

Alma

Back then, all we wanted was the simplest things: to eat good food, to sleep at night, to smile, to laugh, to be well. We felt it was our right, as much as it was anyone's, to have those things. Of course, when I think about it now, I see that I was naïve. I was blinded by the swell of hope and the promise of possibility. I assumed that everything that would go wrong in our lives already had.

THIRTY HOURS AFTER crossing the border, we arrived, the three of us in the backseat of a red pickup truck that smelled of cigarette smoke and gasoline.

"Wake up," I whispered, nudging Maribel as the driver turned into a parking lot.

"Hmmm?"

"We're here, hija."

"Where?" Maribel asked.

"Delaware."

She blinked at me in the dark.

Arturo was sitting on the other side of us. "Is she okay?" he asked.

"Don't worry," I said. "She's fine."

It was just after sunset and darkness bled in from the outer reaches of the sky. A few minutes earlier, we'd been on a busy road, driving through four-way intersections, past strip malls and

fast-food restaurants, but as we neared the apartment building, all of that had given way. The last thing I saw before we turned onto the long gravel lane that led to the parking lot was an abandoned auto body shop, its hand-painted sign on the ground, propped up against the gray stucco facade.

The driver parked the truck and lit another cigarette. He'd been smoking the whole trip. It gave him something to do with his mouth, I guess, since he'd made it clear from the moment he picked us up in Laredo that he wasn't interested in conversation.

Arturo climbed out first, straightened his cowboy hat, and surveyed the building. Two stories, made of cinder blocks and cement, an outdoor walkway that ran the length of the second floor with metal staircases at either end, pieces of broken Styrofoam in the grass, a chain-link fence along the perimeter of the lot, cracks in the asphalt. I had expected it to be nicer. Something with white shutters and red bricks, something with manicured shrubs and flower boxes in the windows. The way American houses looked in movies. This was the only option Arturo's new job had given us, though, and I told myself we were lucky to have it.

Silently, in the dim and unfamiliar air, we unloaded our things: plastic trash bags packed with clothes and sheets and towels; cardboard boxes filled with dishes wrapped in newspaper; a cooler crammed with bars of soap, bottles of water, cooking oil, and shampoo. During the drive we had passed a television set on the curb, and when he saw it, the driver braked hard and backed up. "You want it?" he asked us. Arturo and I looked at each other in confusion. "The television?" Arturo asked. The driver said, "You want it, take it." Arturo said, "It's not stealing?" The driver snorted. "People throw away everything in the United

States. Even things that are still perfectly good.” Later, when he stopped again and pointed to a discarded kitchen table, and later again at a mattress propped up like a sliding board against someone’s mailbox, we understood what to do and loaded them into the truck.

After we carried everything up the rusted metal staircase to our apartment, after we found the key the landlord had left for us, taped to the threshold of the door, Arturo went back down to pay the driver. He gave him half the money we had. Gone. Just like that. The driver put the bills in his pocket and flicked his cigarette out the window. “Good luck,” I heard him say before he drove off.

INSIDE THE APARTMENT, Arturo flipped the light switch on the wall and a bare bulb in the ceiling flashed on. The linoleum floors were dingy and worn. Every wall was painted a dark mustard yellow. There were two windows—a large one at the front and a smaller one at the back in the only bedroom—both covered by plastic sheets held in place with tape, the wood casings warped and splintered. Across the hall from the bedroom was a bathroom with a baby blue sink, a toilet ringed with rust, and an upright shower stall with neither a door nor a curtain. At first glance, the kitchen was better—it was bigger, at least—though the stove burners were wrapped in aluminum foil and bedsheets had been stapled over the lower cabinets in place of doors. An old refrigerator stood in the corner, its doors wide open. Arturo walked over to it and poked his head inside.

“Is this what smells?” he asked. “¡Huácala!”

The whole place reeked of mildew and, faintly, of fish.

“I’ll clean it in the morning,” I said, as Arturo closed the doors.

I glanced at Maribel standing next to me. She was expressionless, as usual, clutching her notebook to her chest. What did she make of all this? I wondered. Did she understand where we were?

We didn't have the energy to unpack or brush our teeth or even to change our clothes, so after we looked around we slapped our newly acquired mattress on the floor in the bedroom, crawled on top of it, and closed our eyes.

