

DO NOT PASS GO



**DO NOT
PASS GO**



Also by Beatriz Rivera

African Passions

*Midnight Sandwiches at the
Mariposa Express*

Playing with Light

DO NOT PASS GO

Beatriz Rivera



Arte Público Press
Houston, Texas

This volume is funded in part by grants from the City of Houston through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston / Harris County and the Exemplar Program, a program of Americans for the Arts in collaboration with the LarsonAllen Public Services Group, funded by the Ford Foundation.

Recovering the past, creating the future

Arte Público Press
University of Houston
452 Cullen Performance Hall
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Rivera, Beatriz, 1957-

Do not pass go / by Beatriz Rivera.

p. cm.

ISBN 10: 1-55885-464-9 (alk. paper)

ISBN 13: 978-1-55885-464-2

1. Reporters and reporting—Fiction. 2. Terrorism—Fiction
I. Title.

PS3568.I8287D66 2006

813'.54—dc22

2006042729

CIP

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Imprinted in the United States of America

6 7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Dedication

To Dr. Nicolás Kanellos for all he has done for Latino literature and Latino scholarship.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the entire Arte Público Press team for their fine work. Special thanks to Gabriela Baeza Ventura for her editorial comments and suggestions. When she first sent *Do Not Pass Go* back to me I never thought I could do it, but we did it! Muchos abrazos for Marina Tristán who is always there when I need her.

I would also like to thank my son, Nigel Barnes, who knew what I was experiencing while writing this novel. He sensed when I was totally focused and always asked me all the important questions at that very moment. That is how he got away with everything. Special hugs and kisses to my daughter, Rebecca Barnes, who has always allowed me to write. Then there's my husband, Casey Barnes, who has always provided me with the space, the safety, the understanding, and has allowed me to keep my head on the ground and my feet in the clouds.

*Flores, Peten, Guatemala
Summer 2006*

By the time congressman Arango, his wife, and his daughter made their entrance, surrounded by the secret service, the gymnasium was packed with rude, rowdy students and concerned teachers with nervous eyes. School Five was the congressman's alma mater, and he was slated to give a pep talk to over a thousand youngsters, who seemed less curious about what he had to say than glad to be missing class on a Tuesday morning.

The boys wore baggy pants and bandannas. The girls had belly button rings and threw their long hair in other people's faces. They never looked anyone in the eye.

Clutching her reporter's notebook, Melody More made her way through the crowd and introduced herself to the family. "Hi! I'm Melody More from *The Chronotope*. Could I ask you a few questions?" They turned to her and smiled. Then, as the congressman was giving her a warm, political handshake, Melody asked, "Congressman Arango, how does it feel to return to your alma mater?"

After having jotted his answer down, Melody turned to the congressman's wife and asked the same question. "Mrs. Arango, School Five is your alma mater as well . . ."

Mrs. Arango looked at her over the top of her glasses and interjected, "Melody More, I know you."

"Yes, we met briefly when they were tearing down the Livingston Theatre, and also last year when your husband managed to cancel a local radio show for lewdness. No big deal for you, I suppose. But it felt like the end of free speech to us."

"Nonsense," she said, and gave her a piercing brown-eyed stare and a little smile. "Here's the quote: I have dedicated my life to public education. My heart goes out to all these students who need encouragement and support," she declared. "We go way back, Melody More," she then said.

Hungry for quotes, Melody did not stop to wonder about that bizarre comment. She simply turned to Alyssa Arango and asked her the same question.

"My parents still live here in Hudson County," the daughter replied. "My mom's a counselor at School One. So we've maintained our roots here. It feels great to be back. Yesterday I went shopping with my mother, tomorrow I'm going jogging by the river. I want to get reacquainted with my hometown. Does any of that make any sense?"

Melody shrugged, "It's your quote."

In the meantime, school officials were desperately trying to get the event started. Unfortunately, the students paid no heed. They were out of control and that's how they planned to stay for as long as this lasted.

Suddenly, there was static. A very nervous moderator (who also happened to be a teacher at the school) stuttered through his introduction of the congressman. The students kept on talking loudly, jeering, laughing, pushing, and shoving.

