

**E**LISABETH MAKES LISTS. It's easier that way. Lists make it easy to recall, easy to separate what should be and what shouldn't, make it hard—make it hard to forget all those things that she knows she should not forget. She keeps them in a notebook that reads 'Multiplication, Division, Addition, Subtraction' on the cover, which is itself a list. And inside, Books I should read. Books I have read. Songs about Mama. My favorite foods. Words that Frank does not like.

Things that Frank does not like. The first item on that list: 1. My lists.

And when the paramedics come through the door, she makes a new list, not in her notebook, but tattooed on the inside of her skull. What she knows about her mother. What she should hold onto about her mother, if the doctors ask or the men in their blue uniforms, rushing forward with oxygen, with a stretcher, with something, anything to stop the blood.

Her mother:

too young to have a ten year old kid

beautiful

works three days a week at Valley National Bank

has one friend, Linda DeSanta

doesn't like to be touched

She has never liked to be touched. Not hugged, not kissed. Doesn't like to shake hands, hold hands, slap high five in a moment of victory, if there ever was a moment of victory, which Elisabeth, at ten, suspects there has not. Doesn't like to be touched, but none of that seems to matter now, as three men in blue shirts that say Southwest Ambulance flood into the house, run in straightened circles, shout her name, pronounce it wrong, say Emery, like something to file her nails—

Her mother:

paints her nails red. Cherries Jubilee.

They lift her body in one motion from the widening oval reservoir of blood that has pooled on the tufts of carpet stained with grease from Frank's boots. One of them, the taller one, the blonde one, has latched onto her mother's hand. Elisabeth has never seen anyone's fingers laced through her mothers in her life.

"You're gonna be alright, Emery. You're gonna be alright," he says. He does not look at Elisabeth as they pass through the doorway, around the sharp edge of

the narrow hall, past the bent curtain rod tossed on the ground in the square box of the living room, through the front door that has come off of its hinges, down the driveway streaked in the burnt black that marks Frank's flight.

Her mother:

is going to be alright.

It seems personal, but Linda, who watches Elisabeth while her mother is away at the bank, averting her fingers as she passes straighten piles of fives and twenties to the men who wait to cash their checks at her window, this Linda says it's not. Says: it's not you, *mija*. That all the way back when they went to the same school Elisabeth goes to now, back when they were sent to ESL classes because of the sound of their last names though they had only ever spoken English, way back then, and for all the years that came between, everyone wanted to touch Emire Cervantes, boys wanted to reach out for her, their fingers itched to run through her hair, big rolling black curls not the frizzy golden red Elisabeth had. But Emire didn't look at anyone, didn't talk to anyone but Linda herself. And most of all, Emire didn't let anyone touch her until the year she ran away to the other side of the country and married a white man who touched her hand, her face, pressed his mouth against hers and put Elisabeth in her belly.

"He tricked me," Emire said once. "I was stupid and he tricked me."

And Linda says, that was the way it always was. Her mother had to be tricked to be touched.

A few months before this day, before the paramedics came through the door and Frank drove away in her mother's car, Elisabeth's class, the gifted fourth graders, went to the mineral museum. Emire came along when another mother cancelled, her mother, the most beautiful of all the mothers, of any lady on television, prettier than the girls from *Sabado Gigante*, prettier than any of Charlie's Angels, prettier even, than Wonder Woman. She rode on the hot, loud bus, sat on the brown vinyl seats with Elisabeth and stared straight ahead, didn't seem to notice the boys and the girls who whispered and pointed at her.

At the museum, Emire followed Elisabeth as she moved through the displays of rock formations, past the charts that track chemical compounds. She followed her to the gift shop, where Elisabeth buried her hands in the huge bin of polished, valueless stones with colors neither of them has ever seen so vividly before—the blue and the pink, the oxblood and the chocolate, the aquamarine and the celadon—and one that shimmers the way oil in the driveway catches the sunlight in the afternoon. Elisabeth runs her fingers through the stones, feels the smooth ice of them, lets their cool blandness pass through her fingers the way she runs her hands through vats of pinto beans at the grocery store. Her mother appears at her side, and Elisabeth sucks in her breath, flinches against what she knows her mother will say—don't touch!

Don't touch.

But her mother, with no possible reasoning or prediction, in that same sudden way she left Elisabeth's father sleeping in the middle of the night and caught the first bus that would take her anywhere, that sudden way Elisabeth has tried to imagine, has tried to piece together from the stories, Emire's hands dive into the stones too, and her fingers tunnel into the rocks the way Elisabeth's do, to see just how deep the box will go.

Beneath the colored stones made cool from the air conditioned museum air, Elisabeth's fingers push through rock, through hardened chemical compounds, and wrap themselves around her mother's hand. Her mouth opens and closes, opens and closes until finally it opens and she says, all at once, before anyone can stop her: "I love you, Mama."