For nearly an hour, maybe more, I lay there listening to the soft chorus of Maribel's and Arturo's long, even breaths. In and out. In and out. The surge of possibility. The tug of doubt. Had we done the right thing, coming here? Of course, I knew the answer. We had done what we had to do. We had done what the doctors told us. I stacked my hands on top of my stomach and told myself to breathe. I relaxed the muscles in my face, slackened my jaw. But we were so far from anything familiar. Everything here—the sour air, the muffled noises, the depth of the darkness—was different. We had bundled up our old life and left it behind, and then hurtled into a new one with only a few of our things, each other, and hope. Would that be enough? We'll be fine, I told myself. We'll be fine. I repeated it like a prayer until finally I fell asleep, too.

WE WOKE in the morning bewildered and disoriented, glancing at one another, darting our gaze from wall to wall. And then we remembered. Delaware. Over three thousand kilometers from our home in Pátzcuaro. Three thousand kilometers and a world away.

Maribel rubbed her eyes.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

She nodded.

"I'll make breakfast," I said.

"We don't have any food," Arturo mumbled. He was sitting bleary-eyed on the mattress, his elbows on his knees.

"We can get some," I said.

"Where?" he asked.

"Wherever they sell food."

But we had no idea where to go. We stepped out of the apartment into the bright sun and the damp early-morning air—Arturo wearing his hat, Maribel wearing the sunglasses that the doctor had suggested she use to help ease her headaches—and walked down the gravel drive that led to the main road. When we came to it, Arturo stopped and stroked his mustache, glancing in both directions.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I peered past him as a car sped by, making a soft whooshing sound. "Let's try this way," I said, pointing to the left for no reason.

Between the three of us, we knew only the most minimal English, words and phrases we had picked up from the tourists that traveled to Pátzcuaro and in the shops that catered to them, and we couldn't read the signs above the storefronts as we passed them, so we peered in every window along the way to see what was inside. For the next twenty minutes, flat glass fronts, one after another. A beauty supply store with racks of wigs in the window, a carpet store, a Laundromat, an electronics store, a currency exchange. And then, finally, on the corner of a busy intersection, we came to a gas station, which we knew better than to pass up.

We walked past the pumps, toward the front door. Outside, a

teenaged boy stood slouched against the wall, holding the nose of a skateboard. I could feel him watching us as we approached. He had on a loose black T-shirt and jeans that were frayed at the hems. Dark brown hair, bluntly cut, brushed forward past his hairline. An inky blue tattoo that snaked up the side of his neck from beneath the collar of his shirt.

I elbowed Arturo.

“What?” Arturo said.

I nodded toward the boy.

Arturo looked over. “It’s okay,” he said, but I could feel him pushing my back as we passed the boy, ushering Maribel and me into the gas station with a certain urgency.

Inside, we scanned the metal shelves for anything that we recognized. Arturo claimed at one point that he had found salsa, but when I picked up the jar and looked through the glass bottom, I laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“This isn’t salsa.”

“It says ‘salsa,’” he insisted, pointing to the word on the paper label.

“But look at it,” I said. “Does it look like salsa to you?”

“It’s American salsa.”

I held up the jar again, shook it a little.

“Maybe it’s good,” Arturo said.

“Do they think this is what we eat?” I asked.

He took the jar from me and put it in the basket. “Of course not. I told you. It’s American salsa.”

By the time we finished shopping, we had American salsa, eggs, a box of instant rice, a loaf of sliced bread, two cans of kidney beans, a carton of juice, and a package of hot dogs that Maribel claimed she wanted.

At the register, Arturo arranged everything on the counter and unfolded the money he'd been carrying in his pocket. Without saying a word, he handed the cashier a twenty-dollar bill. The cashier slid it into the drawer of the register and reached his open hand out to us. Arturo lifted the blue plastic shopping basket off the floor and turned it over to show that it was empty. The cashier said something and flexed his outstretched hand, so Arturo gave him the basket, but the cashier only dropped the basket behind the counter.

"What's wrong?" I asked Arturo.

"I don't know," he said. "I gave him the money, didn't I? Is there something else we're supposed to do?"

People had lined up behind us, and they were craning their necks now to see what was going on.

"Should we give him more?" I asked.

"More? I gave him twenty dollars already. We're only getting a few things."

Someone in line shouted impatiently. Arturo turned to look, but didn't say anything. What must we look like to people here? I wondered. Speaking Spanish, wearing the same rumpled clothes we'd been in for days.

