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A Different Language

Kate Leary

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WINNER

A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

Kate Leary

A mother and daughter sit in a café in Bilbao, in the Basque region of Spain. They're waiting for their tour guide, who is supposed to meet them any minute now. The mother, Claudia, is forty-six. She wears gray tailored wool slacks and expensive black leather pumps, but they're hidden beneath the table. Her blouse is simple, made from black silk, and a red scarf is artfully wrapped around her neck. Her shining dark hair is pulled tightly into a large chignon. Spanish black pearls dangle from her earlobes. Her skin is creamy and smooth, her figure slender, her posture erect. Her makeup is applied to make it seem as if she isn't wearing any. The exception is her lipstick, which is a lustrous burgundy.

The daughter, Andrea—or Andy, as she prefers to be called—is twenty. She wears a blue wool sweater that is stretched in all directions and unraveling at the cuffs. Her right thumb sticks through a hole in her sleeve. Her Gore-Tex raincoat is crumpled next to her on the booth. She has long hair that is curly and dark like her father's. It's looped in a ponytail holder, in a messy sort of bun that she redoes frequently. Her pants are elastic-waist and black, her shoes steel-toed and clunky. She is maybe ten pounds overweight but she's tall, so it doesn't show much. She would have made a handsome man, but as a young woman she seems oversized and ill at ease. Her elbow is on the table and she's slumped over her café con leche, shredding her empty sugar wrapper.

Claudia lifts her cup of black espresso using only her thumb and forefinger and takes a sip. The tiny silver spoon lies next to her saucer, unused. The woman at the tour agency told her that the guide is young and handsome, with wavy hair that is a little bit too long. She shared this information with Andrea earlier, in an attempt to create a moment to giggle over together, but Andrea

simply nodded and looked bored.

Andy is playing a game. The game is that she is trying to see herself and her mother as they might appear to the tour guide when he enters. She's intent on being honest. But last semester she took a Shakespeare class, and it is undoubtedly the influence of this class that leads her to add something figurative to the tableau. As she, in the body of the tour guide, opens the door, she sees, just for a moment, identical pairs of cartoonish red horns, like those depicted on popular representations of the devil, anchored to the heads of both mother and daughter. The horns are the only characteristic the two share. She blinks and the horns are gone, but she knows why they appeared. It's a sign that they're cuckolds; this word is something else she picked up from Shakespeare. She's using it incorrectly, because it's supposed to refer to a man whose wife has been unfaithful. She has opted to use it anyway, because she can't find a word that applies to a woman who has suffered the same injury. While she is ruminating on the horns and half congratulating herself for being sophisticated enough to conjure them, a man who must be the tour guide enters, reclaiming his body.

Lovely is the word that both Andy and Claudia land on to describe him. Claudia thinks it because it's the word she invariably uses when something pleases her. Andy because her mother has said it so often it's difficult *not* to think of it, though she would like to eradicate it from her vocabulary.

Claudia likes the cut of his long brown wool coat, the way it swings at his feet when he walks. And when he looks up from the closed, dripping umbrella in his hand and scans the café for them, she sees his thick black eyelashes from impossibly far away.

Andy notices that his eyes are a rich brown, and that's when she tears her eyes away from him and looks at her mother.

Claudia opens her mouth, but can't settle on the right greeting, an unfamiliar sensation. When he reaches the table, Claudia breathes in the wet wool of his coat. He is, she guesses, in his mid-twenties.

"You are Claudia?" he says, his voice swooping high to make a

question mark. He smiles, and a dimple appears in his left cheek.

Claudia rises, smiling slightly. "You must be Ramón. It's nice to meet you." She extends her hand, and he takes it, giving it a soft press, just enough for her to feel that it's wet from the rain, but warm, too. She shivers, then wonders if either of them noticed. "This is my daughter, Andrea," she says. Ramón turns his gaze on Andrea and Claudia waits to see what she will do—if she'll be open to him, or even nice. Andrea extracts her thumb from the hole in the sleeve of her horrible sweater, sticks out her hand like a boy, and smiles, but Claudia sees that she's embarrassed, and the smile is something she feels she has to do. Claudia looks at the back of Ramón's head, at his hair, which is indeed too long, and forms into ringlets around his ears. He's slicked it back with some gel, but it's only partly successful at containing the curls. His skin peeks between his collar and his hair. She watches Andrea's face when Ramón grasps her hand—her eyes as they open a little wider, her lips, which part slightly—and wonders whether they have the same taste in men after all.

She thinks it might be nice if Andrea and Ramón showed some interest in each other. It might be good for Andrea to receive some positive attention from a man, especially an attractive one, after whatever happened with the break-up. She wills her to stand up straight.

