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The Educación of Julia

by Juliana Barnet

Chapter 7.

THE LOST CITY

A burly man stood waiting for us to descend the steep embankment by the highway. The shacks of the squatters settlement stretched behind him on an immense barren tract, sunlight flashing off bits of sheet metal amid the tarpaper, cardboard, plywood, and other flotsom they were made of.

"*Bienvenidas, señoritas,*" he said, welcoming us with a grave nod. "I am Braulio Fernández, coordinator of our Cooperative, *Kilometro Trece y Medio.*" His voice resonated above the noise of the traffic.

"*Buenos días,*" América replied politely. "My name is América." He extended a hand to her. "This is Rosario," she went on, nodding toward our fellow sociology student, whose dark hair was already plastered to her forehead as she stood sweating in the harsh sun. "And this is Julia," América added, touching my arm.

Braulio Fernández shook our hands. "You are the university students working in the government study?"

América nodded. "Jaqueline, our supervisor, told you we'd be coming to administer the survey?"

“Yes, she said the study will determine if we are worthy to receive credit so we can build better houses.” Braulio Fernández spoke politely, but I detected a wisp of irony in his deep voice. “Thank you for coming out to our *ciudad perdida, señoritas*.” He gestured behind him, palm open. “Please come this way.”

We followed him down a wide dirt path flanked with tiny ramshackle dwellings. Squinting against the glare, América and Rosario gazed around curiously. Both my classmates would be considered poor in the United States, I knew, as I had visited the modest dwellings of both friends. But I was certain that this squatters’ slum was poverty beyond anything they had experienced. For me, transplanted middle class North American, it was nearly impossible to imagine living here.

We threaded our way among the hovels, closely packed as old decks of cards, desperately fending off rain with rumpled plastic, held down by rocks and old tires; walls of plywood, splintered wood and tarred sheets of roofing supplemented here and there with upended rusty signs sporting the familiar logos of Coca Cola and Orange Crush.

A few old people sat motionless in front of the shacks, eyes following us as we passed. It occurred to me to smile at one of them. Somewhat to my surprise, she smiled back.

Barefoot children darted out of from the jumble of shacks and trailed after us, giggling, pushing each other forward, as if approaching us were a dare.

“Sáquense!” Braulio told them, without anger. They retreated a few yards, but kept tagging along. The little girls’ dusty hair was braided with tattered ribbons, their tattered dresses faded to colorlessness. The little boys’ knees and other body parts showed through rents in their tee shirts and pants. I’d seen children like these in front of metro stations and bus stops, selling packets of Chiclets. So this is where they live, I thought.

Upon the recommendation of América’s mother, who worked in a government housing office, América, Rosario, and I had been hired (for a pittance) to read books on peasant migration and take notes on index cards, to provide background information for staff working on a housing project attempting to address the problem of thousands of indigenous peasants whose poverty had forced them to come to Mexico City looking for ways to survive. The makeshift settlements they put up had multiplied around the city limits and were causing the government embarrassment and

other annoyances. Reader though I was, I had found the books been mind-numbing, but today's visit to the "subjects," as our boss Jacqueline called them, promised to be much more interesting.

The settlers of this shanty town were, like so many others, poor farmers who had left their arid lands in the Mixteca mountains of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. I didn't know the precise cause of these folks' uprooting, but I knew from my reading that large landowners and mining companies tended to grab lands of campesinos, usually with the complicity of local officials. Remembering how they often had small mercenary armies to "persuade" peasants off their lands, I wondered if such things had driven the inhabitants of this settlement here. Who would come here, I mused, trailing Braulio and my fellow students down the dusty path between the hovels, unless they had no choice?

"Do they have places like this in the United States?" Rosario asked me in a low voice, after stopping to negotiate a tumble of dried mud in the path.

"I don't think so," I said, though I didn't really know. "It does remind me a bit of the tent city Martin Luther King and the Poor People's Campaign set up in Washington, D.C., when I was a kid. Resurrection City, they called it. But that was a demonstration," I added.

She furrowed her brow as we passed a dwelling so patched together I couldn't detect an entrance. "So's this," she said. "I'd say it's a poor people's campaign for housing. But it's hard to see how they can qualify for loans." The purpose of our study was to determine whether residents could pay back loans the government was thinking about granting them so they could build better houses. As I looked around, it seemed like a fantasy.