"Mami?" Maribel said.

"It's okay," I told her. "We're just trying to pay."

"I'm hungry."

"We're getting you food."

"Where?"

"Here."

"But we have food in México."

The woman behind me in line, her sunglasses on top of her blond hair, tapped me on the shoulder and asked something. I nodded at her and smiled.

“Just give him more money,” I said to Arturo.

Someone in line shouted again.

“Mami?” Maribel said.

“I’m going to take her outside,” I told Arturo. “It’s too much commotion for her.”

A bell tinkled as Maribel and I walked out, and before the door even closed behind us, I saw the boy again, still slouched against the wall, holding his skateboard upright. He shifted just slightly at the sight of us, and I watched as his gaze turned to Maribel, looking her up and down, approvingly, coolly, with hooded eyes.

I was used to people looking at her. It had happened often in Pátzcuaro. Maribel had the kind of beauty that reduced people to simpletons. Once upon a time grown men would break into smiles as she walked past. The boys in her school would come to the house, shoving each other awkwardly when I opened the door, asking if she was home. Of course, that was before the accident. She looked the same now as she always had, but people knew—almost everyone in our town knew—that she had changed. They seemed to believe she was no longer worthy of their attention or maybe that it was wrong to look at her now, that there was something perverse about it, and they averted their gaze.

But this boy looked. He looked because he didn’t know. And the way he looked made me uncomfortable.

I pulled Maribel closer and edged us backwards.

The boy took a step toward us.

I moved back again, holding Maribel’s elbow. Where was Arturo? Wasn’t he done by now?

The boy picked up his skateboard, tucking it under his arm,

and started toward us, when suddenly—¡Gracias a Dios!—the gas station door opened. Arturo walked out, holding a plastic bag in one hand and shaking his head.

“Arturo!” I called.

“Twenty-two dollars!” he said when he saw me. “Can you believe that? Do you think they took advantage of us?”

But I didn’t care how much money we had spent. I lifted my chin enough so that Arturo caught my meaning and glanced behind him. The boy was still standing there, staring at the three of us now. Arturo turned back around slowly.

“Are you ready?” he asked Maribel and me a little too loudly, as if speaking at such a volume would scare the boy off.

I nodded, and Arturo walked over, shifting the bag as he clasped Maribel’s arm and put one hand on the small of my back.

“Just walk,” he whispered to me. “It’s fine.”

The three of us started toward the road, doubling back in the direction from which we had come, heading toward home.

Mayor

We heard they were from México.

“Definitely,” my mom said, staring at them through our front window as they moved in. “Look at how short they are.” She let the curtain fall back in place and walked to the kitchen, wiping her hands on the dish towel slung over her shoulder.

I looked, but all I saw was three people moving through the dark, carrying stuff from a pickup truck to unit 2D. They cut across the headlights of the truck a few times, and I made out their faces, but only long enough to see a mom, a dad, and a girl about my age.

“So?” my dad asked when I joined him and my mom at the dinner table.

“I couldn’t really see anything,” I said.

“Do they have a car?”

I shook my head. “The truck’s just dropping them off, I think.”

My dad sawed off a piece of chicken and stuffed it in his mouth. “Do they have a lot of things?” he asked.

“It didn’t seem like it.”

“Good,” my dad said. “Maybe they are like us, then.”

WE HEARD FROM Quisqueya Solís that their last name was Rivera.

“And they’re legal,” she reported to my mom over coffee one afternoon. “All of them have visas.”

“How do you know?” my mom asked.

“That’s what Nelia told me. She heard it from Fito. Apparently the mushroom farm is sponsoring them.”

“Of course,” my mom said.

I was in the living room, eavesdropping, even though I was supposed to be doing my geometry homework.

“Well,” my mom went on, clearing her throat, “it will be nice to have another family in the building. They’ll be a good addition.”

Quisqueya took a quick look at me before turning back to my mom and hunching over her coffee mug. “Except . . .,” she said.

My mom leaned forward. “What?”

Quisqueya said, “The girl . . .” She looked at me again.

My mom peered over Quisqueya’s shoulder. “Mayor, are you listening to us?”

I tried to act surprised. “Huh? Me?”

My mom knew me too well, though. She shook her head at Quisqueya to signal that whatever Quisqueya was going to say, she’d better save it if she didn’t want me to hear it.

