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## Cuban Jam Sessions In Miniature: A Novel In Tracks

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CUBAN JAM SESSIONS IN MINIATURE: A NOVEL IN TRACKS

by

DIEGO A. RINCON  
B.A. Florida International University, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
in the Department of English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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2009

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## ABSTRACT

This is the collection of a novel, *Cuban Jam Sessions in Miniature: A Novel in Tracks*, and an embedded short story, “Shred Me Like the Cheese You Use to Make Buñuelos.”

The novel tells the story of Palomino Mondragón, a Colombian mercenary who has arrived in New York after losing his leg to a mortar in Korea. Reclusive, obsessive and passionate, Palomino has reinvented himself as a mambo musician and has fallen in love with Etiwanda, a dancer at the nightclub in which he plays—but he cannot bring himself to declare his love to her. His life changes when he is deported from the United States at the height of the Cuban Missile crisis without having declared his love. Through the thirty years chronicled in the novel, Palomino does all possible in his quest to return to the United States to find Etiwanda despite the fact that he knows she has grown to be a fantasy, an obsession of his imagination. Palomino’s quest takes him to the United States and back three times, as he becomes more and more desperate, as he becomes involved with drug traffickers and for-hire murderers like Polo Norte, as he loses track of what it means to feel alive. Palomino is trapped in a tug-of-war between his rational desire for a normal existence and his irrational but inescapable longing for Etiwanda. In the end, his desperation to get to Etiwanda brings the underworld of Polo Norte to her doorstep.

“Shred Me Like the Cheese You Use to Make Buñuelos” tells the story of Polo Norte, Palomino’s antagonist, on his last day on earth, as he is followed by a writer who has agreed to watch him commit suicide. Together, the stories explore the history and nature of the Colombian Diaspora in the United States, and the violent circumstances surrounding the relationship between both countries and the migrants stuck in the middle of it.

For the Legends:

Mr. Pedro 'Cuban Pete' Aguilar (1927-2009)

The greatest of all Mambo dancers.

Mr. Israel 'Cachao' López (1918-2009)

Visionary bassist and inventor of the original jam sessions in miniature.

Mr. Gilberto 'Joe Cuba' Calderón (1931-2009)

The legend of the barrio.

Mr. Ralph Mercado (1941-2009)

The man with the vision to take this music to the world.

For the followers of the worldwide  
movement they inspired, without whom  
I could not have written any of these words.

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## CUBAN JAM SESSIONS IN MINIATURE: A NOVEL IN TRACKS

### Side A

#### *Descarga en Miniatura*

*This I remember—over a decade too late—when El Jefe turns on the turntable and spins Cachao’s Deascargas en Miniatura—Jam Sessions in Miniature: I am sitting on the waxed floor of that apartment, back in the United States, back in Spanish Harlem in the Winter of 1960, thinking that as soon as you walk in, the snow on your boots will melt and it would no longer be pristine enough for you to dance. You knock on the door and I don’t move from my stool. Like a good detached musician, like a good combat veteran, telling you that I don’t care about your presence as much as I do, I answer your knock with a single slap of the quinto drum. You turn the knob, gathering your skirt so that the door won’t catch it.*

*How I had craved this moment since 1957—being alone with you—but it wasn’t me who made it possible. It was you—your black skin glistening, shining under the mirror ball—who’d come up to me at the Montuno Street, after my palm was bleeding from playing a descarga for Willie Rosario and you said, in your fast and casual Cuban way “Palomino, no one makes me dance the way you do. I want to practice whenever you practice.” As if I were pressing my fingers against a gyrating vinyl record, I slow down your words and play them over and over again in my brain before I nod in agreement, because I have no words for you, a woman this beautiful, who could forget yourself and allow the music to possess you for hours without end. I’ve played my drums behind you for five years, but it’s at this moment that I know you know I exist.*

*What do I—crippled, scarred, deformed—say to you, Etiwanda, when you walk into my apartment for the first time and remove layer upon layer of clothing in front of me until I see the almond shape of your bare shoulders and the shadows that your breasts make when they come together? What do I say when you strap on your dancing heels and your calves look like they are ready to fight a war? What do I say when you put a gardenia on your left ear—telling me that you're single? Do I say 'I've loved you in silence'?*

*No. I say nothing. This is sacred: You standing in front of me, ready to dance for me and no one else, and I will do nothing to scare you away. So I slap and slap the cowhide of the three tumbadoras and I create the most heartfelt tumbao anyone has ever played, and I disappear from your world—at least the image of me—because my hands are your world. And your knees bend, and the hem of your skirt flies, and the ruffles look like fighter planes having a dogfight over Korea. Your thighs are powerful, and I think you're going to break through the floor with your next spin and that your black hair is darker than a moonless night in Bogotá, and then your eyes close, your mouth opens unconsciously, the way you do when the music is—I am—in charge.*

*I wish I could step outside of myself, as you make the cramped space of my apartment yours. I wish there were two of me, and that at least one of me would have two legs, so that I could dance around you and thrust my pelvis toward you, making the vacunaos you are now imagining—but I can't, because I have only one fucking leg. And then you are before me and you twirl, your heels tracing audible lines on the floor, and I catch a breeze and the smell of a bouquet of daisies when your skirt flies. You come too close to the salidor and I don't want to disrupt you so I lurch back and the music stops, and I fall over my milk crate full of Mambo records and break in half the disc I am playing now— Cachao's Cuban Jam Sessions in*



Miniature—the whole reason I'm remembering this. And you say "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry,"  
and I remember where I am now, and that remembering you is useless.