And her mother nodded, quick, sharp, one movement and it's done, but more than anything—she let her hold on, for just an instant, before she yanked her hand away, sending rocks—azure, hunter, crimson, sherbert—spilling over the edge of the bin and scattering across the floor.

The only other person who figured out the trick of this is Frank. Frank, who saw her mother in the neighborhood, saw her fling her middle finger in the direction of city workers bent over an exposed pipe who called out to her, whistled. When he saw her again a few weeks later at Los Olivos, he asked her to dance.

Her mother:

loves to dance.

This is how they started. She must have let him put his hands around her waist. Their chests would have pressed together. They would have swiveled and dipped the way her mother likes to do when she dances cumbias, merengues, rancheras, and boleros. And her mother did not let go—and handsome as he is, all black hair and mustache, all red skin that ripples, all muscles that roll the way Emire's body does to the music, somehow, she keeps holding on, and just like that, he tricks her.

He tricks them.

But Frank, the one who first points out that Elisabeth talks too much and asks too many questions, is not always so lucky. Even he has to trick Emire the way Elisabeth does, a kiss on the neck from behind, hands that slip up her shirt and along her back when she is hunched over the stove stirring sopa in the skillet. But even that can only last so long and he finds other ways to touch her. And so he tricks her, surprises her with his hands, when he touches the rock of his knuckles, the hard stones of his fist to her mouth, the point and upward curve of his boot to her back, the wide smile of a watermelon slice to the side of her face, the juice and black seeds dribbling down her chin.

And after all this, after all this her mother still pulls away, and even Elisabeth can see the baffled glaze of his eyes, and she knows, even today, even this last day, it was desperation. Even Elisabeth knows that it was the act of a man with empty hands who chose to force the touch of his wife with a curtain rod, straining, reaching for her, caressing her the way he never could, against the small of her back, against the base of her spine, and still, even then she pulls her body from his reach, even then, as always, she slips away.

Linda comes for her in the waiting room from behind the swinging doors into the O-R. Linda takes her hand but says nothing and Elisabeth for this moment, putting one foot in front of the other, each foot fitting into a colored square of linoleum, is allowed to think whatever she pleases, to ask as many questions inside her own head, as she is lead behind the doors and into the O and the R. Elisabeth thinks about these letters together—O.R. Or. Or what. Or else what. Something or something else. She decides that for now OR is or and or is to give or take, to cry or laugh, to stay or go—

Linda pauses at the desk where a nurse is finishing up a phone call, and puts her hands, one on each of Elisabeth's shoulders, and Linda's big hands, her long fingers, fall below the shoulder and along Elisabeth's taut thin arms, and she has not been touched like this in a long time—but here it is. While they wait, Linda reaches down and kisses the top of Elisabeth's head, and there is a first time for this too. The nurse hangs up the phone, looks at them and says, 'Villarreal?' Behind Elisabeth, Linda must nod, because the nurse cocks her head to the left, and then looks away.

And now Linda pushes forward, and Elisabeth lets herself be pushed. There is a room at the end of the hall, the last room, the room with the door closed, the only room with the door closed. And there is a baby crying somewhere, a baby crying, and a beep-click from another room, but when Linda opens the door to this room, the last room, there is not a beep-click, there is not a baby crying, there is not the sound of Frank, or the squeal of tires as he pulls away. In this room, there is only silence.

O-R can also stand for:

- operating room
- only room
- only romance
- Oregon
- overly rude
- orange radio

and or.

and/or.

Or has been used this way:

yours or mine

open or closed?

alive or dead.

Elisabeth opens the eyes she did not realize she closed, and there she is, her mother, old or young: young. Her eyes—open or closed? Closed. Her hands at rest at her side, her mouth closed, serious, not angry, not smiling, not yelling, not crying. Happy or sad? Neither. Dust from her mascara has pooled on her cheeks. That happens all the time. Elisabeth reaches out to touch it, to wipe it away. She blows softly, and brushes her thumb against her mother's cheek. Warm or cold?

Cold.

Behind her, a sob escapes from Linda DeSanta's throat.

To cry or not to cry? Elisabeth decides: not to cry. She takes her mother's hand in hers. Her mother does not like this sort of thing, but to pull away or not to pull away? Her mother does not pull away. Elisabeth touches her mother's fingers with the broken, red nails. She presses her mother's fingers, the palm of her hand, to Elisabeth's own face. She pretends she has a fever. She pretends her mother checks her—fever or no fever? No fever. You go to school, Lis. You know Frank doesn't like you to stay home. You know Frank doesn't like you—

And or can be used this way:

To die or not to die.

Elisabeth leans closer and she can smell White Shoulders and Aqua Net. Her mother is still. Her chest does not rise and fall. For the first time, Elisabeth does not smell cigarettes. While Linda DeSanta cries behind her, Elisabeth knows exactly what to do. Her mother will not push away. Her mother will not fight. Elisabeth decides, and it is not either or, but only. She lifts her mother's arm around her, she forces her arm around her mother's broken body and holds her for as long as they will let her hold on.

