Hibernate

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Eslami, Elizabeth.  
Hibernate.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2014.  
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/35395.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/35395
Camilo is talking to her about his mother.

“It’s big for her,” he says, balancing a paper plate on his hairy knees. “Summer Slam. Night of Champions. She’ll drag you by the ear to watch.”

Looking at Camilo’s knee is like staring at a scar, private, the skin so taut the bone shines lunar, so she looks away at Dr. Bob’s children who are quietly putting fistfuls of weeds down each other’s shirts. She didn’t wear a bra, and it feels like warm air is under her shirt, like little fingers are poking their way under her breasts, and she’s afraid of marks on her shirt and a little excited by this Camilo who’s talking to her, this Camilo with two loves, his mother and wrestling.

“It’s not just lucha libre, either. She watches all styles.”

“That’s funny,” she says. “Your mother.”

She has no idea what he’s talking about, but she suddenly likes him better than anyone else standing around. Just to get in the car and come here, she smoked a couple of blunts, and now she regrets it. There are people and animals everywhere. Hospital picnic at Dr. Dawn’s house—even the vets seem costumed, wearing layman shorts and bruises and puffy cat scratches. The air is sere with beef.

But Camilo. Camilo seems kind of blurry, or beautiful.

She has worked with him a while now but never really said any-
thing, in this place where you can go a full day only saying things like “We’ll give you a call when he’s ready” and “When was the last time you noticed blood?” She’s thinking she’s never seen Camilo in shorts before, just the scrubs with skating penguins, a puffy jacket over them, one of those cool nights when he came in with a Little Friends application and everyone joked that he was probably an illegal. Probably got some girl to write it for him.

“Your name,” she says, laughing, tugging the sticky shirt away. “I took two years of high school Spanish.” She’s getting breathy and stupid. “It means The Way.”

She can’t believe how stupid, how recklessly stupid she is, because now she’s thinking it doesn’t mean The Way, and she’s wishing she could take him somewhere in Dr. Dawn’s mansion and watch TV. That they could eat something decent out of her fridge.

“I’m not Spanish,” he says, even worse. He’s disgusted with her, she is sure. He stuffs a handful of Doritos in his mouth and crunches, looking at her, and she waits forever until he swallows. “You thought I was Spanish?”

She’s trying to remember what Yessica said about him. That he’s Filipino, that he’s Mexican. That he’s both. His eyes are a soft brown, as if filled in by magic marker and a cautious hand.

“My mother, she likes all styles. She’ll make you watch.”

Without realizing it, she’s smiling and leaning forward so the hairs on his knees touch the bottom of her flip flops. “Haha,” she keeps saying, “that’s funny,” even though he says everything quiet which means it sounds dead serious or like he’s telling a secret. He says Royal Rumble with a straight face.

Three weeks he’s been taking the trash out, dragging sticky bags against the backs of her legs. “You know you’re supposed to use the back door,” she tells him. “It doesn’t look right.”

Mostly he takes the trash out, though he’s also supposed to clean. Take the broom to the blinds. Sometimes he’ll help haul the big mutts up on the table, or lean his elbow across their necks to keep them from springing up and snapping at her when she jabs them for blood.

She smiled at him one time when he had Marie Phipps’s Great Pyrenees in a headlock and she had to take its temperature and their faces were so close she could smell pimento loaf on his breath, but he didn’t
say a thing and she assumed he didn’t like her or hated all of them for making a little more money, for how he had to clean up all their messes, all that fur like an explosion on the table.

Camilo is telling her he used to be a wrestler, only he says “wrassler.” Not the fake stuff, but the stuff right out of high school, fat guys who want to graduate to the fake stuff and get rich. Camilo tells her he had a son. She didn’t know that. She takes a breath and it burns inside her. “I didn’t know that,” she’s telling him now.