“Bueno, we don’t need to talk about it, then,” Quisqueya said. “You’ll see for yourself eventually, I’m sure.”

My mom narrowed her eyes, but instead of pressing, she sat back in her chair and said loudly, “Well.” And then, “More coffee?”

WE HEARD A LOT of things, but who knew how much of it was true? It didn’t take long before the details about the Riveras began to seem far-fetched. They had tried to come into the United States once before but had been turned back. They were only staying for a few weeks. They were working undercover for the Department of Homeland Security. They were personal

friends with the governor. They were running a safe house for illegals. They had connections to a Mexican narco ring. They were loaded. They were poor. They were traveling with the circus.

I tuned it all out after a while. School had started two weeks earlier, and even though I had told myself that this would be the year the other kids stopped picking on me, the year that I actually fit in for once in my life, things already weren't going exactly as planned. During the first week of school, I was in the locker room, changing into my gym shorts, when Julius Olsen tucked his hands into his armpits and started flapping his arms like wings. "Bwwaak!" he said, looking at me. I ignored him and cinched the drawstring on my shorts. Actually, they were my older brother Enrique's shorts that had been handed down to me, but I wore them because I thought that maybe they would make me seem cooler than I was, like maybe some of Enrique's popularity was trapped in the fibers and would rub off on me. He'd been a senior the year before, when I was a freshman, and every single person in the school had adored him. Soccer stud. Girlfriends by the dozen. Homecoming king. So opposite of me that when I tried to earn points with Shandie Lewis, who I would have given just about anything to hook up with, by telling her that I was Enrique Toro's brother, she said that was a really stupid thing to lie about.

"Bwwaaaak!" Julius said louder, jutting his neck toward me.

I balled up my jeans and shoved them into my locker.

Garrett Miller, who had basically made picking on me last year his special project, pointed at me, laughed, and said, "Fuck-ing chicken legs." He flung his boot at my chest.

Julius snorted.

I took a deep breath and shut my locker. I was used to this kind of abuse. Last year, whenever Enrique caught wind of it, he'd tell me to stand up for myself. "I know you don't want to fight," he said once. "But at least have the balls to tell them to fuck off." And in my head I did. In my head, I was Jason Bourne or Jack Bauer or James Bond or all three of them combined. But beyond my head, the most I ever did was ignore it and walk away.

"How do you say 'chicken' in Spanish?" Garrett asked.

"Pollo," someone answered.

"Major Pollo," Garrett said.

The kids at my school loved changing my first name to English and then tacking insults onto it. Major Pan (short for Panamanian). Major Pan in the Ass. Major Cocksucker.

Julius started cracking up, and he squawked at me again. A few of the other guys in the locker room snickered.

I started walking—I just wanted to get out of there—but when I did, I bumped Garrett's boot, which was on the floor in front of me.

"Don't touch my shoe, Pollo," Garrett said.

"Kick it over here," Julius said.

"Fuck you," Garrett snapped. "Don't tell him to kick my shoe."

"Don't worry," Julius said. "He can't kick for shit. Haven't you seen him out there after school trying to play soccer? He's a total fuckup."

"Major fuckup," Garrett said, stepping in front of me to block any hope I had of leaving.

Garrett was thin, but he was tall. He wore a green army coat every single day, no matter what the weather was, and had a tattoo of an eagle on his neck. The year before, he'd spent a

few months in juvenile detention at Ferris because he beat up Angelo Puente so bad that by the end of it, Angelo had two broken arms and blood pouring out of his nose. There was no way I was going to mess with him.

But when the bell rang and the other kids started filing out into the gym, Garrett still didn't budge. The locker room was in the school basement and it was so quiet right then that I could hear water coursing through the pipes. There wasn't anywhere for me to go. Garrett took a step closer. I didn't know what he was going to do. And then Mr. Samuels, the gym teacher, poked his head into the room.

"You boys are supposed to be out in the gym," he said.

Garrett didn't move. Neither did I.

"Now!" he barked.

So that was one thing. The other thing, as Julius had pointed out, was soccer. The only reason I'd gone out for the team in the first place was because my dad had forced me into it. For him, the logic went something like: I was Latino and male and not a cripple, therefore I should play soccer. Soccer was for Latinos, basketball for blacks, and the whites could keep their tennis and golf as far as he was concerned. He'd applied the same reasoning to my brother, too, except that in Enrique's case, it had actually worked out. Enrique had been the first player in the history of our school to make varsity as a freshman, and when he got a full-ride soccer scholarship to Maryland, it was like my dad had been vindicated. "See?" he'd said, waving around the offer letter when it came in the mail. "You were meant to do this! The next Pelé! And this one," he'd said, pointing at me, "the next Maradona!"