"Euh . . . he was raised right here and euh . . . went to school right here."

No one was listening. The girls played with each other's hair. They talked to friends sitting many seats away.

"So here he is, our own, our very own, Congressman Isaiah Arango."

Before saying anything, the congressman slowly took his jacket off, came down from the podium, and stood among the students, staring at them.

"Here's to School Five!" he finally yelled with his arms up in the air. "My alma mater!"

Suddenly there was silence.

"Here's to School Five!" he said again.

"School Five!" the crowd roared.

"The best there ever was!"

"The best there ever was!" the crowd echoed and applauded.

The secret service asked Melody to step back, away from the congressman. They repeated, "Stand away from the congressman!"

Having no more questions for the congressman and not wanting to sit, Melody began to make her way to the far end of the gymnasium, next to the door, where many of the teachers were standing. She waved to Rose, the photographer from *The Chronotope*, who was jostling her way through the crowd.

The congressman began by saying, "I was raised here in Hudson County. I lived in the projects, a few blocks away from here. My mother cleaned houses for a living . . ."

He gave his speech in a way that allowed the crowd to participate. It was what could be called triptych rhetoric. The first component an impossible resolution, such as being at the top of your class, or being offered a full scholarship by a well-reputed university, or even becoming mayor at age twenty-three. The second component a question, "Impossible, they say?" And then the third, "No, it's not impossible . . . because it can be done!" Before long the crowd was roaring, "Yes, it can be done!"

Then he switched gears. Melody was writing all this down.

"Now I want each of you to take a good look at the person to your right," he said. "And then at the person to your left. Just look at them."

Involuntarily, Melody did as she was told, just as everyone else must have done.

While everyone was quizzically looking both ways, the congressman explained, "I'm asking you to do this so you realize that according to the statistics only one of you is going to make it."

He couldn't have known what was coming.

It didn't take long for the news to reach Xoan Xavier Contreras, editor and political columnist at *The Chronotope*. His first reaction was to put his fist through the wall. "Damn! I should have sent Jason, not Mel! Damn!"

"Pick up, Mel! Mel, pick up!" Gustavo kept trying on the radio. "Pick up, Rose! Rose, pick up!"

In the meantime, Xoan Xavier got on the phone with his wife Tere-sita and gave her instructions. She was to send Blanca in a cab to pick Jr. up at school immediately. "Have her take him home, and call me as soon as he gets there," he said, staring at his aching hand. "Oh, and don't let him watch television. Make him read a book. Tell him . . . Tell him I told you to tell him that he doesn't read enough. I'll let the school know that Blanca's picking him up and that the cab's waiting."

"This can't be happening!" Xoan yelled as he slammed the phone down.

Gustavo kept repeating, "Pick up, Melody! Pick up, Rose!"

The phone was ringing off the hook and everyone in the newsroom wanted to answer it, for once, in hopes that it would be either Melody or Rose.

"Newsroom!" Gustavo answered, and everyone turned and stared at him. He shook his head. "The editor's name is pronounced Juan, like Don Juan, not Exoan. No, no, it's pronounced Ha, like ha-ha, vee-air, not Ex-savior, and the last name sounds like *contrary*, with an *as* instead of a *y*. You're welcome," he said and hung up, then immediately picked up another call. "Newsroom!" he said quickly. He shook his head. "I'll put you through to our classified department." He speed-dialed Melody's cell phone number before picking up another call.

"I'm sure she's fine," Xoan said, wiping the sweat from his brow with a trembling hand.

Then Gustavo said, "Melody's father is downstairs."

"I need someone to get Mel's dad and bring him to my office," Xoan yelled. "Jason! Why are you still here? Get to School Five now!"

Utter despair reigned when Gustavo said that a firefighter had found Melody's purse and cell phone in the gymnasium. Xoan put his hands to his head, cursed in Spanish, slammed his fist on his desk, and only regained his composure when Melody's father appeared.

"I had breakfast with her this morning," Max said. "She said she was going to School Five."

"I'm sure she's just fine, Max," Xoan said. "She's a survivor. She'll be calling us any minute now," he added, pointing to the phone, as if the phone were proof enough.