Track 1—Yambú

El Barrio, New York, NY, U.S.A.

14 Oct 1962

Had Palomino Mondragón known that on that day the FBI was going to arrest him and deport him under suspicion of un-American and subversive activities, he would have donned the uniform he wore when he lost his right leg to a Chinese mortar in Korea, and he would have jumped to his death from the observation deck of the Empire State Building. He would have done these things because he had promised himself in the summer of 1952 that he would return to Colombia only in a casket.

Had he known, he would have paid a visit to the Italian widow who lived below his apartment and thanked her for enduring the endless nights of percussion. He would have settled his four dollar and seventeen cent debt at Rivera's bodega on 116<sup>th</sup> Street, and he would have given Dick Loco custody of his ten milk crates of mambo records. But before anything else, he would have dragged his conga drums on the 4 Train toward The Montuno Street and played a final rumba—a Cuban jam session—for Etiwanda.

Had Palomino not fallen once again prey to that accursed habit he'd developed in Korea—a habit he believed to be the reason for all the strife that had befallen him since his arrival in New York—the FBI agents would have never found him: Photographing road kill was the only means he knew for quenching the insatiable desire to capture death in a tangible manner.

When he stumbled upon the dead pigeon's body—its legs sticking straight up—while he was climbing down the fire escape, Palomino was clean shaven and dressed to play at The Montuno Street that night. He was already late for practice. He didn't want to keep Etiwanda waiting, but the urge tugged at his entrails. He hated pigeons and here he could capture a dead

one. Palomino had hated pigeons since having been forced to shoot them and eat them as a child soldier in the mountains of Boyacá. His heart rate sped. He wiped beads of sweat from his cinnamon colored face. Sweat seeped through the rim of his fedora hat, dampened the blue pinstripe suit and solidified into crescent-shaped salt stains. He unsheathed the tripod from the *tumba* drum's carrying case and screwed his Hasselbad 1600F camera on it. Palomino supported his weight against the wooden crutch. He bent down to look through the viewfinder and snapped three photographs of the bird that had fallen out of the sky on the corner of 116<sup>th</sup> and Lexington. "Soldier Boy" by the Shirelles played from inside Rivera's bodega.

It was then that he noticed the red breasted pigeon perched on the traffic light, looking down at him. He hadn't seen it in seven years. It was that same pigeon that shit on him when he escaped the lynch mob that followed the *Bogotazo*—the assassination of Liberal presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán at the Plaza de Bolívar in Bogotá on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April of 1948—It was the same pigeon that had followed him during *La Violencia*, the war between liberals and conservatives that ensued. It was the same pigeon. He was sure of it. It was the same pigeon that had followed him to the Puerto Rican version of American freedom when he deserted the 1<sup>st</sup> Batallón Colombia in Korea and joined the all-Hispanic 65<sup>th</sup> US Infantry Regiment— it was the same pigeon that had landed on his shoulder before carnage befell the Borinqueneers at Hill 391. It was the same pigeon. He was sure of it.

Palomino scrambled to collapse the tripod and shove the camera back in its case so that he could hobble away from the scorching suspicion of impending doom as fast as the crutch would allow. Two Caucasian men approached. They wore grey trench-coats, black ties, and felt hats. One of the men examined a three by five picture and stared Palomino down.

"Mr. Moon Dragon?" He said.

“Mondragón,” Palomino said.

“FBI. Didn’t think we’d find you this easy, fellow.”

26 Federal Plaza, New York, NY, U.S.A

15 Oct 1962

The room was dark, windowless and without a toilet. Palomino sat naked on a dancing wooden stool. They had taken his crutch away and tied his leg to the stool’s uneven and splintered leg. He hadn’t eaten or slept since his arrest. Two spotlights shone on his face, blinding him. When the agents entered, he was in the process of relieving his bladder on the stool.

“How long have I been here?” Palomino said.

“Days. Do you know this country’s on the brink of nuclear war with the Soviets?” an agent said.

“That’s what all the fallout shelters are for.”

“Testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities has identified you as a subversive under the control of the Cuban government.”

“See, you’ve got it all wrong. I’m a conservative.”

“Did you or did you not share dinner with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro at the Theresa Hotel in Harlem on 18 September of 1960?”

“I had lunch, not dinner at the Theresa, and I ate with Dick Loco. Fidel just happened to be there, which ruined my meal because seeing him there, being hailed like the king of Harlem, would ruin any sensible man’s appetite. Fidel Castro’s been my enemy since the day I met him.”