Enrique might have been the next Pelé, but I wasn't even in

the same galaxy as Maradona. Two weeks into practice, I had bruised shins, a scabby knee, and a scraped elbow. Coach even pulled me aside once to ask whether I was wearing the right size cleats. I told him they were size seven, which was my size, and he patted my shoulder and said, "Okay, then. Maybe you should just sit it out for a while," and directed me to the sidelines.

In the past few days, a flock of girls had started coming to our practices, sitting in the empty stands and pointing at us while they texted and talked. Word got around that they were new freshmen. They didn't look like any freshmen I knew, in their skimpy tank tops and lacy black bras they wore underneath, but what I did know was that our team got a hell of a lot better after those girls showed up. Everyone was running faster and kicking harder than before. I felt like a loser, hanging around the sidelines all the time. Whenever the girls broke out in laughter, I was sure they were laughing at me. One day, I asked Coach if I could go back in, even if just for a few drills. When he looked ambivalent, I lied and said, "I've been practicing with my dad at home. Even he thinks I'm getting better." Coach worked his jaw from side to side like he was thinking about it. "Please?" I said. Finally he gave in. "Okay. Let's see what you got."

We set up a star drill where guys spread out into a circle and dribbled the ball a few paces into the middle before passing to a teammate who took the ball and repeated the sequence. Each time I ran through and got back in line, I looked up at the girls in the stands, who weren't laughing anymore, just watching. Maybe I got overconfident. Maybe there was a divot in the grass. The next time I ran into the middle to get the ball, my ankle turned. Ethan Weisberg was stepping toward me, waiting for me to pass to him. I was so eager to get the dribble going again that when

I went for the ball with my other foot, I rolled my cleat up over it instead. The ball was still spinning, and I stumbled again just as Ethan, impatient and frustrated, finally came at me and tried to spear his foot in to swipe the ball out for himself. When he did, I fell. His leg caught under mine. And before either of us knew it, I had taken him down, both of us landing on top of each other in the middle of the field. “What the fuck, Mayor!” Ethan yelled. My hip throbbed. Coach blew his whistle and jogged in to untangle us. The girls erupted in laughter.

Rafael Toro

I was born in 1967 in a town called Los Santos in a little country by the name of Panamá. I was an only child. My father moved us to Panamá City when I was five because he had political ambitions. He read the newspaper every day to keep himself informed. He had a small transistor radio that he listened to in the morning while he was in the shower. My father used to walk around the house in his socks and make speeches about everything. He made speeches about the dishes stacked in the sink or about Gerald Ford or about the raspado vendor who'd gotten in his way. He had a temper, too. He broke our teacups and one time he broke the television set when he threw a vase through the screen. Well, it broke the vase, too, but I was ten and I only cared that he had broken the television set. I remember one time he got so furious that he picked up a ham my mother had prepared for dinner and heaved it into the front yard. My mother ran out to retrieve it and when she brought it back inside, she was crying and picking pebbles and dirt off the seared skin. My cousins were over that night and I remember them all laughing at her. I thought that was how a man behaved, so when I got upset, even as a young boy, I would throw things or kick the wall. I had a terrible temper. After my father died, when I was thirteen, it only got worse. Because then I really had something to be angry about. I missed him after he was gone. My mother must have felt the same way, because in the years following his

death she often got sick. She went to doctors but they never knew what it was. She was depressed and tired. There were days she didn't get out of bed. I don't think she could function without my father. Then one morning I went to wake her and she didn't move. I remember her arm was cold when I shook it.

I spent a long time after that feeling like I didn't care about anything. The house went to the bank, and I lived with various friends for a few months at a time, sleeping on their couches or more often on the floor. I stopped going to school. I started drinking during the day. I got into fights at the bar or with guys on the street. I washed people's cars to earn enough money to get by.

My wife, Celia, saved my life. Who knows what would have become of me if I hadn't met her? I was playing a pickup baseball game with some friends on a beach by Casco Viejo. That beach is filthy now, but back then people used to go swimming there and sunbathe on the sand.