"I apologize for the rain," Ramón says, and Andy thinks how funny it is that if you spend enough money, you can get people to apologize for the weather.

But her mother accepts his apology graciously. "It's January," she says. "What can we expect?"

He leads them into the street. It's raining lightly, and the air is raw. Andy knows her curls are coiling tighter in the moisture, and soon her hair will be a senseless tangle. They walk on a large pedestrian walkway of smooth gray stone that's flanked by lanes for cars. The street is lined with stores, all of which display signs in both Spanish and the Basque language. Andy stops to stare at them. She doesn't understand either language, but the Basque words are more alien—full of Xs and Ks. Ramón stops for her

KATE LEARY

and points to a shoe store sign.

"The Basque language, Euskera, is not related to any other language in the world," he says. "It is alone. Every other language is related to at minimum one other."

Her mother asks him if he speaks it.

"Oh yes," he says. "They teach it in school from the time you are small." He hesitates. "But during Franco, you would go to prison if they catch you speaking Euskera. It was almost lost. But people are trying to save it."

Andy pulls her raincoat closed. They've already spent one week in Madrid, but now she feels as though she's in another country entirely. Even the people look different. They're shorter, darker, and some of the men have jaws that jut out aggressively. She wonders what it would be like, to live in a place where you could be arrested for speaking your native tongue.

Andy and her mother are only staying in Bilbao for one night—just long enough for her mother to check the new Guggenheim off her list. She has already checked off the Prado and the Thyssen Bornemisza, which they visited in Madrid last week. They are, her mother said, the Met and MOMA of Spain, respectively. In Barcelona, they'll see the Picasso museum, and the Miró, and of course all the Gaudi buildings. But the Guggenheim Bilbao will be the centerpiece of the visit, the one to lord over the other New York museum hounds, the people her mother calls friends. Her mother volunteers one day a week at the MOMA instead of having a real job. It's something for a bored, wealthy woman to look forward to, Andy supposes. Andy is sick of museums. Her friend Tanya is studying abroad at the university in Bilbao, and as soon as this Guggenheim thing is over, she'll meet up with Tanya and they'll go out. She's planning to get drunk. She hasn't had a chance to get drunk since she discovered Ben with the other girl.

They come to the river, and the murky, industrial look of it surprises Claudia. The water is dark and sludgy, and debris is lodged against the concrete banks. An old warehouse is being demolished. Ramón points to a rickety footbridge.

"You will see our *new* bridge," he says.

Across the river, tall concrete buildings stand next to old, sooty ones. A few display banners that feature maps, with words in Euskera. The city does not seem quite ready for tourism.

"It is to free Basque prisoners," Ramón says, but the rawness of the spray painted words frightens Claudia, and she's sure he has translated the most innocuous one. There are Basque nationalist terrorists, she knows, who are responsible for bombings that have been going on for years. They want to be free to govern themselves. They want their own country. She looks for Andrea, a safety check. Andrea is lagging behind, as usual. Claudia tries to determine what she's looking at, but she seems to be squinting into the clouds, when there are so many other things to see. She considers asking, but knows it would go wrong somehow. Andrea would take it as an accusation.

She knows Andrea is in pain, because she broke up with her boyfriend, or he broke up with her. She's not clear on it, and can't bring herself to ask for details. She's not sure when she missed her chance to be the sort of mother a daughter could talk to about important things, and she wishes there were something she could say or do to turn it all around. She only knows that the relationship lasted two years, which must seem like a long time to Andrea. Andrea has been monosyllabic since the trip began. She has not taken care in dressing, and has showered only once in the past three days. Claudia is panicked because she doesn't know if this is how Andrea normally acts, or if it's a result of the break-up. A mother should be able to tell the difference. But first, Andrea was in boarding school and only home for breaks, and now she's in college and only home for breaks. Even when she's at home, it's easy to go for days without speaking to her, in that big house that Steven hardly ever bothers to come home to.

But on this trip, Claudia and Andrea eat every meal together, and sleep in the same hotel room. The day before Andrea returned home for Christmas break, Claudia discovered Steven's latest affair, and she arranged the trip in a fit of drama, thinking to cure both Andrea and herself.

They turn a corner and an arching white bridge with cables

KATE LEARY

comes into view.

Andy thinks they might not actually walk on it because it's more like a sculpture than an actual bridge, but then they do. The bottom is frosted plexiglass, slippery in the rain.

"This one is nicer, don't you think?" Ramón asks, gesturing proudly at the bridge. Andy's mother laughs at exactly the right volume, for exactly the right amount of time.