With his arm around Max's shoulder, Xoan led him to a chair and urged him to sit and wait for news of Melody. So Max put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands and waited.

Suddenly, Gustavo said with a voice full of nerves and gladness, "I've got Mel on the phone! Mel, are you okay? Oh, I'm so relieved! Thank God! We love you. Here's the boss," he said as Xoan grabbed the phone from him.

"Nena! Why the hell didn't you call sooner? We've been worried sick. Are you all right? . . . Where are you? . . . You need clean clothes? . . . No, Jr. doesn't know. I sent Blanca to pick him up at school . . . I'll give Gustavo your keys . . . We'll both meet you there . . . Here's your dad. Don't hang up after you're through with him."

"Didn't I say she was just fine?" Xoan gloated. "I never doubted it. But if she ran out of there without a quote from a wounded person she can kiss her career good-bye! I'll take the call in my office as soon as she's through talking to Max."

Not only had Melody not gotten any quotes from the wounded, she also refused to write the article. She told Xoan on the phone that she was too confused and felt guilty about having . . .

In the middle of this conversation, word came that Jason was having trouble making his way to School Five, that the streets were blocked. He had already gotten several quotes from people who had heard the blast. Apparently, the congressman and his wife were dead. The daughter was in critical condition at the medical center. Lots of kids dead too. Xoan asked Melody if she had gotten any quotes from the congressman and his family. She lied; she said she hadn't. By the time Melody hung up, Xoan wanted to strangle her.

The very next day an article appeared in *The Chronotope* regarding the tragic event at School Five. Just this once, Xoan forewent the three X's that had become his trademark and signed the article with his real

name, Xoan Xavier Contreras. Under normal circumstances, the three X's stood for Triple X-Rated because he said he exposed everything having to do with the truth. But with so many kids dead, Triple X just didn't sound right, or look good.

He wrote: . . . As to Mrs. Arango, she is survived by her only daughter, Alyssa, who is in critical condition at the Hudson County Medical Center, and one brother, Juan Mateo Irigaray, of Val Morin, Québec. *The Chronotope* lost a photographer, Rose Flanagan. Staff writer Melody More, who was covering the event for *The Chronotope*, sustained minor injuries. The death toll has now reached 427.

He even managed to get some quotes: "We will retaliate," said the president of the United States. "We will find the culprits and punish them," said Rob Shapley, the newly appointed director of homeland security. "No peace without honor," the president reiterated yesterday.

Xoan was furious at Melody.



Two weeks later, Melody returned to *The Chronotope* wearing sweatpants and sneakers and clutching a bright yellow Walkman. When she walked into the newsroom, her coworkers stopped whatever it was they were doing, stood up, walked over to where she was, and took turns embracing her. When Gustavo's turn came, he told her the boss wanted to see her in his office.

"How are you feeling?" Xoan asked before biting into a donut.

"Kind of guilty."

"I'm so glad to hear that. Want a donut?"

"No."

"Have one, you've lost weight. I have carrot muffins in there. That's a vegetable. Why haven't you been answering your phone?"

"When did you call?"

"Around two a.m.," he replied as he looked in the box of donuts and proceeded to choose donut number two.

"I must have been asleep. You're getting too fat, Xoan Xavier," Melody said. She was, by the way, the only person in the office who called him either Xoan or Xoan Xavier. Everyone else called him Boss or Triple X.

“Who asked you? If I want your opinion, I’ll ask, okay? Here’s what I want you to do today,” he said irritably.

When she got to her desk, Ginger instant-messaged her. “It’s really good to have you back. How are you feeling?”

Melody wrote, “Guilty.”

“I’m worried about you. What about a drink after work?”

Melody wrote, “I have to pick up Jr. We’re going swimming.”

Ginger was one of the top reporters at *The Chronotope*. She had her own column and was beloved by just about anyone who bought the paper. Her readers treated her as if she were a close family member. Both Triple X and Ginger were so popular that their photos were on buses and billboards calling attention to the newspaper’s mission: Integrity.