"Why is this community called *Kilómetro Trece y Medio*?" I heard América ask Braulio, a few steps ahead of us.

"Because we're thirteen and a half kilometers from the city, *señorita*," he explained matter-of-factly. "Back there"--he pointed down the highway towards Mexico City-- "is Kilómetro Trece." His grimace clearly indicated that these utilitarian names had been bestowed on them by bureaucrats.

A few steps further, Braulio stopped and pointed to a gray pipe that snaked along the trampled yellow-gray earth to some hidden source. "Here is our community water faucet," Braulio

said, turning to include Rosario and me as we stepped up and joined them. Rosario leaned toward me. "I bet one of the squatters is a plumber who tapped the municipal water supply," she whispered. She cocked her head toward the shacks. "They're also helping themselves to electricity." Thin wires, patched with black electrical tape, swung from house to house.

I nodded, gazing at them, feeling the printed surveys I was clutching wilt under my sweaty fingers.

We neared a wall of low cliffs, looming behind the settlement like uneven yellow teeth. Sunlight blazed off white streaks running up the rock. "That's where they got the stones for building the road," said Braulio, following our gaze. "Those lines running along them are dynamite trails."

Our ragtag followers, reveling in the greater space as the shacks thinned out by the cliff, chased each other among the scrubby bushes and jumbled rocks, shouting and laughing.

Braulio halted at a shack with red plastic rooster on a pole outside a low wooden door. Following him inside was like entering a cave.

"*Siéntense, por favor*," Braulio's voice invited us. In the dimness I made out a bench fastened to the wall. At his gesture of invitation the three of us squeezed onto it. Braulio grasped a lightbulb hanging from a wire and gave it a half turn. In the feeble light he opened a cupboard and pulled out a spiral notebook. "This is the members list," he explained. Opening the notebook he tore off a sheet and handed it to América. "These are the names of people you can try to interview. Like me, none is working right now, so they'll probably be home." He smiled ruefully and looked down at his large hands.

I wished I could ask him how they had come to take over this particular land, how they formed the cooperative, what it felt like to live in a "lost city." But that wasn't part of the study.

América tore the list into three parts, handed a scrap to each of us, and we split up to do our interviews.

My first was with a couple who had come from Oaxaca two years before, just a few shacks down the path from Braulio's dwelling. Miguel Juárez, a carpenter with a lean, angular face, did not invite me in but began talking to me eagerly as we stood outside his door, which he had obviously

made himself. He explained how until a few weeks ago he'd worked on a hotel renovation downtown. His large dark eyes shining, he described the fine cabinets and closets he'd helped install. "They didn't skimp on the materials, *señorita*, it was all luxury."

But the same didn't go for the workers, evidently. When the general contractor fired Miguel's boss over a budget dispute, Miguel said, shaking his head, all his employees lost their jobs--and their last week's pay.

"It was a big disappointment," Miguel sighed. "For once I'd been doing real carpentry, not just day labor building concrete forms--that's ugly work. The boss apologized to us, but what could he do?"

I thought to myself, he could have paid your last week's wages; but I didn't say it. Instead, I asked if he was on unemployment.

He looked puzzled.

"Unemployment insurance," I enunciated. "*Seguro de desempleo*."

He smiled at me. "There is no unemployment insurance in Mexico. If you're out of a job, you're out of luck." He glanced down the dirt path fifty yards or so to where four or five men in dusty shirts were sitting on large stones, playing cards. One reached down and picked up a liter bottle of beer, took a swig, and placed it in his neighbor's outstretched hand. "If you don't have a family to help you, you have to scratch yourself with your own fingernails." I kept my eyes on the men, feeling ignorant and overprivileged.

Miguel's wife Angela emerged from the low doorway. She was barely five feet tall, with a round face, black braids threaded with faded green ribbons, and a ruffled apron over a flowered nylon dress. Her feet were thrust into thin red plastic shoes the size of a child's. Her bright smile and outstretched hand made me feel better.

Now that both of them were there, I told them, we could begin the formal interview. I looked toward the door Angela had just come out of, but instead they led me behind their dwelling. A circle of stones with a three legged brazier covered with a blackened sheet of metal stood in the center, over shallow depression in the dirt, filled with ashes. As we settled ourselves on wooden benches, I noticed an anxious look pass between Angela and Miguel, reminding me that they had

considerably more reason to feel nervous than I did.