It is by Santiago Calatrava," he tells them. The way *Calatrava* rolls off his tongue makes Andy think of kissing him.

"It's beautiful," her mother says.

Andy watches his mouth and wishes he would say *Calatrava* again, only to her, and that makes her blush, and then she is angry with herself for caring about this man simply because he's good looking and as tall as her and vaguely eligible and his mouth seems acrobatic when he says some architect's name. It makes her feel bored, or *boring*. She removes her ponytail holder and tries to run her fingers through her hair to fix it, but the rain has made it impossible. She gathers it as well as she can.



Claudia picks up her pace when she sees the Guggenheim. They've come at it from the tower side, which is not ideal, not the angle of any of the photographs in the Frank Gehry book she has at home. But the sculptural tower, which she knows is the final problem Gehry solved, is astounding. It curves outward, so that it seems to be in front of her and above her at the same time. Beyond it is the Puente de Salve, and beyond that, the titanium part of the museum looks like the prow of a futuristic ship, sailing around a bend in the Nervion River, just as the book says. She wishes she could come up with her own way of thinking about the building, without falling back on other peoples' words.

But the best she can do is think that the whole thing is larger, more dominant, than it seemed in the photographs, and when they pass beneath the bridge she stops right under the tower and cranes her neck up at it. Then she steps to the side, so she can see

the flower-like structure at the museum's center. The titanium shimmers in waves and mirrors the sky's storminess, intensifying it somehow. The whole assemblage seems altogether impossible. She knows, of course, exactly why it is possible. She's seen the computer models. But this—the way it nestles into the hills around the city, the aliveness of the materials, its sheer magnitude—is a revelation. She can't unravel it, or figure out how the structure might fit together as a whole, or imagine Gehry holding it all in his head. She fills her lungs with the cold, wet air and tosses her head back to look at Andrea, ready to share her triumph, ready to share, perhaps, a transcendent moment in the face of such an accomplishment, or at least ready to agree on *something*. But Andrea is looking down, pulling on a piece of yarn on the sleeve of her sweater, which is poking out of her raincoat. The failure of the moment makes Claudia's stomach drop.

She finds Ramón, a couple of steps behind her. His eyes are on the building, his head tilted back. His eyes are roving. She knows this is because the structure has clean lines and an irresistible sense of movement, what Gehry called an *all pervading energy flow*, and that's part of what makes it great. Ramón's mouth is a little open, like Andrea's was, earlier, when she shook his hand. He can't seem to stop looking at it, even though he must see it almost every day. Some things—*great* things—never become mundane. He catches her eyes and she sees in him what she wanted from Andrea. She smiles and moves closer. She smells a waft of wet wool again, and shares the moment with him instead. Their appreciation seems to fill the space between them.

The rain begins to fall in earnest, and Ramón places his hand on Claudia's elbow and steers her around the edifice and into the museum so naturally that she doesn't notice his touch until he lets go, and then she feels its absence.

But Andy, trailing behind them, sloshing through puddles that they avoided effortlessly, noticed. She noticed and she was a little relieved, now that she knew where Ramón's interest lay. But also, her throat tightened.



They enter a small gallery, and it seems as though they're staring at a blank white wall. Claudia trusts that there's something, but looks at Ramón for reassurance. He hung up their coats earlier, and he's wearing a chocolate brown suit with a navy silk tie. She doesn't know the Spanish designers, but it's a good suit, without being flashy, and it fits him well.

"Wait," he says.

The light on part of the wall changes. The colors shift, imitating a sunrise, and it's clear that this light is not being projected onto the wall, but is somehow shining from within it. Claudia walks up to the wall and extends her hand, hesitating at the last moment to look at Ramón. He nods and bites his lip as if trying to contain his excitement. She reaches in further, and her hand goes through the wall. She sticks her arm in, up to her elbow, and smiles, caught in a moment of pure surprise. It's not a wall, after all, but a room with rounded edges instead of the expected corners, an elaborate *trompe l'oeil*.

Andy watches Ramón smile, too. He looks like someone who has just given a fabulous present and received exactly the reaction he hoped for.

Andy sticks her hand through the wall and wiggles it around in the light. She understands that they've been taught a lesson about perception. Things aren't always what they seem. It's disappointing that someone built an installation piece to say something so obvious.

Andy found out in the dramatic way: she walked in on them. She turned the doorknob to Ben's room and saw him, naked, atop a small girl whose feet poked out on either side of his knees. The feet were tiny, and, for whatever reason, pointed. One of the toes had a silver ring on it. The toenails were painted pink. The pointed little feet, the toe-ring, and Ben's ass, clenched with the effort of pumping away at the girl, were what Andy took in before she closed the door. Outside, she leaned against the door

and, for a split second, understood why her mother pretended her father didn't fuck other women. It would be so much easier than starting from scratch with someone else.