I was terrible at baseball. I was always trying to persuade the other guys to play soccer instead, but baseball was the big sport then, and one of the guys would bring cold beers in a cooler to the pickup games, so I used to go for that.

Celia was walking by with her girlfriends—they had on their bathing suits and the kind of platform sandals that were popular—and they stopped to watch the game for a few minutes, all of them laughing like nervous birds. I think one of them knew one of the guys. Celia didn't stand out to me right away. But after the game, she was still there with one of her friends—everyone else had left by then—and I remember she touched my shoulder. I must have said something funny, but I don't know what, and if you ask her, she'll claim I've never said a funny thing

in my life. But she laughed and laid her hand on my shoulder, and I thought to myself, Who is this girl?

I was eighteen then. We started spending time together. I was still sleeping at friends' apartments with no place of my own, so Celia and I sat on park benches and drank bottles of beer or walked down Avenida Central or sat on the rocks by the bay, listening to the water slap below us. Her favorite was always that small Casco Viejo beach where we met. She could sit for hours with her toes in the sand, letting the sea foam come up to her ankles. I never saw her happier than when we would go there together.

She wasn't very demanding, Celia. She didn't care that I couldn't give her a lot of things. But *I* cared. Eventually I got a job at a restaurant, just so I could have enough money to buy her gifts and take her out once in a while to a movie. That's what the man is supposed to do. She was in university, studying to become a secretary, but I didn't want us to have to rely on the money she would be making one day. I wanted to be able to take care of her myself. And, I guess, all of a sudden I wanted to be able to take care of me.

I got my life straight after that. Instead of spending my paychecks on rum and beer like before, I saved enough to buy Celia a gold ring from Reprosa, and I asked her to marry me.

We got married in Iglesia del Carmen in front of about twelve guests. Her sister, Gloria, her parents, a few of our friends. One year later, we had our son Enrique. Then Mayor.

Both Celia and I miss certain things about Panamá. It was our home for so many years. It's hard to let go of that, even when you have a good reason for leaving. How can I describe what it was like during the invasion? We slept in a city bus one night

because the bus was barricaded and when we and all the other passengers tried to get off, men from the Dignity Battalions were standing outside the door with guns pointed at us, telling us not to move. Celia was holding Enrique in her arms, pleading with them because we didn't have any food for him. And in the morning, when they were gone, we walked home listening to gunfire in the distance. No one was outside except people who were fighting. Well, and a few people who were looting. But most of the stores were closed and the owners had pulled the metal gates down over the front windows and doors, padlocking them shut. We went three weeks without leaving the house. We were eating toothpaste by the end of it. There was static on the television. We didn't know what was going to happen. Then one day we heard from a neighbor that Noriega was gone, and suddenly there were voices in the streets again. Everyone was wandering around, looking up at the sky, knocking on each other's doors, sharing stories about what it had been like, how scared we had been, the parts of the city that had been destroyed. But the stories were nothing compared to what we saw when we went out. El Chorrillo. San Miguelito. I didn't even know how to comprehend it. Burnt-out cars and the rubble of buildings. Broken glass and charred palm trees along the sides of the roads. It looked like a different place. It was just destruction and more destruction. I remember Celia burst into tears the first time she saw it all.

We tried to give it time, but three years later we made the decision to leave. We never felt safe there again. We felt as if our home had been stolen from us. And part of me felt embarrassed, I think, that my country hadn't been strong enough to resist what had happened to it. Maybe the way to say it is that I felt betrayed.

We're Americans now. I'm a line cook at a diner, and I make enough to provide for my family. Celia and I feel gratified when we see Enrique and Mayor doing well here. Maybe they wouldn't have done so well in Panamá. Maybe they wouldn't have had the same opportunities. So that makes coming here worth it. We're citizens, and if someone asks me where my home is, I say los Estados Unidos. I say it proudly.

Of course, we still miss Panamá. Celia is desperate to go back and visit. But I worry what it would be like after all this time. We thought it was unrecognizable when we left, but I have a feeling it would be even more unrecognizable now. Sometimes I think I would rather just remember it in my head, all those streets and places I loved. The way it smelled of car exhaust and sweet fruit. The thickness of the heat. The sound of dogs barking in alleyways. That's the Panamá I want to hold on to. Because a place can do many things against you, and if it's your home or if it was your home at one time, you still love it. That's how it works.