There was silence. Palomino heard mumbling.

“When and where exactly did you first meet Fidel Castro?”

“In Bogotá, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of April of 1948 when he and the Liberal goons from the Externado University tried to hang me.”

“Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?”

“I lost a leg for this country fighting Communists in North Korea.”

Palomino heard paper shuffling. There was a prolonged silence, then more mumbling.

“Is that why we found a DD Form 214 for a Private First Class Ray-nall-dough Colon in your apartment?”

Palomino said nothing.

“Did you pose as Mr. Colon in order to enlist in the Army?”

He said nothing.

“How did you get into this country?”

He said nothing.

“Fraudulent enlistment is a federal crime. I’m going to assume there are other things you’re hiding.”

“If you’re going to charge me with anything, you should give me my telephone call first.”

“This isn’t a police station, fella. As we speak, the Air Force is loading B-52s with nuclear bombs, each with the name of a Russian city on it.”

They hooked electrodes to Palomino’s nipples and to his penis.

“Whatever you plan on doing to me, do it after I tell my girl that I love her. I want my telephone call.”

Colombian General Consulate. 10 E 46<sup>th</sup> St. New York, NY, U.S.A

26 Oct 1962

It had been thirteen days since the start of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Palomino had not spoken to Etiwanda. After the Soviets removed the nuclear missiles from Cuba, the FBI saw no further use for Palomino and surrendered custody to the INS. Of all of Palomino's possessions, only the salt-stained pinstripe suit, the crutch and the camera were returned to him. His shoe, his conga drums, the fedora hat, and all the things he was sure the FBI had taken from his apartment were missing. An unruly full-length beard had taken hold of Palomino's face.

Consul Filómeno Salavarieta, a corpulent man with greasy sideburns, entrenched in making life impossible for the agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, demanded a face to face interview with Palomino in order to verify the Colombianness of his accent—he needed this to issue the emergency passport necessary to expedite the deportation.

Palomino entered the Consul's office escorted by the deportation agent and the Consul's secretary, who took such pity on Palomino that she collected money from the consulate staff in order to buy him a shoe from a Chinese leather vendor on 46<sup>th</sup> Street.

Both of Palomino's hands were cuffed to the crutch. When he entered the office, he was overwhelmed by the amount of Colombian paraphernalia hanging from the walls. Palomino could see the green expanse of Central Park through the window behind the Consul and thought that he wouldn't see it again for a long time. The raspy voice of hit Colombian singer José Benito Barros crackled from the Consul's turntable. Palomino recognized the lyrics of "El Hombre Caimán," an upbeat Cumbia song about a man whose longing had morphed him into a caiman, who then roamed the streets of the coastal city of Barranquilla bellowing with a human voice.

Palomino realized he hadn't heard the song since leaving Colombia in the forties, and became distracted deciphering the song's three drum pattern.

The Consul pushed aside miniature *chiva* buses and San Agustín statuettes from his desk, opened the INS folder, and laid out the fingerprint cards and the profile pictures of Palomino the Deportation Agent had taken.

"How am I supposed to know you're Colombian if you have no identification and you sound more Puerto Rican than anything else?" the Consul said in Spanish. He loosened the Windsor knot on his navy blue tie.

"I feel more Puerto Rican than anything else, and I've never been to Puerto Rico," Palomino said.

The Consul's secretary entered the office and asked the deportation agent if he could have a look at Palomino's new sneaker shoe.

"Your deportation order says you are a criminal and a subversive," the Consul said.

"I've been nothing but a patriot to both of these countries, Consul."

"You were born where?"

"Medellín. *Comuna San Diego*."

"A long way from that dump to New York City. Family in Colombia?"

"The only family I have ever had died in Korea," Palomino said.

The Deportation Agent excused himself and snuck out of the Consul's office.

"Your tie. You're a fellow conservative," Palomino said.

"Your suit. I should have known it." The Consul raised his eyebrows. "What have they done to you?"

“The same things we did to leftists during *La Violencia*, only more sophisticated. Please. I need to use the phone.”

“Being Colombian is...”

“...An act of faith, Consul.”

“Do it quickly.” The Consul stamped the temporary passport and stuffed a small wad of one hundred Colombian pesos into the booklet. “It’s not much, but you’ll need these when you get to Bogotá.”

Palomino dialed Etiwanda’s number. There was no answer. He dialed The Montuno Street. Dick Loco informed him that Etiwanda hadn’t been seen since the day he disappeared and that everyone had assumed Palomino had finally gathered the courage to declare his love for her.

“I thought you two had eloped,” Dick Loco said.

“If you see her, you tell her I love her. I’m coming back before the Mambo craze is over.”

“It already is.”