But Andy didn't pretend. She confronted Ben. He told her who she was, that it had been going on for some time, and that he had been trying to tell Andy but was afraid of hurting her.

"A *sorority* girl?" she said. "We hate sorority girls."

"She's different."

"No," Andy said. "*She's* not different. *I'm* different. She's the same." She said it with great certainty, though she knew it made no sense at all. She had begun dating Ben a month into their freshman year of college. He was the first boy she had sex with, and she picked him partly because he seemed the opposite of her father—not interested in money or appearances. Interested, instead, in making the world better. She'd thought they agreed on things, had an understanding about which people were worthwhile (Ben and Andy), and which people weren't (Andy's parents, sorority girls, and the like). When she thinks about it now, it all seems entirely predictable. Her mother warned her that it wasn't a good idea to jump into a relationship right after orientation, that it might be better to make her own friends and choose her own activities without tangling her life up with his. But Andy has never listened to her mother. She obeys her when necessary, but she never really listens. It has to do with her mother's complete lack of credibility.



One of the galleries is devoted to time-lapse photographs. The same view, taken every day for a year, or every hour for a day, or every minute for an hour. Claudia tries to see the point. It's either how slowly things change, or how different the same thing can appear depending on when you look at it. But the differences in most of them are barely discernable, and she doesn't care to search for them. Andrea is in another corner of the gallery, absorbed in a photograph. Despite Claudia's hopes, Andrea has

said barely anything to Ramón since they entered the museum, and seems almost to be avoiding him. He turns to Claudia and nods at a photograph.

"I admit I find these not so interesting," he says.

Claudia laughs, relieved. Ramón laughs, too. She touches his forearm lightly, before she has a chance to think better of it. Once her hand is there, though, she can't help thinking it would be so easy, so natural, to slide her hand into his and clasp fingers. She knows Steven is probably off somewhere with his mistress, taking advantage of his temporary freedom. Holding hands with this tour guide would be nothing in comparison—a few seconds of warm human contact, which she has been missing for years. But she lets go.

Andy has been listening since she heard the alto laugh, a sound she associates with the dinner parties her parents hosted when she was little. The laugh was always warm and genuine—never shrill—and it inspired laughter in others. She used to sneak out of bed to see what was so spectacularly funny. She would crouch at the bend in the staircase and watch everyone, but mostly her mother, who always seemed to be the most important person in the room. Her mother's job was to host lovely parties, to look beautiful, and to act charming for her father's associates and clients and their wives. She was good at it, Andy knows. She was born for it. But it didn't add up to anything. Her father probably cheated from the very beginning, she thinks now. It's the way he is. She had always sensed something was wrong with her parents' marriage, but she didn't know her father cheated until she was eleven and overheard them fighting.

She sees the way Ramón leans toward her mother, after the touch. He's already fallen for her laugh, and she knows that next he will notice how long and shiny her hair is, and he will want to touch it. Then he'll see how smooth her skin is, how straight her nose is, how large and blue her eyes are. How her lips resemble a small, perfect heart. Of course, her mother won't have any of it. She prefers martyrdom and flights to Spain.

Andy sidles closer. They're making small talk.

"I spent a year in Washington, D.C. in high school," Ramón says.

"Have you been back since?" her mother asks.

"Just once." Ramón looks down at the floor. He seems embarrassed. "After I graduated from university, I did not know what to do. Fine arts degree," he shrugs. "What *can* you do?"

Make art, Andy wants to say. But maybe he does, when he goes home, and this job is only for money. Maybe tonight he'll go to his studio and paint.

"So I went to Martha's Vineyard and waited tables for the summer." Andy searches for a reason for his embarrassment, and can't decide between the fact that he waited tables, or the probability that he worked illegally. Maybe he's afraid her mother will think less of him.

"Sounds fun," her mother says, and he looks relieved.

Andy has been to Martha's Vineyard. She knows what a sensation Ramón must have been on an island crawling with WASP girls who had nothing to do all summer but work on their tans and their bodies and comb the beaches for men to waste time with. She wonders if he chose just one of them, and then she wonders why in the world he would have.

She strides toward them, and they move apart when Claudia hears her heavy steps.

"I need a cup of coffee," Andrea says. "I'll just go to the café I saw downstairs."

"We'll come with you," Claudia says.

"No," Andrea says. "No, I'll go alone," and Claudia listens. There is some kind of warning in Andrea's voice, and even her hair, which has swelled from the rain, looks angry.

