

Arcelia

Before they knock down the door, I run. I'm wearing flip-flops, men's pajama bottoms, and a tank top with no bra. My sunglasses on the top of my head. I grab my baby and tuck her under my arm like a purse. She's one of the few things I own, and unlike everything else in my possession, I never lost or broke her.

I hear them enter the apartment—the front door cracks, their voices boom—but I'm gone before they catch me. Out the back window and down the alley before I know where I'm running to. Doctors always say I'm too skinny but you'll never catch me with my hips stuck in no window—even them small ones they put in basements—and I can still outrun almost any man, even in sandals and with a baby in my arm and a dope habit that keeps me shooting almost ten bags a day.

My baby's three now—not a baby anymore—and if I put her down she could run alongside me, but I hold her instead, to keep her close to my body, and to remind myself that I still have something to hold onto. Besides, what kind of mother lets her little girl run from the police? I don't know a lot of things, but I know that ain't right.

Me, I'm always running. So quick my feet don't seem to touch the ground. I hear the sound, though, the slap of my sandals on the pavement as I run down Manton Avenue in the rain. It sounds loud and quick like a machine gun. I am not a gun, but sometimes I feel like a bullet. Fast. Unstoppable. Deadly. I used to think I could outrun a bullet, when I was a

child and I still believed in things I couldn't see. Like the truth, love, and forgiveness. Today I believe in only the things I can feel: hunger, pain, my beating heart.

I don't remember most of my childhood. I got a few memories from when my mother was alive, but not as many as I should. Only a few are clear. The rest are faint and jumbled, like the lines of a long and complicated joke that ends without a punch line. Or that never ends.

I see flashes all the time. Real quick, like a movie preview. They jump into my head and jump out, quick as they came. I try to control them, but I can't. They're not mine. They come so often they don't belong to me. It's like I'm watching TV without the sound. Like I'm remembering somebody else's life. There's a kid in most of them—me, I guess—but I don't recognize her. I try not to look her in the eyes. There's a man with her, or sometimes a boy, but he is always someone she knows. He looks kind, but he is not kind. Sometimes he smiles at the girl, but she never smiles back. She is always trying to escape, or looking for a place to hide.

When the rain stops and darkness comes, I'm still running. My baby girl is asleep in my arms, her breath a whisper on my neck. The high gone, she's now too much to carry. My arms and legs burn. I cut through the parking lot behind Atlantic Mills, hoping to lose the cops before my legs give out. I been running my whole life—either to people or away from them—and I don't really know where to go anymore. All the streets look the same and I wonder if I'm lost. Not sure it matters, as long as I keep moving. All roads got to end somewhere.

I run up an alleyway where two men are working under the hood of an old Buick. The car looks familiar but they don't. My legs continue to move, purely on instinct. I hear music from inside the car, the radio playing a Spanish song about a bird that follows a balloon all the way to the sun. The old man whistles the tune, and the younger one sings so softly I can't even tell if he knows the words.

They don't stop to look up as I sprint past them, as if I'm so fast they can't see me.

As if I'm invisible.