*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I have traveled through an ice storm in a bus, sitting in the back with the negroes because I have to see you. I have come back to New York, all the way from waving wheat Kansas, from Fort Leavenworth, from visiting Sotomayor, one of the Privates from the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry who got court-martialed after the mess with the white officers at Jackson Heights. He told me when I told him about you, “You don’t have a day purchased. You don’t know when you’re going to die or when they’re going to take your freedom away. You have to live in the day,” he said. Words to live by.*

*This is why I have come, resolute. To tell you I have loved you in silence before you and Cuban Pete leave for California, to tour the stages of Los Angeles and San Diego, dancing for Noro Morales, exporting this mambo thing. This is why I stand here in the lobby of the Montuno Street with these foreign things in my hand—twelve red roses—why I’ve pricked my fingers more times than an intelligent person should. This is why I stand here smelling the way men should smell, why my suit is pressed and starched, why I’ve pawned my camera and my records to buy you this bracelet—and I look around the Montuno Street at the women who steer clear of me, and I think this bracelet is woefully inadequate, but it’s all I have.*

*Then you emerge. Majestic. Your waist so thin. Your hips so full that I imagine you a medieval princess, and a court of children trails behind you, keeping the train of your dress from dragging on the dirt. But your dress has no train. It has a void in the front that shows the curvature of your breasts and the valley between them, and you smile at me. You wave, and I start to wave back when Dick Loco taps me on the shoulder, saying “It’s me she’s waving at.”*

*And I wonder if Dick’s said anything to you, being the club owner. I wonder if he’s said anything about the love I’ve held for you, which I foolishly disclosed to him because I couldn’t*

*help it, because despite the fact that I don't like to talk, to tell anything to anyone about my life, I can't shut up about you. Dick Loco grabs you by the waist as if it was normal, as if you weren't precious, as if touching your skin wasn't akin to kissing the feet of Jesus for a Catholic.*

*Noro Morales does what he does best. He tames the piano and Cuban Pete the wood floor. He does the hand blade to the clave. You shimmy. You smile. Of all the men that frequent this establishment, he is the one I respect the most. Because he is married to a woman who is not of his race. Because he has danced the mambo in front of the Queen of England. Because he hasn't tried to fuck you. Because he hasn't tried to get you drunk.*

*And this is the perfect opportunity. You are resting between sets while Cuban Pete cradles his baby girl. So I plant my crutch like I'm the Marine planting the flag in that picture from Iwo Jima, and I soar up to you as if there was an Army behind me. Resolute. Today this ends. Today I will finally tell you how I feel for you, that I no longer want to hear you complaining about every other man. I will say to you "I have loved you."*

*You are powdering your shoes, and I am only an arm's length away when you look up and ask "Who are those for?"*

*And I halt. And I can't say they're for you.*

*"Did you finally find a lady friend, Palomino?" you say. "Okay. I won't embarrass you. You're turning red."*

*My leg is there. It is materializing. Coming back to me, hurting as much as it did when it pulverized. And I can't think. I can't say a simple sentence to you. And I amend my message. I will make it sound more tentative. I will say, "I think I'm in love with you," but I don't.*

*Dick Loco swoops in from behind and slaps your ass, and then he laughs in his Puerto Rican Jew way as he hands you a Cuba Libre, and I don't know how he can do it, how he can*

*swing his hand, at full speed, towards one of your most seductive, most private parts, when I can't say a simple sentence to you. I don't know how he doesn't savor that moment. Why he doesn't stretch it till eternity. I thrust the bracelet into my pocket, and you see me, but you don't think anything of it—I know—because why would I think, what would possess me to think that I have a chance with you, when every man in the Montuno Street—every man with an unscarred face, every man with two legs—melts over your Mediterranean eyes, over your Middle Eastern skin. I go outside to burn these flowers, to do this all over again when you get back to New York. Black consumes the ashing roses as Noro sobers the piano for a bolero.*

El Dorado International Airport. Bogotá, D.E, Colombia.

28 Oct 1962.

Palomino landed at an airport he had never seen in a city he no longer recognized. The airport was much uglier than he imagined it, and he decided that it in no way merited having the legend of El Dorado as its namesake. The first thing he did in Colombia was stand in line. He did it for a long time and did it often, five times before getting to the immigration stand, and he did it because there are few things more Colombian than standing in line and being patted down. The American deportation agent surrendered Palomino over to The Authorities (for convenience, and to avoid lengthy acronyms and explanations because the differences between the many corrupt and largely ineffective Colombian government enforcement organizations are minor, Colombians refer to them collectively as The Authorities)

The agent ordered Palomino to strip to his underwear in order to have German Shepherds sniff him, his clothes and his camera. To Palomino, the cubicle was nothing like the FBI interrogation room. It was as if it was a public sideshow, starring an Americanized one-legged expatriate. Passengers going through immigration stared at him for fractions of a second before looking down at their travel papers.

The Authorities confiscated the temporary passport. Palomino's agent was bewildered because the man had no other form of identification (Authorities' brains can't function efficiently when people don't have identification) a fact he shared in between bouts of laughter with every other Authority that passed by the cubicle—after explaining that to top it all off, the poor bastard was crippled.