“There’s Paige,” Dr. Bob says, walking by, touching two fingers to the back of her neck. She knows he thinks he can do this. A month ago, in his car, she put her hand down his pants, her eyes closed the whole time. He didn’t blink. He never said anything, but she knew it was what he wanted. More than once he had insinuated he’d upgrade her from vet assistant to vet tech, which she knew she should be anyway since she could measure out the meds and find a vein and do anything that Vonni and Yessica could do. She knew she was more than muscle.

Whatever, she thinks. It was her decision to get in the car with him, and anyway. She had needed that money.

Dr. Bob has twin daughters who she didn’t know about before today, and they’re sitting in the grass, putting weeds down each other’s shirts. She thinks of them on the weekends, drawing with chalk in his two car driveway.

There is a wife, too. A wife standing near Dr. Dawn, eating a hamburger with a fork.

Camilo has tattoos on his legs, and usually the vets make him wear long pants. He leans forward, and the plate slides a little, and she knows his hairs under it are warm even though the chicken on the plate must be cold by now. He’s only eating the Doritos. There’s a little bit of orange dust on his mustache.

“What happened to your son?” she’s asking him. “You were talking about him like he’s dead.”

“Haha,” Camilo says. He’s looking a different way, his eyes sliding past her cheek, and then he opens his mouth and is shouting over her head to someone. “Ey! Use the can!”

The chicken slides and she pushes it back towards him with her finger, fast so he can’t see.

“No,” Camilo is saying to her. “He’s not dead. At least not to me.”
When they run out of things to say, she swings her feet out into the grass, away, as if she has intentions, some person to speak to or a desire for the watery vodka-y punch being ladled into plastic cups by Dr. Dawn. She’s walking then, towards the giant glass windows of the house. She doesn’t feel his presence dimming behind her—and she thought she might, really—only feels the coarse blades of dry grass curling over her flip flops to touch her toes. Already her feet are reddening. She’s allergic to nearly everything. Milk and grass and saliva.

Dr. Bob’s wife is standing next to someone’s dog, trying to hug its neck, but it has stiffened against her.

She wonders if she should speak to her. If Dr. Bob’s wife knows that her husband refers to his techs as “gals.”

“Paige,” someone says, shaking a plastic cup full of ice cubes. “Sit down, already.”

There are fingers around her wrist, and she falls into a folding chair, metal and sagging cloth. “Hey,” she says, seeing Vonni, her nose red and raw. “Have you been crying?”

“Sunburn,” Vonni says, looking down at her forearms.

Vonni’s in a dumb party dress, the dead skin flaking off her face and arms like shed fingernails. “You’re walking around like you’re lost.”

“I smoked too much before coming here,” she says. “It was Yessica’s fault.”

Vonni winces, lines forming over her nose. “Poor Yessica.”

“Poor Yessica,” she sighs. “Can I have some of that?”

And then she has Vonni’s drink tipped toward her face, the ice cubes clinking against her teeth.

“There’s nothing left,” Vonni is saying. “Dr. Dawn is fixing to get everybody wasted.”

Poor Yessica is their co-worker and currently Paige’s roommate. Everyone says “Poor Yessica” when her name is mentioned—which is written “Jessica”—because Yessica’s father died of a fast brain tumor. Yessica has been taking it hard for weeks, trying at Easter, a little halfheartedly, to climb into the tub with her father’s PC.

That night Paige had sat with Yessica on the floor of the bathroom, wrapping her in one of her old green dolphin towels, the giant computer tipped over like a great head on the bathmat.
Paige isn’t sure why she volunteered her one bedroom apartment. She knows when she leaves in the morning that Yessica has ample opportunity to commit suicide if she wants to. And Yessica never cries or talks about her dead father. Mostly they sit around in their Little Friends Hospital scrubs and smoke blunts and watch *The Daily Show*, smiling but not laughing, and Paige has to bite back a lot of what she could say. That Yessica’s father was lucky, going fast, that Yessica herself is lucky, losing him fast, if anyone is lucky.

“Saw you over there talking to Camilo,” Vonni is saying. There is no more ice in her cup. “There’s a freak for the record books.”

“Not really. He was eating the barbecue chicken.”