Although Melody had been working at the paper for over seven years, she was seldom given what were considered to be important assignments. As far as Xoan was concerned, her intelligence was totally worthless. What’s more, he didn’t believe she had it in her to be a good reporter. As a matter of fact, he thought he was doing her a favor by keeping her. For weeks he repeated, “Damn! I wish I’d sent Jason to School Five!”

Almost a year later, *The Chronotope* headlines on the front page read: *Terror Alert to be Raised Today*.

"Damn! That arrogant bastard hung up on me again!" Ginger said.

"Who's that?" Melody asked.

"Mateo Irigaray. He was a child prodigy way back when. He's Congressman Arango's brother-in-law. Anyway, we got a tip from the electric company that Mateo came back to empty his sister's house, which is his house now. The boss wants me to interview him."

Melody looked at the photograph on Ginger's desk. "He's not bad looking," she said.

"But what a jerk he is! Arrogant and surly."

Melody took a few moments to analyze the photograph. "He kind of looks like that actor Olivier Martinez. Doesn't he?"

Ginger scrutinized the face on the photograph. "A coarser version perhaps. Olivier Martinez looks European, and this guy certainly doesn't."

"My mother knew him," Melody said, her eyes still on the photograph. "Actually she wanted me to be a child prodigy just like him, but I turned out to be a normal incompetent. No wonder the congressman's wife kept saying she knew me! She was his sister! I didn't put two and two together. Can I?" she asked, holding Mateo Irigaray's profile.

"Be my guest," Ginger said.

Melody took the folder to her desk.

Juan Mateo Irigaray. Born: Hudson County, April 27, 1958, to Juan Manuel and Victoria Irigaray, natives of Medellín. Victoria: deceased, April 30, 1958. One brother, Juan Marco, deceased, two sisters, Amparito and Anamaría, both deceased. Married: Leila Benjelloun, 1982, two children. Divorced: 1983.

"Give me his address, Ginger. I'll swing by his house on my way to the gym and tell him my mother knew him when he was a child. Maybe that will soften him up for you," Melody said, as she returned the profile to Ginger.

“Go for it,” Ginger said, handing Melody a bright pink Post-it. “In case you need it, his cell phone number’s on there too.”

Just then, Gustavo yelled across the newsroom, “Hey, Mel, the boss wants you in his office. Jr.’s on the phone.”

Melody stood up and ran across the newsroom all the way to Xoan’s office.



Melody parked her bright yellow BMW two-door on the street in front of the Manila Avenue address that Ginger had jotted down on the Post-it earlier that day. There was a beat-up, chalky-white BMW four-door with Québec *Je me souviens* license plates parked in the driveway. It was too hot for the sweatpants and sneakers she was wearing. She had her hair tied back in a low ponytail and hadn’t bothered to put on her contact lenses or any makeup for that matter. She felt makeup was useless when she was wearing glasses.

After opening the gate, Melody made her way between two rows of hedges that marked the way to the house. Untended, untrimmed, the branches were madly reaching out for each other. In places, the abandoned vegetation rendered the bluestone path almost impenetrable.

Then, just as she was going up the steps to the front porch, she noticed that there was a man lying on the other side of the tangled hedge, crying.

“Sir!” she said. “Are you okay?”

Abruptly, he sat up and looked up at her.

“Did you fall off the porch?”

“What’s it to you?” he asked with hostility in his voice. “What do you want?”

He had hair down to his shoulders and had not shaved in several days.

“Oh, it’s you!” she then said.

“What do you want? Go away!”

She explained why she was there in as few words as possible. He said he didn’t want to talk about anything, that he was too upset. Suddenly he got even more upset, stood up, and was about to walk into the house when he realized that he was locked out.

“Damn! Shit!” he yelled, as he let himself drop on the stoop, put his head in his hands, and once again began to cry.

“Are you locked out?”

He lifted his head and glared at her. "You're still here? And what the fuck does it look like?"

"Do you want me to help you get back in?" she asked, inspecting the lock and then the rest of the house.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, exasperated. "Break a window? I can do that myself."

"No. I'm going to find the flimsiest lock I can find and pick it. Is there a back door?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, pointing back.