I glanced down at the long list of questions we'd been given. "How many children do you have?"

"None, yet," said Angela with a little sidelong smile at her husband.

I was then supposed to ask how many children they expected to have, and if they practiced family planning. These questions had seemed routine when I read over them in Jaqueline's office, but here, facing these people, I found I couldn't ask them. Why should they have to reveal every detail of their lives just to get help they obviously needed? I stared down at my papers, getting my thoughts together. When I finally looked up, they both smiled at me with unhurried tolerance.

Feeling an unexpected prick of tears, I smiled apologetically at them. Skipping the remaining questions on children and birth control, I embarked on the section about their possessions--did they have a washing machine, a car, a refrigerator?

They had a two-burner kerosine stove, they informed me, but preferred to cook outside on the wood-burning brazier. "More like home," said Miguel. Angela nodded wistfully. "We gather kindling in the ravine beside the mine," he explained, gesturing over his shoulder.

I gazed at the cliffs behind him. They no longer seemed so bleak as they leaned protectively over the couple.

I scanned my questionnaire. "Do you have a television?"

They smiled. "Don't bother asking about other appliances," said Miguel. "The stove and an old blender are the only ones we have. We watch TV at the neighbors'." He gestured toward a nearby shack sporting an antenna on its jumbled roof.

"And the blender doesn't even have a top," added Angela with a laugh.

At the end of the questionnaire I got to ask them what improvements they wanted in their community. Angela immediately said "a play area," with such a bright expression that I pictured her flying through the air on a swing. Her long braids and small size did make her seem childlike, but I suddenly wondered if the look they had exchanged when I asked about children had meant she was pregnant, but that they didn't feel like telling a stranger.

Miguel said, "We need *una clínica*."

“*Ay, sí,*” agreed Angela, instantly snuffing her high spirits. “It’s really terrible trying to get to a doctor out here. The kids all suffer from hookworm, dysentery. *Es terrible,*” she repeated.

Though it wasn’t in the protocol, I asked if they had any questions themselves. Angela and Miguel shared a look, eyebrows raised. “How long will this take?” Angela asked me.

“I don’t know,” I replied, “but I’ll try to find out.”

I asked if I could sit and write up my notes. “Of course, *senorita* Julia,” said Angela. “But excuse me. I have to go inside and put the beans on.” Miguel needed to take the bus downtown to see about a possible job. When I’d asked if they had a telephone, he’d replied, “Ha! There’s not a phone line in this whole *ciudad perdida*. You have to hike down the highway to the pay phone by the footbridge.”

When I was done writing my notes I stuck my head in the doorway--the only view I’d had of the shack’s dim, meager interior--and asked Angela if she could direct me to the second person on my list, someone named Concepción González. Angela said she would, but when she stepped back outside, she hesitated, telling me I should be prepared.

“For what?” I asked.

She shook her head, but only said, “Well, I won’t say. Chon might be in a good mood.” She led me to a hut not far from hers. A man of indeterminate age, with a weathered face, sat in a chair in front of an open door. He stood up when he noticed our approach, leaning forward, swaying on gangly legs.

“*Buenos días*, Chon,” Angela said. “This is the *señorita* from the government to interview you about the loan.”

“She can go to hell,” said Chon, and spat into the dirt not far from my feet.

I stood rooted to the spot.

“Chon, they’re trying to help us,” protested Angela.

“The fuck they are!” Chon’s gaze fell on me like a blow, and I took a step back. “You all are going to destroy what we’ve built here with our own sweat,” he shrieked. “We’ll be in debt to you for the rest of our lives and you’ll make us pay with blood!” He spat again. “*Hija de puta*, get out!”

Frozen, I glanced at Angela. She took my arm and pulled me back to her place. “I’m so

sorry,” she gasped. “I was afraid he might be like that. I don’t know why Braulio put him on the list.” She gave me a little squeeze. “Don’t pay any attention. He’s a drunk.”

“I guess he has a right to be mad.”

“But not to be nasty,” she insisted, obviously very distressed. Did she fear I might report Chon’s outburst?

“It’s okay.” I smiled down at her and her frown relaxed a bit. “Let’s see who else is on the list.” From my pocket I drew out my fragment of the list of potential interview subjects, which Braulio said he had divided according to those who lived more or less near one another. I passed it to Angela.