“Be careful with Camilo. I guess Yessica told you. He runs drugs in those tunnels straight to Nogales. You’ll be his mule.”

Vonni has yellow beads of sweat above her lip like pimples.

“Not really,” she says, getting up. “He was all about that chicken.”

Dr. Dawn promises her a ride home if she can wait. She walks around the yard three times. She drinks more of the watery vodka-y punch and hugs Mrs. Phipps, who has brought her Great Pyrenees.

“I drained his anal glands,” she says, a little too loud.

“You sure did,” Mrs. Phipps says. “Why don’t you get some bread, sweetheart?”

She excuses herself, finds one of Dr. Dawn’s upstairs bathrooms and pees for a full minute, rubbing her allergic toes into the thick, pearl carpet. Tomorrow, she’ll wake with hives crawling up her ankles. She’ll drink a Red Bull and get Yessica to spread Calamine on cotton balls and press them to her shins.

While she’s on the toilet, the door swings open and the stiff legged dog comes trotting in. One of Dr. Dawn’s, the one Dr. Bob’s wife tried to hug. It stares at her, discharge running black down one cheek, the pale tongue lolling over yellow teeth. The dog puts a muddy paw in her shorts, down around her ankles, and presses like a steamship against her. Shiba Inu. She’s sure she’s scraped it for fleas. She is suddenly peeing again in the empty echoing bathroom, the fluffy head under her chin.

That night with Yessica, the two of them on the floor, the computer on the bathmat running through its screensaver of galaxies, she had been think-
ing of her own father, whom she’d had to put in a home for people who
could do most things for themselves but couldn’t be trusted not to burn
their houses down.

He used to call her pussy cat, and he smelled like cigars when he’d
kiss her goodbye. What she remembered from being a kid was his slip-
pers, all worn down where his toes rubbed inside them. That he was aller-
gic too, to shellfish and bee stings. That he seemed a lot older than her
mother.

When Paige was six and one of her friends asked, she told her he was
twenty years older than her mother.

“He’s not that much older, Paige,” her mother had said, exasperated.
“Good God. Not even a decade. No more than eight.”

After the divorce, her mother did her best to teach her to hate him.
But Paige understood her mother. She forgave her. Her mother taught
herself hatred too. It made her a fighter, made her gnaw like a rat, even
though she never seemed to hold the weight. Diabetic, hypertensive,
hypoglycemic. Ate her way, eventually, gray faced, into supernovas in her
ribby chest.

Her father was good about it, being in the home. Good natured, they
said about him. He never asked how his daughter managed to pay for it.
A vet assistant. Maybe he thought it was some magic stroke of govern-
ment, health insurance for the only halfway poor. He was respectful.

“She’s had all kinds of episodes,” she told him on the phone, eating
the smoke. “She’s fine. These days you can walk away from stuff.”

The home smelled of band-aids, black women pushing him up to a
big table for canned breakfasts, syrupy peaches and stringy pears. After
dinner, someone rolled him back to his room and left him alone with the
television.

When she went to see him, he was sitting on a sleeper sofa, smoking
one of his cigars. Her stomach was growling and she ate a dry cookie
from a plate next to his ash tray.

“They let you smoke in here?”

“Well, I can use my hands still,” he said.

He asked her to sit and visit with him. And she left right then, chew-
ing on the dry cookie, walking down the squeaky hallway, into the smell
of band-aids, tread marks of wheelchairs scratched over the tiles. Hadn’t
been there five minutes. He had called her pussy cat when she was a kid.
If she had stayed, he would’ve done it again, would’ve kissed her on the mouth, smelling the same way all these years later. She would have cried. All the way back to the car, her stomach was growling.

Royal Rumble, she’s thinking. She follows the Shiba Inu out into the hallway. In one of Dr. Dawn’s closets she finds a towel, and she lifts her shirt, wipes the sweat from under her breasts, and shoves the towel between stacks of folded sheets.