“It's Sunday, so you'll have to wait until tomorrow. Go to the office of the National Registrar of the Civil State to request permission to apply for a new Citizenship Card. You'll

need to dress in dark business clothing. They won't accept you in that pretentious monstrosity you were wearing. I suggest getting up before dawn, because the lines are long. You'll have to bring your National Birth Certificate—”

“—I don't have one of those.”

“Then you'll have to bring two people with their Citizenship Cards to the office of the National Registrar who can sign notarized affidavits attesting to witnessing your birth.”

“I don't know anyone in this country anymore, let alone anyone who witnessed my birth. It was thirty-three years ago.”

“The Authorities will deal with you later.” The inspector stamped the passport and handed Palomino back ten of the hundred pesos. “The rest is my commission for letting you pass.”

Palomino donned the tattered suit, slung the camera around his shoulder and felt his breast pocket for the ten pesos that remained of what Consul Salavarieta had given him. He hobbled through the gates of the international terminal and was first hit by the mountain breeze. He was then met by a swelter of shit peddlers and taxi drivers tugging him in all directions, screaming unintelligible things that together sounded like a hysterical flock of hens clucking with Colombian accents. It reminded him of the bayonet battle at Hill 391. Palomino braced his camera.

A middle-aged jaundiced man sporting a perfect bowl cut pulled Palomino from the multitude and sat him down on the back seat of his Renault 4 taxi. A mangle of scapulars, prayer cards to San Cristóbal and Baby Jesus medallions dangled from the taxi's rearview mirror.

“Where to?” The taxi driver said.

“I don’t even know where I am.” He looked out the window and saw above the airport terminal an enormous sign with the words EL DORADO inscribed in golden letters. “I haven’t been here since the forties and I don’t think I know anything anymore.”

“Everybody has to go somewhere.” The taxi driver turned the car radio on. “The Twist” by Chubby Checker blared from the speakers.

“Don’t you have something a little more Colombian?” The only place he wanted to go was back to The Montuno Street to play for Etiwanda and tell her what he’d been too much of a pussy to tell her.

“*Compadre*, but this is the number one song.” He turned the tuner knob until he found a tango song by Carlos Gardel. “It’s Argentinian.”

“It will have to suffice. Take me to a place where they play mambo and cha cha chá.” Palomino decided that he needed to make money to return to the States the only way he knew how anymore—playing drums.

“What is that?”

“Cuban music. It’s like Cumbia.”

“Ah. Black music. You’ll want to go to the Granada Hotel.” The cabbie started the engine.

“How much?”

“Fifty pesos.” He started driving.

“Where can you take me for ten?”

“Nowhere. Minimum fare is thirty pesos.” He slowed down. “Blacks from the Caribbean coast sometimes gather playing African indecencies at the Plaza de Bolívar on Sundays. I live in the Egipto neighborhood and my wife needs me to—I’ll take you there for ten.”

“I’m familiar with the Plaza.” The last time he had seen it, it had been consumed by flames and riotous peasants. “Take me.”

Palomino slumped in his seat and digested everything he could see through the taxi’s windows. The city had grown and bunched against the mountainsides. He decided that in the aftermath of *La Violencia* and the military dictatorship, Bogotá had managed to blossom while it bled. Hordes of unornamented International Style buildings surrounded the newly paved road, which after eight minutes of riding he recognized as 26<sup>th</sup> Street. He was astonished by the extent to which everything had changed. Asphalt covered the streetcar rails, and the streetcars themselves had been replaced by unsightly silver Mack buses. Dilapidated Italianate buildings stood side by side with their new concrete neighbors. Looking toward the city center, Palomino saw a cluster of block-shaped skyscrapers dwarfed by a hazy Monserrate Mountain and the peaks of the Eastern Range. Flat building tops and communications antennas had replaced the colonial bell towers and the columns of black smoke that dominated the city’s skyline on the day of his departure.

Riding through the Teusaquillo neighborhood, he saw the fields where he used to play *fútbol* prior to the *Bogotazo* and imagined himself showing Etiwanda around the Victorian homes of Bogotá’s aristocracy. He felt disgusted when he saw the once immaculate walls of the neighborhood littered by communist scribbles and bullet speckles. He noticed the charred remains of the houses of prominent conservatives. As the cab negotiated the steep inclines and the pot-holed one-carriage ston of the colonial La Candelaria district, he saw the contrast of the colonial porticos and balconies with the blocks rising in the distance and realized that Bogotá had forsaken its destiny as the Athens of the Americas, and that it had traded its neoclassical and Spanish baroque edifices for dull, dehumanizing rectangles that made New York seem colorful

by comparison. The city even smelled different—like fresh asphalt poured over blood. He was overcome with sadness because he realized that the radical change of the natural order he and his fellow Black Crows had tried so desperately to prevent by removing Jorge Eliécer Gaitán from the public sphere had taken place regardless.

Palomino caught the driver staring through the rearview mirror at the nub of his missing leg.