"I'll get tools out of my car."

"What the hell?" Mateo said, loudly, as she walked away toward her car.

It took her half an hour. "Baldwin locks are tough," she declared. He stared at her in disbelief and curiosity.

Reluctantly he uttered, "Thank you." She slipped the tools in her purse. Even more reluctantly he asked, "Do you want to come in and have a drink? All I have is vodka, orange juice, Materva, and sweetened condensed milk."

She accepted the invitation and introduced herself.

"I'm Melody More from *The Chronotope*."

"*Chronotope*?" he repeated. "That's Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*."

"Initially it may very well have come from there. But now everyone focuses on the chronos and ignores the topos," she replied. "You're from here, so you shouldn't pretend you don't know the paper," she added.

They went into the kitchen.

"And just how do you know about Bakhtin?" he asked, as he pulled a tray of ice cubes out of the refrigerator.

Melody raised her brow. "Mateo Irigaray, for your information I also happen to know about Luce Irigaray, the feminist psychoanalyst. Are you by chance related to her?"

"Nope."

She looked the other way. "To answer your question, I studied philosophy," she said. "And it's totally useless, I know."

"I have four PhD's," he said.

"I'm sure your mother is very proud of you," she said, having forgotten what she'd read in his profile.

"My mother's dead," he said. "Blown to smithereens."

"I thought that was your sister."

"My mother was also my sister."

Judging from the smell of garbage in the kitchen, he had to be a slovenly person who didn't mind wallowing in filth. Those were her thoughts. There was a small heap of dirty laundry on the floor, a pair of jeans, several polo shirts, not-so-white socks, and navy blue boxer briefs. Several bags of Kentucky Fried Chicken contoured the careless laundry. Some bags were empty, some wadded up, yet others half full of chicken leftovers. Staring at his mess, she asked him if that was all he ate, and he replied in the affirmative. Then she asked him if he realized what kind of life those chickens had led, and he replied that he didn't give a damn. Finally she asked him if he always lived like this, throwing leftovers on the floor, and he did not like that at all. "If you don't like it, then leave," he said between his teeth.

The table was covered with old newspaper clippings and photos. Melody remarked that many of those clippings were from *The Chronotope*. He shrugged.

"Vodka and orange juice?" he then asked. "Have your drink, then do me a favor and go."

"That sounds good. Do you know me?" she asked suddenly as he poured orange juice into glasses that didn't seem very clean.

He seemed to think that was a stupid presumptuous question. "Why would I know you? Are you famous? Come into the living room."

She followed him and said, "Or maybe you knew my mother. Her name was Lee Hatchoun. She's dead now. She died back in 1997."

He froze when she mentioned the name. Slowly he turned to face her and shot a piercing dark-eyed glance at her.

"The name doesn't sound familiar," he said, squinting. "Why are you here?"

"I already told you."

In the living room, sitting across from him, she studied his physique. He sat cross-legged, forming a triangle with his thighs and calf. His right ankle on his left knee, his foot was dangling. He was wearing khaki shorts, an old red polo shirt. And he was barefoot. She looked at his foot, the one on the knee. Well-defined ankle, handsome foot, bony in some places, padded in others. A size ten perhaps. How tall could he be? Five-ten, perhaps, or five-eleven. Slowly, her eyes focused on his knee, it looks good too, down the other leg, the calf is well shaped, strong, not too hairy, but there's hair. When he uncrossed his legs she looked at his crotch. She looked at his knees again, then at his face. He seemed to be in so much emotional pain.

"Maybe you were too young to remember. I don't know much about it myself, because a lot took place before I was born. But I do know that mother liked you a lot. Oh, she liked you a lot. In fact, I believe you're the only person she ever liked, besides daddy, she said."

"I'm sorry. I don't remember any of that. What year were you born?" he asked suddenly.

"1965."

He shot a glance at a spot on the living room floor, then at her, then back at the spot, back at her, back at the spot, while smiling to himself. It made her wonder to what extent he was a total lunatic.

So she said, "It must be hard for you, returning here, where your sister and brother-in-law lived. I was at School Five when it happened. I was one of the survivors. Sorry!"