"We are almost finish," Ramón says. "We'll meet you in the big gallery. You will know it when you see it."

"Sure," Andrea says. She does a nearly perfect about-face in her big, military shoes and practically stomps out of the gallery.

Claudia feels reprieved, though she knows she should feel concerned or some other, more maternal emotion. But when she and Andrea are in a room together, it's as if the air is pressurized,

and all the unsaid things, all the questions they want to ask each other, close in on them. *Do you know?* Claudia wants to scream. *Do you know about the affairs?* And: *What do you think of me?* But as soon as Andrea disappears around the corner, as soon as the sound of her shoes is no longer audible, Claudia feels as if she can breathe again.

Claudia found out in the creeping, gradual way: the evidence simply accumulated until she could no longer ignore it. The damning piece was a receipt for a pair of diamond earrings Claudia never received. It was the fifth dalliance that she knew of. She had found out about each one in basically the same way, though the first had been the hardest blow. This time, as was her custom, she accused him; he confessed; she threatened to leave; they both knew she wouldn't, but he allowed her to storm off to Spain with Andrea anyway. It was her privilege. The first time, they had both thought she might actually leave for good. But Andrea was only two months old, and Claudia was in no condition to leave. She has never caught him *in flagrante delicto*, as her own mother would have put it, and she thinks something like that might have made a difference.



"You will love this," Ramón says, and cocks his elbow. Claudia slides her arm into his and wonders whether this is unusual behavior for him, or just Spanish courtliness. They're perfectly in sync, and they look good, she knows, walking together. But she also knows it's because she's making little adjustments for him, a habit she can't break.

They pass into the atrium, at the center of the titanium flower, and look up. It's like being in a cathedral, or in heaven, with all the white and the light streaming in from the glass wall and the skylight. His arm tightens, and she takes a tiny step closer to him. He's not afraid to make eye contact. "Can you believe this is not the best part?" he says, without blinking. She can't help it. She tilts her head up to look at his face. His cheeks are beautifully

round, and beneath one eye is a mole, a delicate beauty mark.

And then they're moving again, into the largest gallery. The light is dazzling on the white walls. The ceiling is high and open. Buttresses and catwalks crisscross it in layers. Again, the eye is drawn upward. From the outside, she knows this is the extension that looks like the ship. She's heard the ceiling compared to the spine of an immense fish, which fits, though she feels more like she's in the belly of a whale. Gehry is obsessed with fish.

"Can you see it is like a fish?" Ramón asks.

She nods and is suddenly conscious that their arms are still linked. "Maybe you could give me back my arm," she says, her tone teasing.

He raises his eyebrows, and his smile expands so he shows his teeth. "Of course," he says, releasing her arm. He takes an exaggerated step back and gestures to the sculpture in the middle of the room.

"The snake," she says.

"Good. By?"

"Richard Serra."

"Very good."

It's three enormous sheets of rusty looking steel that undulate, creating two passages that people can walk through. They must be at least twice as tall as she is and over a hundred feet long. She walks through the wider of the two passages, but it tricks her and narrows in the middle. She runs her hand along the rough steel. Through the top, she can see the white expanse of the ceiling.

Ramón is waiting on the other side.

"We are at the end," he says, looking genuinely sad. "You can look around at Serra's other sculptures." They are scattered about—giant industrial sculptures made of American steel.

Claudia nods. "Andrea should be here soon."



Andy finds her way from the café to the gallery. Already, her head feels better from the caffeine, less muddy. She overheard an

KATE LEARY

old couple speaking Euskera in the café. She's almost certain it was Euskera, because it didn't sound like anything else she's ever heard. It was softer than she'd expected from the signs. Lots of *chs* and lisping and gentle *ks*, so that it almost sounded like whispering, as if they were telling each other secrets. She wonders if it was always that way, or if it became that way when it was outlawed and people have been unable to get over it. She thinks she might ask Ramón. He's not so bad. Even if he does think her mother is pretty, nothing will come of it. It doesn't matter.

She enters the gallery and it is spectacular. She looks to see if anyone is watching, and places her cheek against the steel of an enormous sculpture in the middle of the gallery. It's cold and rough and reassuring.



Ramón looks down and up again, then purses his lips. He puts his hand on one of the sculpture's walls and leans into it. "It is a pleasure to show the museum to someone like you, who has a knowledge of art."

Claudia smiles, flattered. Her ability to appreciate art and architecture is a modest talent, but still, it's the only one she has. "I got a degree in fine arts too," she says, "a long time ago. This is all I use it for." She doesn't want to tell him that one day a week, she takes schoolchildren through the MOMA. It might sound amateurish.

