Dragons with some kids from Developing Economies. Jenny made popcorn for her father. On TV, a Dodger walked up to the plate, kicked the dirt, and cranked his bat up behind his shoulder.

From the couch, her father said, "Swing for the fences."

Last summer her mother threw a surprise party for her father's fortieth birthday. She hung paper lanterns from the magnolia tree in the yard. She set up round tables with white cloths and a bartender on the patio. She wore a silver wrap dress that tied at the hip, plunged at the neckline, and slit up the side to show most of her thigh. While they waited for Sam to show up with her father, her mother introduced Jenny to guests. She held Jenny's hand and pulled her around like a prop, a toddler's ugly wooden duck tied to a string. Or not a duck, a blue elephant. In her blue cotton dress with red polka dots. "This is my beautiful daughter, Jennifer," her mother said over and over. Jenny stood there and smiled while the guests praised her mother for her shimmery dress, her whimsical lan-

THE SPANIARD

terns. Jenny felt like a bystander to her own existence. Her mother quickly bored of their charade and left her by the hedge with a hook-nosed woman talking about time-shares on Kauai. Sam and her father arrived and everyone yelled, *Surprise!* When her father opened his arms to the crowd with what Jenny supposed was astonishment, her mother dove into them and he hugged her until her painted toes lifted up from the grass. Her mother's audience erupted in hoots and hollers and thundering applause.



The morning of Jenny's birthday, there was no Scirocco parked in the driveway. On the walk to the bus stop, Sam picked a weed flower from the scrub grass along the sidewalk. He handed it to Jenny, and she tucked the yellow flower behind her ear.

"You can't blackmail someone if you're not prepared to go through with it," Sam said.

"Is that your pathetic way of asking if I'm going to tell Dad?" Jenny said.

"You won't," Sam said. He wore his backpack on both shoulders. Jenny couldn't stand his maturity.

"I only just woke up," Jenny said. "The day is long."

Alas, long with disappointment. She had thought the car would be there; she had believed in her car, in the red bow tied around its hood. She had believed in her parents, her mother and her father. They would do the right thing. But that morning she stared out her bedroom window at the empty driveway, willing the Scirocco to her, prying it loose from the car dealership with her magnetic thoughts. When the driveway remained blank, she hated its cement, the crack down its middle, the basketball hoop crooked above the garage door.

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

"Then act like you mean it," Sam said.

"I do mean it," she said. She'd followed his directions, taped pictures of Sciroccos inside her mother's makeup drawer, her jewelry drawer, her purse, her stash of chocolate nonpareils hidden in the rice cooker.

"Turn up the heat," Sam said. "That's all I'm saying."

Jenny thought of bacon sizzling in a pan. She wanted to be the stove burner, or the pan. She was the bacon.

She took her driving test that afternoon in the Volvo.

"Nonetheless," her mother said into the car on the way home. They had not spoken since Jenny had finished her test, refused to smile for her license photo, and discovered her mother leaning against the Volvo in the parking lot with a lit cigarette. Lucky Strikes. Jenny had never seen her mother smoke. She walked right past her mother and slid into the driver's seat.

As Jenny drove, her mother fiddled with the latch on her purse. "I'm going to bake your cake, angel food with whipped cream and strawberries," she said. "Drop me at home and you can drive to the market for cream and berries. Your inaugural flight, to Safeway."

Jenny held the steering wheel at ten and two o'clock and checked her rearview mirror every five seconds. "Is Federico from Spain?" she said.

Her mother rolled down her window and lit another cigarette. She held the cigarette casually out the window and blew smoke sideways from her mouth so it caught the wind.

"I don't want to talk about Federico."

"Federico sounds Spanish," Jenny said.

Her mother stubbed out the barely smoked cigarette against the Volvo's door and dropped it into the road. *Littering*, Jenny thought.

THE SPANIARD

"He's from Argentina," her mother said. Her mother blinked at the palm trees bending over the road, their sunbaked fronds brown and curled. "But that doesn't matter."

Jenny watched the painted dashes in the middle of the road, kept to her side. The asphalt glistened in the sunlight. Up ahead, the light at the intersection turned yellow, and she gently pressed down on the brake.

"Where's my car?" she said.

Jenny stopped at the red light and looked at her mother.

"Your *car*?" Her mother's eyes widened like in a cartoon. "I'm trying to find my happiness, can't you see?" Her mother did not look pretty with her eyes round and her chapped lips pulled back against what Jenny could see were yellowing teeth.