She didn’t reach for the paper, but shook her head with a pained expression. “You have to tell me who’s next.”

I realized she couldn’t read. I prayed that my shock hadn’t shown in my face. Poor Angela had already suffered enough because of me. Breathless from so much embarrassment, I managed to read out the next name.

“Oh, Maria Trujillo,” breathed Angela, and smiled. “*Qué bueno*. You’ll have a good interview with her. I’ll take you.”

I demurred, but she refused to let me go alone. “You’ll never find it,” she insisted. As we walked down the path, I realized she was right. Without a special marking like Braulio’s red rooster, there was very little means for a newcomer to tell one dwelling from another. I watched Angela’s narrow back as she walked confidently down the hard-baked path and turned onto a narrower trail beside a shallow canyon filled with stunted bushes and trash, which I could see extended down to the cliff wall.

We stopped at a house that seemed sturdier than the others, built of cinderblock with a low tarpaper roof. Angela shook my hand, and I thanked her for her kindness. “*Buenos dias*, Señora María,” Angela called into the hut, “I brought you a visitor.” With a wave, she started back up the path.

“*Adelante, señorita*,” called a deep female voice. The woman, Maria Trujillo, appeared at the door, smiling. She took my hand, drawing me into the dwelling and sat me in an old vinyl chair.

Maria was a small, plump woman with shiny black hair and lively eyes. Despite the heat she wore a neat, navy blue three-quarter sleeve dress, in which she appeared much fresher than I felt in my short-sleeved shirt.

Bunk beds, cupboards and a little stove in the back became visible as my eyes adjusted. It took me a moment to recognize the dark shape beside the stove as a small refrigerator. I made a mental note of this rare “major household appliance.”

I was grateful that Maria hadn’t turned on her lights. It was pleasant to sit in the cool dimness listening to her cheerful voice. She turned the survey questions into opportunities to talk about her life, especially her two boys. Oscar, the oldest, was in fifth grade, and was going to be an engineer. "He's very *inteligente*. See how he helped me build this *casita bonita*?" She ran her hand lovingly over the cinderblock wall.

"You built this house yourself?" I had never pictured a Mexican woman doing that.

"With these very hands." She held them out for both of us to admire.

"That's unusual for a woman," I ventured.

"*Es cierto*," she replied, "but my brother is a construction worker and he showed me how to mix mortar and use the trowel, and many other things besides. I may be a *vieja* but I'm strong!" Her face grew serious. "My sons and I built it last year. Our cardboard house was destroyed by the rains three years ago, just like many other neighbors' homes. The roof fell in, and everything was ruined, including the children's books." She appeared deeply pained at this memory. "My husband taunted me. 'You have nowhere to live,' he said, 'you'll have to take me back now.' *¡Pero no!* I would not take him back!" Her eyes flashed. "He used to beat me and the boys, that's why I threw him out! 'I will build a beautiful house without your help!' I told him. *¡Y aquí está!*" With a triumphant smile she swept her hand in an arc that encompassed the room.

I smiled back.

"Where did I get the money? You want to know that, I'm sure." She gave me an arch look. "Well, it was not easy, Julia, believe me. My boys and I stayed with my cousin's family in their shack in the next *ciudad perdida* down the road. Each morning at five o'clock I put a big pot of tamales in my sons' wagon and pulled it half a kilometer up to the footbridge by the bus stop, along

with my brazier and fuel. I steamed the tamales and sat at the bottom of the bridge until ten o'clock, sometimes noon, however long it took to sell all of them. Then I went to market to buy more cornmeal, *tomatillos* and other fixings for the next day's batch, then home to make them in a hurry; and afterwards fix dinner for the whole household. Every day for two years. But I made enough money to buy these bricks. And here is my house!" She seemed so proud of it that I asked whether she wanted a different house at all, even with a loan from the government.

"Oh, no," she answered, "not a different house, of course, not to tear this one down, nunca! But if I had a loan I would build a bedroom. And a bathroom! Then we would have una verdadera casa!"

