

Kings Day 1965

“*Por favor, Señora,*” Maria sobbed at the back door. “Our *casa*, she is burning. *Mis padres*, they no move.” “That’s nice,” my mom said, and closed the door. Shivering in thin pajamas and a bathrobe, Maria pounded until my mom responded, ready

to scold her for disturbing our rest, but *el fuego* held her tongue. Flames swirled in eddies around the edge of the tenement railing, flowing in waves across the platform of the wooden fire escape. She ushered Maria into our kitchen, ran to wake my dad.

“Get your coat,” she hissed. I tried to peek out my bedroom window, but heat blasted my face like a can of hairspray exploding. Wrapped in blankets, from the safety of the street I watched fire snap, sizzle in the crystal January air. I wanted to reach out, touch the dancing

colors, convinced they were solid, alive. I gawked at ladders lining tenement walls, wondered if they had chutes long enough to reach the people on the roof. Whole families, trapped, smashed windows, leapt onto tarps. Huddled bodies, covered only by bedclothes, nightshirts

and boots, hovered at the fringes, unable to speak, faces blurred. But no one died. Blocked at first by billows of soot, the sun urged itself across the sky, filtered hazy light through charred remains of brick and glass, steel and wood and the miracle of *Fiesta de los reyes*.