The light turned green and Jenny drove. She kept her eyes on the road, her hands on the wheel. Jenny thought she must not care about her mother's happiness, because she couldn't bear to hear her mother speak of it.

When they got home, her mother came around to where Jenny stood on the driver's side. She set her purse on the hood of the Volvo. Here it is, Jenny thought, *the standoff*.

"I won't be blackmailed, Jennifer."

"Then you should've gone to a hotel."

Her mother's small hand flew out high and hard and slapped her cheek. Jenny smelled her mother's perfume in the sting on her skin.

"Federico is a friend of your father's." Her mother's face winced at the lie or the hitting, Jenny couldn't tell. "He's worried about your father, that's why he was here."

Jenny held her cheek. Her eyes filled with water.

"That doesn't explain anything."

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

"To me, it does," her mother said.

"You still have a husband *and* a Federico," Jenny said, and scooted into the house before her mother could slap her twice.



Jenny told Sam that Federico was not a Spaniard or an Italian. He said, "In Argentina, adultery is ubiquitous." Instead of asking what Sam meant by *ubiquitous*, Jenny went to her room. She found the cat sleeping in a square of sunlight on the floor. She curled her body tightly around him and made herself small. The sun was warm on her back, and the cat began to purr. Jenny pressed her reddened cheek into the carpet and felt a prickly burn.

When the light moved away from them and the room dimmed, Jenny took Mr. T outside to lie on the hammock under the magnolia tree. In the kitchen, she passed her mother mixing lemonade in a pitcher. On hot days, her father liked a glass of her mother's lemonade spiked with vodka from the freezer when he came home from work.

"Sweet sixteen," her mother called out, circling sliced lemons with the spoon. "My first baby, all grown up."

Jenny paused and watched her mother rip mint leaves off their stems and drop the pieces into the pitcher. Her mother dipped the spoon and tasted the lemonade. She was wearing coral lipstick and her hair was brushed. She looked up at the ceiling as if listening for direction from somewhere far away. Then she squeezed another half a lemon over the pitcher, the citrus juice dripping over her fingers and into the lemonade.

"Don't call me baby," Jenny said. "Ever." The cat was heavy. She moved his head up to look over her shoulder. He felt like a baby in her arms.

THE SPANIARD

Her mother wiped her hands on a kitchen towel and went back to mixing her lemonade.

“It was a pretty car you picked out,” her mother said.

Jenny held the fat cat and wished Sam were there to say something sharp. Her mind went to the picture of the Scirocco she’d left on her mother’s dresser, sun reflecting off the red hood, the silver VW emblem on the front grill. She had been deceived by her wanting, by her faith in a Scirocco. She had believed in magic.

The automatic garage door rumbled, and Jenny and her mother looked at the door where her father would appear. Her mother opened the freezer and pulled out a bottle of vodka. Jenny silently vowed never to speak to her mother again and carried the cat baby outside to the hammock.



By the time Jenny has a car, her dead grandmother’s Chevy Nova, Sam is gone. He will abandon her for boarding school in Connecticut, his parting words “Every man for himself.” She’ll never count on him coming back. Her father has already left, moved to a condo in Marina del Rey. He and the other separated husbands were reborn in Marina del Rey. They abandoned their needy children, their pinched wives, for careless stewardesses on layovers at the Marina Hotel. Jenny had seen those fathers turn back into men, with tan, shiny faces and better-fitting clothes. They waited on the sidewalks after school on Fridays, waved heartily to children dragging beneath backpacks and squinting into the sun, then tucked these suddenly quiet boys and girls into their Datsun 280Zs and delivered them into afternoons of pizza and endless quarters at the video arcades. The children visited the condos during these temporary leaves from their

SMALL IN REAL LIFE

broken homes. They regarded the dingy carpeting, track lighting, and black pleather sofa beds with distrust. At night, the sofa beds creaked beneath them. They lay in the dark as boats sloshed water against harbor slips, and they learned that they missed their bedrooms more than they missed their fathers.

Jenny will sleep on the sofa bed in her father's condo only twice. She'll live in this house alone with her mother for what will seem like forever. Her mother will come and go with men who remind her of Federico, though she will never see him again.

But on her sixteenth birthday, Jenny swayed in the hammock and listened to her father whistling at the barbecue. She hated her mother. She hated her mother enough to forget that it was only a car.

Her father painted the birthday dinner steaks with her mother's spicy sauce, then stepped back as the meat sizzled and cackled above the coals. Jenny set the cat on the grass and walked over to her father.

"Dad?"

Her father looked at her from the side, his mouth curling at the edges, expecting a joke.