She paused for a minute, as if reining in her enthusiasm. "But what we especially need is a preschool. And a clinic. And a playground. And a footbridge in front of our community--such a simple thing." She leaned toward me earnestly. "The children have to cross the highway to go to school, or walk half a kilometer in the wrong direction to the next footbridge. It is criminal. The mothers drill it into the children's heads to wait at school until they come get them. But what if a mother is delayed? What if a child forgets or a friend says, let's go get candy at the store across the road? Any little thing that children should be able to do without thinking is dangerous, maybe fatal. Two children and a man from these settlements have been killed on the highway since I came here. *Es un crimen.*"

We fell silent. The roar of motors seeped through her cinderblocks. I remembered crossing a wide street a few years earlier when I was out walking with my mother. Even though I was sixteen I burst into tears, overwhelmed by the rush of traffic. What it would be like, I thought, to face that every day. To picture your children braving it every day when you weren't there to keep them safe.

Putting the harrowing image out of my mind, I asked Maria if she had any questions for me. This was not in our survey protocol, but I had decided to make it part of my protocol.

Maria Trujillo narrowed her eyes. "Indeed, I do! Will they listen to us? Do they really want to help, or just to win some election?"

I wrote her questions down, though I guessed she did not have much expectation that they would be answered. Then, suppressing a sigh, I rose.

"No, no, no." She put her hand on my arm to sit me down again. "Please stay to lunch."

"*Muchas gracias*, Maria, but I need to meet my friends."

"I'm sure that whoever they are with will ask them to lunch." Her teeth gleamed in the dimness. It felt uncomfortable to take her food, but I realized I would hate it for someone to refuse an invitation of mine because they thought I was too poor, or too stupid to decide whether I could afford to be generous.

"We'll have *huevos a la mexicana*," she told me, getting up and beginning to bustle about the room, which was her kitchen as well as everything else.

I smiled at her announcement, like a chef offering Mexican cuisine to a visitor. Just because she sells tamales at the bus stop doesn't make her any less of a cook, I told myself.

She spooned cooked black beans in thick black liquid out of a round clay pot into a pan, then with a practiced hand diced onions, tomatoes and green chilies, tossing them in another frying pan. She lit the burners and stirred the food. Leaving it to bubble and sizzle she poured water into a pitcher from another clay urn, adding coarse brown sugar crystals from a plastic bag and using a fork to squeeze thin-skinned green limones. The sharp citrus smell mingled with the dusty odor of the concrete blocks.

Then Maria poured beaten eggs into the sauteeing vegetables and began heating tortillas on a round sheet of dark metal. The soft whoosh of the pouring sugar, the scrape of the wooden stirring spoon, the sputtering of eggs on the stove, filled the little room with pleasant sound, keeping the noise of the highway at bay.

It all smelled delicious. I decided not to worry about parasites in the drinking water.

"*Bueno*," said Maria, plumping herself down in the chair opposite me and dishing beans and eggs onto my plate. "Now, tell me, what brought a young North American woman like yourself to this lost city?" She placed the basket of tortillas by my plate and looked at me with bright curiosity, obviously considering it her turn to ask questions.

I was not so eager to talk as she had been. But I began anyway, starting with my family's stay in Mexico the year before, and how I'd come back to live in Mexico City.

"All on your own? That was very brave of you!" she exclaimed.

This was a novel thought. I must have looked skeptical, because she added, “Well, certainly! To come and live without your family in a different country where everyone speaks a language you weren’t born with. For that you need balls.” She laughed. “I mean ovaries.”

I laughed, too.

“You could say that I did that myself when I came here,” Maria said, “because my first language isn’t Spanish, either. It’s *mixe*.” At my puzzled look she repeated the name. “The language of my people. Well, I’m only half, on my mother’s side. But I lived in her village. It’s the side I’m most proud of.”

That explained the lilt I’d noticed in her voice.

“I almost got to be a school teacher,” Maria went on. “Our local school only went to third grade, but my family made sacrifices and sent me to live with a cousin in Guerrero so I could continue my studies. And what did I do? I fell in love with the custodian, and then got pregnant! Such a scandal! My family and the school were furious with me!

She gave me a look that was regretful but unrepentant. “They were right, of course--look where I ended up.” She smiled in ironic resignation. “Out of all that love and fuss I have only my beloved little Oscar and a lot of crazy ideas. I don’t even have Osvaldo, Oscar’s dad, who had to flee to escape jail.”