He makes a gentle clucking sound with his tongue. His skin looks supple and scrubbed, as if an old layer has just been peeled off. "I don't believe it was so long ago." He removes his hand from the sculpture and places his hand on her arm, and his intent is unmistakable. He's hitting on her. She must be nearly twenty years his senior. He's probably younger than whomever Steven is sleeping with, and she smiles at the thought. She wonders if Steven would even bother to be jealous if he could see them.

"You and Andrea have plans for tonight?" he asks. She stares at his hand. His fingers are long and thin, and he has no hangnails,

no peeling skin.

"No," she says, distracted. "Her friend is studying here. She's meeting her for dinner and they're going out. To clubs or something."

His fingers tighten around her forearm. She meets his eyes, realizing what she's just said.

"Oh," he says, and blinks several times. His lashes flutter luxuriously. "You will eat dinner alone, then?" He lets go of her hand, reaches into his pocket, and pulls out a business card and pen. The card is from the tour agency, but on the back, he writes "Home," and then his phone number, in a pattern of digits and dashes that she's not used to. "Maybe you will call me," he says, and she tells herself it's a professional courtesy, or he wants a bigger tip, or perhaps he genuinely likes her and wishes to discuss Frank Gehry further, but that's all. But he presses the card into her hand and holds on a beat too long, and trails his fingers down her palm when he releases it. Her heartbeat quickens. She could call him, she thinks, and blushes. She takes a step closer to him.

What if she called?



Andy walks through the narrower passage of the sculpture. When she's almost all the way through, she sees her mother and Ramón, standing close together. She catches her breath and stops and watches her mother step away, waving her hand and laughing *nervously*, Andy would say, if she could believe her mother capable of such a thing. Her mother sticks something small into her pocket, and walks away to another sculpture. Ramón takes a deep breath, releases it, and runs a hand through his hair.

Andy continues through the passage, and meets Ramón's eyes. His head jerks from her to her mother, and then he puts on a fake smile. She leans against the edge of the sculpture, next to him.

"You got your café?" he says.

She nods.

KATE LEARY

His face relaxes. "Your mother says you are maybe going to clubs later?"

"Maybe," she says.

"I know one that is OK. A little silly, maybe, because it is a disco. And a terrible name. Discoteca Rock Star."

Andy cracks a smile, because it *is* a terrible name. The kind of name that is supposed to invoke America, but that Americans would laugh at.

"In the old town. I go there sometimes. Probably not tonight."

"Thanks," she says. He doesn't move away, and she searches for something to fill the silence. "I was wondering how many people speak Euskera."

Ramón smiles sadly. "They think maybe one million at most, but not all those people speak it very well. Spanish is the first language most of us learned."

"Oh," she says, and because it's genuinely sad and she sees that he cares about it, she tries to give him a sympathetic look. But she can't resist the chance to make him pay for whatever she just witnessed. "Do *you* speak it well?" she asks.

"I am better at Spanish," he says. He looks over her head wistfully and says: "The old men you will see with berets. Those are the real Basques. Born before Franco took over." He shakes his head and smiles, and then seems to notice his hand on the sculpture. "This is done by Richard Serra," he says, in full tour guide mode. "It was designed specifically for this space."

Andy nods, knowing he has said the same words hundreds of times. "I'm going to look at that one," she says, and points to the sculpture that is the farthest away.



In the hotel lobby, as Andrea looks at the gift shop display window, Claudia pulls the card from her pocket and tosses it into a wastebasket before she can change her mind. She's never cheated, and she's not going to start now and lose the moral high ground, though she would like to go to bed with a man who

thinks she's intelligent, a man who is genuinely beautiful. And she'd like to run her fingers through that hair just once. But that's how Steven thinks. That's how he ruined their marriage.

Andy waits for her mother to turn the corner and call the elevator, then reaches into the wastebasket to retrieve the card. She knows it must be what Ramón gave her mother. She shoves it into her pocket just as the elevator dings.



While her mother is in the bathroom, Andy looks at the card. A lump rises in her throat when she sees the writing on the back. She tries to swallow back her jealousy. She promised herself she wouldn't think about men in that way until she'd figured out how she allowed Ben to trick her. She thinks of her mother, the eternal victim, throwing the card away. She'd like to see her mother *do* something, for once, even if it's only getting laid by a good-looking Spanish man half her age who knows about art. She thinks something like that might be enough to propel her mother into a more radical sort of action such as leaving her father, so she props the card up on the nightstand, right next to the TV remote control.

Her mother emerges from the bathroom.

"I'm staying at Tanya's tonight," Andy says.

"I know."

"I won't be back until late. Noon, probably."