“War is a horrible thing,” the driver said when he met eyes with Palomino.

“How did you know it happened in war?”

“Why else would people lose their legs in this country?”

“This happened in Korea.”

“You didn’t have to go that far to lose a leg. In Colombia, war has never been a scarcity.”

“Well, one gets tired of killing his own people.”

Plaza de Bolívar. Bogotá, D.E, Colombia.

28 Oct 1962

When Palomino exited the taxi, he stood in front of the phone booth on the corner of Calle Real and the Plaza de Bolívar, and thought of trying to reach Etiwanda once again. He felt his pockets and wished he hadn’t spent all his money. Palomino navigated through the mayhem of the plaza, attempting to isolate the sound of African drums. Instead, he froze, overwhelmed by the premonition of terror. Squadrons of pigeons encircled the square, flanking around the Prime Cathedral and the Liévano Palace before diving into the crowd, where someone had thrown corn on the ground. The statue of Simón Bolívar, Liberator of the Americas, was covered by downward streaks of dry pigeon droppings.



Palomino cowered when a veiled woman tugged at the tail of his pinstripe suit, asking him for a peso coin in exchange for a fistful of corn seeds with which to feed the pigeons. When he turned away from her toward the north end of the square, he noticed that the Palace of Justice had been rebuilt in the same inhuman right angles as the rest of the city. He remembered the way the Plaza looked the last time he had been there and marveled at how the death of a single man could have changed so many things. He stared down Calle Real and saw new storefronts where the scorched ruins of the Turk and Arab tailor shops were. The only structure he recognized was the green and white July 20<sup>th</sup> House on the corner of the Plaza. Palomino saw the blackness of new pavement over cobblestone and remembered the overturned streetcars burning in front of the Cundinamarca Governor's Mansion.

Neither he nor the masterminds of the assassination had intended for such things to happen. All he had ever wanted, he decided, was to maintain the natural order of things—a natural order Jorge Eliécer Gaitán and his populist socialism were determined to uproot. He had never wanted things to change. He thought of that approaching moment when he'd be reunited with Etiwanda and she would say "you came here to save me," but of course she would never say something like that.

Palomino surveyed the circumference of the Plaza, looking for musicians. He found he was no longer surrounded exclusively by white *Bogotanos*, but also by the jagged facial features of the descendents of the Muisca Indian tribe who had flooded the city in the aftermath of *La Violencia*. He walked down Calle Real and noticed weeds growing through the cracks on the narrow colonial path. He looked at the twenty-inch thick wooden Cathedral gates and remembered surrendering the shooter Juan Roa Sierra to the fury of the crowd so that he wouldn't live to identify him or the other *Chulavitas*—Black Sparrows. He recalled the sting of a

shot of Aguardiente liquor burning his throat while Roa Sierra's naked corpse lay next to an overturned Citroën that burned on the steps of the National Capitol.

Palomino looked up and noticed a squad of soldiers squatting behind flagpoles on the roof of the National Capitol, watching the Plaza with rangefinder binoculars and Mauser Karabiners. He looked down. A golden retriever with a lush coat shook loose from its owner's leash and sprinted from the steps of the National Capitol in his direction.

"Stop that dog. It belongs to Senator Navia," a soldier shouted from the rooftop. By the time the Authorities of the Plaza scrambled to chase the animal, it was already too late. The Chapinero-bound Mack bus on Calle Real didn't have room to swerve. Smoke emanated from its undercarriage as it screeched to a halt.

Palomino looked around the front of the bus for the dog. It had been a clean hit. There was no blood on the bumper, the tires, the asphalt, or the dog. The golden retriever lay peacefully on its side—as if it was asleep. It was the most beautiful dead dog Palomino had ever seen. Its coat shimmered. Palomino thought he knew better than photographing a senator's moribund dog in the middle of the Plaza—especially given the times, but he couldn't resist. He un-slung his camera and aimed at the golden retriever through the viewfinder, hoping for a clear shot of the canine's entire body. Palomino's senses shut down. He didn't wonder why the bus driver and the passersby were stepping away from the dog, nor did he hear the bullhorn warnings to back away. The red breasted pigeon landed next to the golden retriever. Palomino depressed the shutter button and blinked. He heard the click but not the shot.

The bullet grazed his left hand. The camera disintegrated into miniscule plastic and metal fragments that lacerated the coarse cinnamon skin of his face. Palomino touched his right hand to his nose and realized the bullet had cut it. He strained to keep his side pressed against the

wobbling crutch. He couldn't see. A cyclonic force lifted him off the ground and slammed him on the pavement. A cold badge on a policeman's chest dragged against the bridge of Palomino's nose.

Bogotá Metropolitan Police Headquarters. Bogotá, D.E, Colombia.