He stared at her quizzically. "Why are you sorry?"

"I didn't save anyone's life except mine. I wasn't heroic. I didn't even have the courage to write the article describing what happened. Look, I'd better get home before curfew," she said, leaving her glass untouched.

"Bye, thanks for picking my lock," he said, without getting up. "But I won't be a gentleman and walk you to the door."

The next day, Melody called to cancel her class at the college and left work an hour early. First she went home to change and shower. It took her a while to decide what to wear. Finally, after having changed three times, and left clothes strewn everywhere, she opted for very casual attire.

On the way to Mateo's house, she stopped to buy red wine and flowers, then realized she couldn't wait to get there.

At six she rang his doorbell. His car was parked in the same spot and probably had not been moved since yesterday. She rang a second time, and still got no answer. Standing there, she noticed that he had taken the garbage out.

After she rang for the fourth time, she stepped back and looked the house up and down. Then she heard a sound. There was someone behind the door, turning the knob. He opened it slowly and peered out. He gazed at her. This time he looked like a stalked animal. His eyes were bloodshot, and the late afternoon light seemed to bother him. He was still wearing the clothes from the day before.

"Hi!" Melody said. "Remember me?"

Since he didn't answer her question right away, she reminded him that her name was Melody. He was checking her out. He sniffed. Her perfume had a lot of citrus, with a hint of vanilla and cinnamon. He sniffed again. And lily of the valley. Shampoo with coconut fragrance. Lavender soap. And oatmeal. Her hair was down, flyaway, just washed, but he didn't have his glasses on, so she was blurry. Jeans, black platform sandals, a tight lime-green T-shirt, nice breasts. He looked again. Nice breasts. A delicate gold chain around her neck. Three small clear stones hanging from it, touching her throat. A blonde with dark eyes. She had practical hands, veiny, with fingernails cut short, a flat gold watch around her wrist, and no rings. Today she wasn't wearing glasses.

"Yeah. What can I do for you?"

"I brought you some Napa merlot, as well as very cold dessert wine, and flowers."

He raised his eyebrows. "You brought me wine and flowers?" he asked before stepping to one side to let her in. "Men aren't supposed to be offered flowers," he declared solemnly.

"Oh, I'm not courting you," she said casually. "At least I don't believe so. I just thought they might cheer you up. I'll put them in the living room, and they won't affect your manliness, I'm sure."

He stared at the pink flowers, sniffed, then murmured, "Amaryllis belladonna." After that he turned his gaze to her, tilted his head to one side, looking puzzled, as if she were a figment of his imagination.

Inside the house, the thermostat must have been set very low. It was frigid, quiet, and deathly lonely. There was death in the air and a pungent tobacco smell.

"And I'll put the dessert wine in the fridge. Taste it when you get a chance, it's delicious. Someone I interviewed gave me a whole case," Melody began to prattle, since she did not wish to leave right away. "My hair is going to reek of tobacco. By the way, garbage pickup is not tomorrow, it's Thursday for this neighborhood. I noticed you had a bag of garbage out there. You should put it in a trash can because the raccoons will have it all over your lawn in no time. You'll see. Tomorrow they pick up the recyclables, but you don't recycle, do you? Why is it so cold in here? I'm freezing, can you turn the temperature up?"

"I don't intend to be around on Thursday," he said slowly. "And I need for it to be cold like that."

"I need a vase for these flowers," she said.

He pointed, "Look in that cabinet. Pick any vase you want."

The kitchen table was still covered with newspaper clippings and photos. The first line of an article read: "He stands barely four feet tall, the genius of Hudson County . . ." She stopped to read. It was signed by Ron Noble. Quickly, Melody calculated that Ron must have been twenty years old when he wrote that.

She looked at the date. It was from before she was born, when the renowned and beloved Uriah Tremblay was the editor of *The Chronotope*.

When Melody began writing for *The Chronotope* in the late nineties there were still anecdotes about old Uriah. He was a little round man who called himself the Chronos of Hudson County, and he had this habit of taping his ideas on tiny pieces of paper all over the newsroom. He also liked to feed the entire newsroom ice cream cake right at the hour of anxiety, quarter to three.