"OK. Our flight's at three." With her hair down and her face scrubbed, her mother looks tired, imperfect. Andy is not sure her mother understands what she's trying to tell her, but she doesn't know what else to say.



At 2 A.M., Andy is drunk and dancing at Discoteca Rock Star with Tanya and some of her friends from the program. She's wearing a great deal of makeup, some of it sparkly, and clothes

she borrowed from Tanya: a tight black sleeveless top, a black miniskirt, and boots that come up to her knees. She isn't dressed like herself—she's dressed more like the sorority girl Ben is fucking, or maybe making love to. She's not sure which. She's not even sure which he was doing to her. The balls of her feet are starting to hurt, and she's parched.

"I'm getting a Coke," she yells to Tanya. "Want one?"

Tanya shakes her head. She's dancing with a slick looking Spanish guy. Tanya has always been the kind of friend who will ditch you for a boy. It's understood.

Andy struggles through the toiling crowd and squeezes into a stool at the bar. She orders a Coke and swivels her stool so she can look out at the dancers. The way she's sitting, her stomach forms into two clearly visible rolls, and she wishes she could learn to like Diet Coke. Her hair, which she washed and blow-dried straight at Tanya's, is frizzy again and sticking to her neck and she has lost her ponytail holder. Despite all this, a man approaches her.

"No habla Ingles," she says.

He tries Spanish.

"No habla Español," she says, and laughs. Ben would have thought that was funny, and as much as she hates him, she wishes they could laugh about it together. She swivels back, and the bartender hands her the Coke, which she sucks down quickly.

Someone taps her on the shoulder. She swivels around and it's Ramón, dressed down now, in gray slacks and a green collared shirt.

She wants to ask him, very casually, why he's here when he ought to be having sex with her mother. Or at the very least, why he isn't making art. But instead she says: "I thought you said you weren't coming here."

"I changed my mind," he says. "My friends convince me." He gestures at a group of people who are scrunched at the end of the bar. One of them waves. Ramón turns back to her and shrugs. "Bilbao is not so big," he says apologetically. "Not many places open at this time." She can tell, now, that he's been drinking,

too. It's on his breath, and in his sweat.

He clears his throat. This is when she expects him to say goodbye, tell her to have fun, and go back to his friends.

"You changed," he says, moving his eyes down her body.

She looks down at her chest, then back at him. His eyes flicker away.

"You look nice," he says, and she can't tell, quite yet, if he's really going to try this.

"You, too."

"Which one is your friend?"

Andy looks out at the crowd, but can't see Tanya anymore. "I lost her."

"That's not good," he says. "You like to dance? Maybe we will find her that way."

Maybe he's just being kind, trying to rescue her from sitting alone. "OK," she says.



Claudia has been lying awake for hours. She tried her Yoga breathing exercises, but when she heard herself, she sounded as if she were gasping for air, so she stopped. After only a week of sharing a bedroom with Andrea, she misses the sound of her breathing. Andrea falls asleep easily, and her slow, even breaths are reassuring, easy to follow into sleep. Usually, Claudia sleeps alone. She hasn't shared a bedroom with Steven in years. Usually, her Yoga breathing does not sound desperate. She worries about Andrea wandering around this foreign city at night, with some girl Claudia has never met. They're probably drinking too much.

If she had called Ramón, she could be having sex right now, instead of worrying about Andrea. Steven rarely bothers with her anymore, and she hasn't really missed it. But she thinks sex with Ramón would have been different. She thinks he would have tried to make her feel special, made some kind of effort to woo her.

Claudia turns on her bedside light and reaches for her book,

but something flutters off the nightstand. It's probably nothing, but she swings her feet out of bed and plucks it from the carpet anyway. She feels that it's a business card, but doesn't believe it until she brings it to her face and sees Ramón's handwriting. For a moment, she thinks it's magic, or fate, or she's lost her mind and only *thinks* she threw it away, and she is thrilled to have it back, thrilled to have the chance to decide differently. But then she realizes it must have been Andrea, that Andrea knows Ramón wanted to see her tonight, knows Steven cheats. Andrea *knows*, and she has never said a word. It is unbearably sad, and she feels her throat constrict, her body preparing to cry.

Andrea wants her to call Ramón. She is giving permission or something.

Or it could be that Andrea is simply mocking her, waving the evidence in her face, threatening to tell Steven of her flirtation.

Maybe Andrea doesn't know at all. She looks at the phone again. She wants to know what Andrea meant—not because she would call Ramón, but because she wants to know Andrea better.