30 Nov 1962

Even though he'd been originally arrested for the murder of Senator Navia's hunting dog, Palomino was held for twenty-eight days at the Bogotá Metropolitan Police Headquarters because he fit the physical description of hundreds of fugitive *guerrilleros* from the Eastern Plains that had not fulfilled the requirements for amnesty during General Rojas Pinilla's military dictatorship. Despite his insistence that his name was Palomino Mondragón and that he was a conservative, Palomino was convicted as Quinto Pimentel, a Lieutenant for the Sumapaz communist guerrilla, for the 1952 murder of one hundred and ten soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion at the town of Villareal. He was sentenced to twenty years of confinement at the Modelo National Prison.

On the day he was to be transferred to the prison, he thought about New York, the mambo craze and the way life had been prior to October 14<sup>th</sup>. From inside his temporary cell, he daydreamed about summer nights in Spanish Harlem and the abundance of life that oozed from the syncopated rhythms of Afro-Cuban music and seeped in through the cracked windows. He examined the tears of his soiled suit and realized that the pinstripes were no longer visible. The cloth had turned from navy blue to the color of black humus after a torrential rain. He lamented that everything had changed after he had finally carved an identity circling not around his natural ability to kill, or the fact that his leg was missing, but around the hypnotic power his hands

commanded when slapping the heated rawhide of the conga drums. A beautiful woman—Etiwanda—had even become addicted to him—to the feeling only his drums could give her. Etiwanda had managed to forget his disability and dance away while the stump of his missing leg hid behind the body of the three conga drums. He saw the fire that erupted in her eyes when she danced, possessed by the cadences his hands dictated. She danced and contorted the sharp curves of her lean Antillean body, slapping the ground and lifting the ruffles of her skirt. He palpated the scars that now plagued his face and thought that when he returned to New York he would learn to play the violin for Etiwanda so that he could shield his face behind it.

He tried to recall her voice. Her voice was so coarse that it often sounded like she was speaking Arabic instead of Spanish. All he could think of was the time when she'd asked him out for breakfast at the Jewish deli on Park Avenue, how her voice was even lower than usual, how she never looked up from the menu, hiding the bruises, how she whispered "thank you for being such a friend, such a friend...you actually listen to me...please don't say anything to Dick." Then he remembered how he wanted to stab Dick in the neck, but then thought that he couldn't do that anymore, because the Palomino who would do that had died in Korea. How was he supposed to stand up in a fight with a man when he had only one leg? He remembered he sat there in front of her, chewing on his pumpernickel bagel with too much spread, and he nodded, too afraid to put his hand on top of her outstretched palm, too afraid of the possible rejection. He'd been such a fool. All the opportunities he had of saying "I have loved you," he never took.

Palomino struck an imaginary *salidor* drum with his left hand and wondered if he'd be able to sit in front of the congas again. The police doctor who'd removed the camera fragments from Palomino's hand had explained that the nerve damage was minor.

Iván Darío Albarracín, Palomino's public defender, looked impeccable with his *pachuco* suit and his wavy locks slicked back, like a Colombian Dean Martin. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five, Palomino thought. He seemed younger every day that passed.

"I managed to get a hold of the New York telephone company. There is no Etiwanda Torres living at the address you gave me. I sent your letters to a Dick Irrizarri. This is the last I can do. I'm burning a lot of money and favors," he said.

"I'm going to be at La Modelo for a while, aren't I?" Palomino said.

"As far as Colombia's concerned, Palomino Mondragón is dead. The Authorities forwarded me this." The lawyer handed Palomino a death certificate, dated April 12<sup>th</sup> of 1954, stating that the government of South Korea had repatriated the bits and pieces left of Corporal Third Class Palomino Mondragón found near Incheon, who had deserted from the *Batallón Colombia* in 1952.

"This is the first I've heard of this," Palomino said. "So where am I buried?"

"In a mass grave off the Bogotá-Melgar road."

"Have you seen it?"

"I told you. This is the last I'm doing. You have to be able to prove you are not Quinto Pimentel or no tribunal will overturn the conviction."

"I thought that was your job."

"What you're asking for is magic."

"If you hear from Etiwanda, you tell me."

Two brown-skinned, Indian-faced policemen excused themselves and tied Palomino's hands to the crutch, then led him to the front of the line of convicts awaiting transfer to the Modelo National Prison aboard a silver Mack bus.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I like war. I'm good at it. I wouldn't be anywhere else, doing anything else right now. The continental Lieutenant calling for artillery fire right next to me doesn't know me from José or Ramón or any of the Puerto Rican troops and it's better that way. He says something to me in English and I reply "What?" he ducks his head behind the berm, thinking the rounds coming from the hill will hit him, but I know they won't, because those bullets are flying too high, because the Korean gunner on the far side of Jackson Heights can't aim for shit, because he can't pick off a helmet with a shiny gold bar from that short of a distance. The next time I come up, putting a round between his eyes will be the first thing I do. I know what a bullet sounds like—it sings to you—when it wants to hit you but can't. The Lieutenant buries his ears into his radio, but I know he can't hear a thing with the barrage of mortars whistling and shaking the earth with every boom, with every boom that comes closer, a closer that resonates inside my cranium and makes me feel alive. My back against the ground. Refreshing dirt sneaks under my top. I reload my M1 and let my eye rest for a second, let my heart rate slow, let my breaths become shallow, let myself become calm, let everything leave me so I can do what I came here to do, so I can do it well. I look around and see the dead, so peaceful, unperturbed by the fire landing around them.*