Just this morning, in her eagerness to hear more about Mateo, Melody had broached the subject with Ron. At first Ron squinted, then he said, "Yeah, I wrote quite a few articles about the little boy genius." Ron was semi-retired and only came in two days a week. "Mateo Irigaray, yes."

From the moment it was discovered that the town of Hudson County had produced a child prodigy, old Uriah decided that *The Chronotope* would chronicle his life. Every two months or so the readers were reminded that Hudson County had a little motherless wizard who didn't need to go to school. He spent all week at some undisclosed location and returned home only for the weekends. Judging from the articles, it was no longer Señor and Señora Irigaray who had produced this exceptional child. The cute little boy who could learn a foreign language and speak it with native fluency in a matter of weeks, and for whom once was enough, to learn by heart, whatever it was, that cute little boy was a child of Hudson County.

"He's just a little boy," said Amparito Irigaray, when asked what it felt like to be the sister of such a powerhouse.

"What are you doing?" Mateo asked.

He startled her.

"I'm reading this article," she replied.

"You look different today," he then said.

"So do you. You look worse. Did you sleep in those clothes? Anyway, I called your cell phone but you weren't picking up," she prattled. "My friend at the paper wants to know how you feel about being back in New Jersey."

"Get out of here!" he said. "Go away! Leave me alone! No, wait, here's a quote, that way I won't owe you: All I want to do is die!" He spoke slowly, "I can't face another night."

There he was, very upset again. He rushed into a little bedroom by the kitchen and slid under the bed. Melody, who had followed him, crouched down and said, "Mateo? Is there something I can do for you? You seem very upset."

"Yes! Go away! And never come back!"

He left one foot out, like a cat, and she couldn't help it. She sat down on the floor, took his foot and massaged it gently. He remained still, as if this scared him to death. But he allowed her to do it. Her fingers kneaded his foot. The Achilles tendon, the inside ankle bone, the outside ankle bone, the heel, the bones on the top, the toes, the sole, just that one foot.

Half an hour later he came out from under the bed and staggered into the living room.

He let himself fall on the couch. "You have caught me in the middle of an episode," he said, desperately trying to keep his emotions at bay. "I came here for a specific reason, and you're distracting me. Now, can you please leave and let me go on with my plan . . . And don't ever come back." His voice broke.

Once again, he wept and wept, and every so often he'd hit his head with an open hand or pull his hair or try to hurt himself some other way.

She just sat there and scrutinized him.

"Oh no!" she cried out suddenly.

"What?" he asked, as if she were waking him from slumber.

"It's so late. I hate to be out driving when it's so late!"

He shrugged. "Stay here."

"Stay here?" she yelled out. "One minute you tell me to leave and now you want me to stay here?"

"Look. I'm not propositioning you. What else are you going to do? Use my mobile if you need to call your husband, your boyfriend, or whomever. All the beds are stripped. So I'll sleep on this couch and you sleep on that pink one. This is where I've been sleeping since I got here."

"No one's expecting me at home," she declared. "Besides, I have my own cell phone." She took another look at him. "You haven't even bathed, have you?" she asked. "And you smell of stale cheap tobacco."

"What's it to you? I'm not asking you to sleep with me!"

"You could at least shower and shave," she shrugged. "And also put that thing on low cool, I'm freezing," she said, pointing up at the air conditioner.

"Is there anything else you want me to do?" he asked with a tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"What about food?"

"Cook? You want me to cook you dinner?" he asked, as if he were talking to a hallucination. "There are eight cans of sweetened condensed milk, a six-pack of Materva, half a bottle of vodka, and a carton of orange juice. Oh, and there's a jar of Nescafé too. That's all there is for dinner."

"I think I'll have some sweetened condensed milk and some red wine, then we'll top it off with very cold dessert wine," Melody said. "Do you want anything to eat or drink?"

"No. I have a bad stomachache. Come to think of it, I'll have what you're having. Open two cans because I don't want to share mine."

"How long has it been since you've had a decent meal?" she asked, from the kitchen.