Inside the mansion, the air conditioning is rising from vents in the floor, moving raw silk curtains. Her skin is goose pimpled. She wraps her arms around herself and warms her fingers inside her armpits.

Down the hall, she can hear the dog’s tags, the animal rolling with pleasure or itch, and when she looks inside, there is Camilo, on the bed. Of course. He claps his palms against the dog’s ribcage like a kettle drum. “Hola” he’s saying, again and again. “Hola, pooch.”

“We scraped him for fleas, no?” He is not looking at her.

“Yes, maybe,” she says, pushing her way in. “You finished your chicken?”

“I chunked it,” he says. “It was getting cold.”

She smiles. “I was hoping you could tell me about the Five Moves of Doom.”

She hadn’t told Yessica anything about her father in the home. Yessica never cried. Yessica’s father, she imagined, died pretty because he died fast. He would have had a shaved head, cold hands. She was thinking that as they sat on the bathmat and watched the stars on the computer.

She could see Yessica’s naked body under the dolphin towel, her skin looking like plastic.

Yessica was talking, her words trembling. She told her that she’d slept with Camilo. “Vonni slept with him. Outside Benchmark Cinema. Megan. And Beth at the desk.”

“Jesus,” she said. “Anyone else?”

“Pretty much,” Yessica said.

She figured that Yessica must have been pissed to find out where she fit in the order of things, because Yessica told her she knew for a fact that
Camilo ran drugs in tunnels to Nogales, and smuggled other things. Sold Tide in bulk and cosmetics out of the trunk of his car.

“I thought he was Filipino,” Paige said.

“Don’t be stupid,” Yessica said, pulling the towel tighter.

“I’m not,” she told her. “You look like a taquito, by the way.”

Paige is sitting on the bed next to him, but the dog has left. He is playing with her inflamed toes, wiggling them back and forth and rolling them between his fingers. With the air conditioning, they can’t hear or smell the picnic outside, the people laughing and drinking from the pink mouth of the punch bowl. Dogs are running around, the Shiba Inu, all of them stopping occasionally, noses pointed up, smelling beef.

“I’m allergic,” she tells him.

“To dogs and cats but not to me.”

“Haha,” she says, wishing she had a blunt. “I thought you were going to tell me about wrestling. Wrassling.”

He has moved his hand up her leg, is resting it nearly on her crotch, as if he is an old mapmaker or guide, having stitched in the landmarks with needle and thread. Here is where you must go, he’d show with his fingers.

“Do you really have a son, dead or alive?”

“Haha.” But his eye twitches a little, like he might be getting angry.

“You already asked me that.”

“Sorry.”

“Um. Did you really do what they said you did with Dr. Bob?”

Her feet go numb and she goes to get up, but he squeezes her once. She is wishing she had a bra on.

And then nothing. A thermostat is ticking on. Then they relax.

“Want to go with me to Walmart?” he asks. The hand so constant she is beginning not to feel it.

Yessica had told her about Walmart. “He’ll fill the basket with Tide. You’ll be the distraction, so he can get out.”

“Yeah. I guess. Maybe.”

Yessica, she is thinking, doesn’t know what she’s talking about, and is probably racist. Yessica was fourth in line and will never forget it.

He has her hand and they’re walking now, her bare feet in Dr. Dawn’s thick carpet. Somewhere she has lost her shoes. To the grass or to one of the dogs.
Outside, the sounds are getting louder. Dr. Bob and his wife are laughing at their twins as they put weeds down each other’s shirts.

She is thinking of the giant glass windows, how it seems like they’re looking out, but they could just as easily be looking at her. She knows she’s stupid and reckless, recklessly stupid. If she asked, Vonni would drive her home.

As they’re going down the stairs, he’s telling her about another wrestling thing, not a move but something. Muta scale, he calls it. A way of measuring how much blood a wrestler loses in any given match. People place bets on it, he tells her. They weigh the blood.

“My mother, especially,” Camilo is saying. He still has orange dust in his mustache. “My mother,” he says, his hand cold around hers. “She loves it.”