

CHAPTER I

We slept in what had been the gymnasium. The floor was furnished with stripes and circles painted on it, for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball net were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the women's stalls. The girls, felt skirts as known from pictures, later in miniskirts, then pants, then in one evening, spiky, constructed from Danes, would have been huddled there, the music lingering, the palpable impact of unheard sound, style upon style, and a garland of flowers, a few waxy garlands made of tissue paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving wall of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a spray of light.

The noise died in the common hallway, and on occasion, something without a shape or name I remember that yearning, for something that was almost about to happen and was not. The hands that were raised in the air, the smell of the book, or a look, in the peaking light, in the common room, with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the city, and it was still in the city, in the thought, in the look, in the way, in the way that had been set up in rooms with open shutters, with the beds, with the flannel bed sets, like children's, and army issue blankets, and ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the ends of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Fannie both patrolled, they had electric rattles prodding us away from their beds.

No guns though, even they could not be trusted with them. Guns were for the guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren't allowed inside the building except when they had a message, and were not allowed out, except for one small, tiny, daily, twenty-two around the football field, which was enclosed now by a chain link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were quiet, for a while, but something else would happen, they would look at you, you could talk to them, something could be exchanged, we thought, we could talk, we could talk off, we still had our heads. That was our factory.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren't looking, and touch each other's hands across space. We learned to lip read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other's lips, but in this way, we were changing ourselves, from bed to bed.

Alma Lajune Dolores Meira June