"What's decent? I ate Kentucky Fried Chicken every day for nearly a week without ever stopping to wonder what kind of life those chickens had led. And for the past three days I've been ingesting nothing but alcohol and sweetened condensed milk. Is that decent or obscene?"

"No wonder you have a stomachache."

After they had emptied the bottles of wine and dessert wine and he had smoked a whole pack of discount cigarettes, he went to get some blankets and pillows from upstairs for her.

There were no towels in the bathroom, so she had to use toilet paper to dry her face and hands. It immediately fell apart. Not wanting to use up what was left of the roll, because there were no more rolls, she ended up drying her hands on her jeans and her face with her T-shirt. While doing so she had a sudden urge to look in the medicine cabinet and also to open his black toiletries bag just to see what was inside, but she refrained, and then she felt proud of herself for being so discreet for once in her life.

"By the way, there are no towels in the bathroom," she told Mateo as she walked into the living room.

He was seated on the leather couch, smoking. "I wasn't exactly planning on having a slumber party," he said solemnly. Once again, he was very depressed.

She lay down on the pink couch and wished him a peaceful sleep. Immediately, he put out his cigarette and turned off the light without saying so much as good night.

For quite a while, she lay in the dark, wide awake, listening to his breathing. It was distressed, and she knew he was making every effort to weep in silence. Several times she asked him if he was all right. It annoyed him. He told her to shut up. He told her to mind her own business. He reminded her that he hadn't invited her.

"That's what I get for being irresponsible," she said. "I cancel my class in order to come and see you and you're mean to me." That made him curious. What did she teach? She replied, "French, at the community college. I only give that one course on Tuesday evenings."

"Why do you do that?" he asked.

"Just in case," she said. "Just in case I want to change careers one of these days."

"You want to become a French teacher?"

"Professor," she corrected him. "Yes, or a philosophy professor. By the way this is the most I've ever heard you talk."

Soon, she realized that his breathing had become steady, that he had fallen asleep. For a while, she kept her eyes open in the darkness, as if this effort could enhance her sense of hearing. The refrigerator changed its rhythm every so often. Little noises were always followed by dead silence. Maybe a drop of water fell in the sink and shattered into pieces.

It must have been three a.m. when she awoke. He wasn't there. The kitchen lights were on. She got up, walked toward the light. "Mateo?" she called.

He wasn't in the kitchen. The light in the little room with the stripped bed was on too, but he wasn't in there either. She even looked under the bed. Then she peered into the bathroom and saw him with his head halfway in the toilet, vomiting. She startled him.

"Please leave me alone," he gasped.

"Can I get you something?"

"No. Get out. I have to go to the bathroom. Close the door behind you."

She did as she was told and waited five minutes or so before she knocked on the door and said, "Mateo, are you okay?"

"Go away! Leave me in peace!"

"Okay. I'll wait for you in the living room. But please call me if you need help."

When he returned to the living room his uneasiness was overwhelming. Several times he repeated, "I hurt." He wept loudly, spasmodically. Whenever she tried to come near him, he'd stop and look at her as if he were ready to hit her if she got any closer. "I don't want your comforting," he hissed. "Stay away from me or I'll hurt you."

So she approached him and uttered, "Go ahead. Hurt me."

He stared at her with anger, looked away, and shook his head.

After a while he managed to calm down, somewhat. Staring her in the eye, he said, "You could be just the person I need." The statement surprised her. "Are you coming tomorrow or the day after?" This surprised her even more. She nodded. So he said, "If my car is here and I don't answer the door, that means I'm dead. You'd be doing my ego a great favor if you made a phone call, that way my body won't rot in here."

She just stood there with her arms crossed in front of her, staring at him, not quite knowing what to say or think.

He sighed, as if another problem had just crossed his mind. "What am I going to do with all the stuff upstairs? There are clothes, glasses, shoes, you name it!"

"Listen, I have an idea," Melody said. "I'll come Friday on my day off. Maybe you can accompany me to the pool in the morning, it'll do you good, and then we'll get some boxes, and I'll put your sister's stuff in there. We'll begin with her stuff."

All of a sudden he was hostile. "Why are you doing this?"

"I thought I was wretched until I met you."