Ramón leads Andy to the dance floor by the hand, which seems like an odd, old-fashioned gesture for the setting. During the first song, they do exaggerated moves and make faces to show they're not being serious. During the second song, he puts his hands on her back and pulls her closer, so she can't even see his face anymore. She never danced with Ben because he hated dancing, hated clubs. She wonders how it would have felt, and it seems strange that now she is pressed up against this stranger, and she can smell his sweat, can feel it seeping through his shirt. Even though she knows it shouldn't, it makes her think about sex. She presses her head into his shoulder and thinks that she could go home with him instead of with Tanya. Maybe if she didn't expect anything more than one night, he wouldn't be able to hurt her. She could have sex with him and it would be different than it had been with Ben. Ramón could teach her things. They would

both pretend her mother hadn't been his first choice. In the morning he would brew thick coffee on the stove and pour in plenty of warm milk and tell her more about Basque culture and history. He would teach her some words in Euskera. He would give her precise directions back to the hotel, where she would meet her mother as though nothing had happened, and they'd fly on to Barcelona. Her father gets away with it all the time, so why shouldn't she?

Ramón places his hand on the back of her head and pulls her face close to his. He turns it so her ear is at his mouth. "We should get a drink?" he asks. His lips graze her earlobe when he straightens up.

She meets his eyes, which are hooded now. His whole face is languid, as if he has just finished having sex. Everything turns hazy. She feels her eyelids lower and her mouth soften, and then she is leaning forward, into him, or maybe being pulled. But he puts his free hand on her face at the last moment and strokes her cheek with his thumb. She wants to moan.

"Andrea," he says, rolling the *R*, so that her name sounds Spanish. He removes his hand from her head and grins slyly. He wraps his arm around her waist and leads her back to the bar. She wishes Ben could see her. Ramón asks what she wants, and when she tells him a Coke, he takes his arm away and pays for the drinks with her mother's money, she realizes. Really, it's her father's money. When she takes a sip, there's rum mixed with the Coke, and she feels a surge of anger.

"You like Bilbao?" He gestures to the crowd and laughs. He's being self-deprecating and she wants to tell him to stop it, because it's a beautiful place. A place that still means something and he knows better than to talk about it that way. She finishes the drink quickly and puts it down on the bar. She burps, but Ramón doesn't notice. He puts his arm around her, and his hand brushes her breast, and she turns to him and sees on his face that it was not an accident. She closes her eyes and sees, against her will, Ramón brushing her mother's breast in the same way. But he wouldn't have done that to her mother, exactly. He would have

altered his game a little. Eventually, though, his hand would have made its way to her mother's breast. Andy opens her eyes and really looks at his soft, damp face. He returns her gaze, but it is so clearly an act that she wants to scream. She hates him for seeing the same possibilities in her that he saw in her mother. She hates what Ben did to her. The rum and Coke boil up in her stomach, and she has to swallow a vomity burp. He pulls her closer, but she slips away.

"My mother didn't call you?" she shouts over the crowd, aware that she could puke on his shoes at any moment.

His face goes slack, and then he shakes his head and smiles slightly. "No. She did not call."

She would like to take him by the shoulders and shake him and tell him he's blind if he can't see that she and her mother are so fucking different, they hardly belong to the same species. But it doesn't even sound true when she says it in her head. And anyway, she wants to leave before she's sick. It occurs to her that maybe in a very long time, this will be something to laugh with her mother about, but she can't imagine herself getting the story out.

"I have to go," she says, and he nods, unsurprised. She reclaims her coat and finds Tanya and tells her she's going back to the hotel. She stumbles outside, and on the corner, a bunch of old men in berets are sitting on a flight of stone steps, singing a song in Euskera with gusto. The language doesn't sound so gentle anymore. The words explode from their mouths. These are the men Ramón was talking about. Some young people passing by start singing, too. At least everyone knows the song, even if they don't really know what it means. Andy thinks, for a moment, that if she could throw back her head and sing along in that ancient language, everything would make sense. But instead she throws up on the sidewalk and hails a cab.



When Claudia wakes to the sound of the door opening, she thinks, at first, that it must be Steven, and then she thinks Ramón. But instead it's Andrea, silhouetted against the light from the hallway, incredibly tall but hunched over.

"What's wrong?" Claudia says, a reflex. She's surprised when, instead of ignoring her, Andrea closes the door and says: "I don't know." She's even more surprised when Andrea takes off her boots and pads around to the other side of Claudia's bed and slides between the sheets and curls into a ball, still wearing her bar clothes. The room has two beds. Andrea smells like smoke and booze and vomit, but Claudia places her hand on Andrea's back and feels that she's shuddering. She knows, then, to slide closer to her daughter and fit herself against her back, and reach around to smooth the hair away from her forehead. And after a while, she feels the precise moment when Andy relaxes into sleep.