She fell silent, eyes distant, then sighed and focused back on me. “Well, that was a long time ago. I was only sixteen. They kicked me out of school, and I went to work as a *sirvienta* in a house with five children. Then Diego’s dad came along, swept me off my feet while I was sweeping the walk in front of the house. Maria rolled her eyes. First he made Diego for me, and then he made my life impossible.”

She shook her head, smiled, and pointed her fork at me. “The decisions you make when you’re young aren’t always the best.” Then she seemed to hear her own words and caught up my hand. “But I don’t mean that’s always true! Often they are very good decisions.”

I smiled, to reassure her that I hadn’t felt criticized.

“I’m still young, anyway, Julia.” Maria withdrew her hand and sat up very straight. “I can make a lot more good decisions.”

“Of course,” I said, and took a sip of my delicious lemonade.

“But you were telling me how you happened to be here. I’m such a talker.”

As I savored the eggs and vegetables, scooping them up with bits of folded tortilla, the way she did, her bright gaze and eager but gentle probing unknotted my shyness. I told her about my Mexican boyfriend Daniel and his family, about how I lived in a commune with a group of University of Mexico students and a rather fearsome professor, since our previous landlord, an old Spanish artist, had thrown us out of his apartment because I was too messy.

Maria smiled at that, encouraging me to open up further and admit that the artist also disliked that Daniel and I had smoked pot in the little room he’d rented us. “The only drugs he likes are tobacco and alcohol,” I told Maria. “In the commune, on the other hand, marihuana is very popular.” I giggled, picturing the horrified face of Jaqueline, my boss, if she were to overhear this conversation. I checked Maria’s expression to see if she disapproved.

She did raise her eyebrows a trifle, but nodded philosophically. “Yes, when you live in somebody else’s house they get to decide which vices are allowed and which aren’t.” She arose to take our empty plates to a plastic bucket, which I guessed she would later carry up to the water tap for washing. Sitting down again, she poured more lemonade. “So, how did you get involved in this government project to improve our *ciudad perdida*?” Again I detected a trace of irony, as I had in Braulio Fernández’s words.

“Well, first my classmates and I were hired to read sociology books for them.”

“Why?”

Her curt tone took me aback. “*Perdón?*”

“Why read books? What does that have to do with our getting a loan to build houses?”

“Well...” I began, but she interrupted.

“Can’t they see we need assistance? Why don’t they just come talk to us?”

“I’ve wondered that myself, Maria.”

“Don’t mistake me, I think books are very important. I want my sons to go to the university. It’s just maddening to me, because books won’t solve this situation. The real problem is they don’t want to listen to us, only come ask us stupid questions about how many refrigerators we have!” She

grasped my arm again, much harder. “Julia, they don’t see us as human beings! They’re disgusted by how we live, they think we’re stupid and dirty. Well, when you live on a piece of dirt with one water tap for a hundred families, you get dirty! They don’t want to work with us to solve problems-- they think we *are* the problem, because we are poor!”

Maria narrowed smoldering eyes, let go of my arm, and clenched her fists. “It makes me furious!” She half rose in her seat as though she couldn’t contain herself. For a second I feared that in her rage she might attack me.

She caught a glimpse of my face and drew an unsteady breath. Sinking back onto the bench, she sighed. “Well, Julia, now you know how I really feel about all this. I was a member of the Poor People’s Party. It was started by two rural school teachers in the state of Guerrero, to fight for the rights of poor people in the countryside. I learned about it when I was studying to be an elementary teacher at the Normal school. It was my beloved custodian who got me into it. He was very political and taught me a lot.” She smiled to herself; then set her lips in a grim line. “A couple of years ago President Echeverría destroyed the party and killed the leaders. I never heard what happened to Osvaldo.”

Silence fell. The highway sounded in my ears like roiling water.

Maria sighed and shook her head. “*Bueno*, Julia, I thank you for talking and listening and eating with me like a human being.” She smiled her warm smile at me, and I smiled back.

The afternoon sun beat down as I made my way back along the rocky path. América and Rosario were waiting by the walkway up to the road, looking tired, thoughtful, and pleased, much as I felt.

Stepping up the embankment, we halted at the edge of the highway, contemplating the swirling dust and the heat shimmering up from the black surface. A solid wall of traffic separated us from our bus stop, on the other side.

América, in the middle, reached for our hands. Clutching each other, we waited, crouched like soldiers about to cross a barrage of artillery. We watched for our break, darted glances at each other, drew breath, and ran.