*After Colonel DeGrave had ordered the Puerto Rican Soldiers in the regiment to "shave their mustaches until they prove they can be men," they couldn't tell each other apart, and when I appeared in their mess hall a few of them thought my name was Colón, and I went along with it, and I gave them my best and most pathetic impression of an islander accent. Maybe the NCOs can tell that I wasn't Puerto Rican, that I have deserted from the Batallón Colombia but then maybe they don't care because they'd already lost five hundred men at Outpost Kelly and they*

*know I can shoot. God, I can shoot. I love this war more than the one in Colombia. Gunfire makes my dick hard. I inherited this—this lust for war from my father and my grandfather.*

*When the commanders of the Batallón Colombia were readying to go back to Colombia, the clusters were going off above our heads and the Chinese Army was saying in Spanish over the loudspeakers, “Colombians, what are you doing here, coming from so far away to spread Yankee imperialism? Why don’t you go back and fix your own messes?” Our officers were weary. The men were scared, nodding in agreement, and I inched forward like I’m doing now, and I swear I shot the fucker holding the loudspeaker in the mouth, and he finally shut up. Now they say that unless you’re shooting by yourself you never know for sure when you’ve killed someone, but that’s what faggots say because they can’t deal with their own actions. I know I shot the fucker in the mouth. And then we’re regrouping and some Captain, the nephew of some liberal bigwig we killed in La Violencia says to me “Sleep with an eye open, godo.” So the next week, when I was on guard duty and the battalion was prepping to redeploy, I stabbed him in the neck with my bayonet while he was sleeping, and I left the camp, marching twelve clicks to meet back with the 65<sup>th</sup>, the outfit I’m with now, and I figured I could do this, float from outfit to outfit so that I can stay here forever and never go home, because with all the mines they’ve laid, I know this war will still be going on sixty years from now. Why would I want to go back to Colombia to kill my own people when I can stay in Korea, killing people who aren’t related to anyone I know, who don’t look like they could be another one of my father’s illegitimate children, whose cries I can’t understand when they’re begging for mercy.*

*And now I’m here at Jackson Heights, and I don’t even have to take orders from the officers because I don’t understand anything they say. The eight-round cartridge is in. Click—*

*I pull the bolt to the rear; Click—I let the bolt slam forward. I roll on my stomach, the dirt trickling down my sides from my back to my chest. My cheek feels great against the cold wood, the cold metal of the M1 and I look through the circular viewfinder, and I see the world as I should always see it, a world I have complete control over, a world on which I can unleash death. I see the muzzle lit up from the machine gun nest on the other side of Jackson Heights. His aim is getting better. Whistle and boom, a mortar lands and blocks my line of sight, and my brain resonates inside my skull. A pigeon, oblivious to the bullets, lands on my shoulder, and I slap it off.*

*This berm is horrible. It's shit. It's angled too high. I can't aim at the fucker unless I profile myself and give him my entire back and shoulders as a target, and I won't do that. Ahead of me the berm slopes down and back up, speckled by bullets spraying dirt and grass, and I see my new fighting position, a downed tree, from behind which I will kill this yellow fucker. So I roll. I stand. I sprint...The Lieutenant yells something, but I don't pay him attention. He can thank me when I take the head off that gunner...I see the patch of grass I will shoot from, and now I'm falling toward it. The ground rushing toward my face. The buttstock of my M1 hits the ground first, and then my left knee, and then I hear the whistle, and then I feel the boom.*

*I am a cloud of dirt and smoke. I tumble through the air, like a grenade the Lieutenant has thrown, and I have no breath with which to scream. I rush toward the ground once again. A thud, and my lungs feel like they're the size of my fist, and like a hand is choking my chest, preventing my lungs from expanding. My ears are dissonant music. I don't have my weapon, and the world, the sky, the smoke they're all spinning in concentric circles. I'm at the center of it all, and I throw my arms around, looking for that fucking M1 and I can feel the air rushing from the bullets speeding around me, and then the visual typhoon slows, and I grab my rifle. I go to stand,*



*to kill the fucker, and I can't because my leg isn't doing anything, and then I sit up and I look. I have no fucking leg. But I don't yell. I lie down and see the Lieutenant running to me, and I hear his skull shattering like pottery. The pigeon lands on my shoulder again, and this time I don't slap it off.*

Track 2—Cha-Cha-Chá

Modelo National Prison. Bogotá, D.E, Colombia.

30 Nov 1962.

An oppressive mist engulfed the city, blocking the sun over Jiménez Avenue. Palomino's first impression of the most dangerous prison in the world was that it was a place of deceit. Its walls were painted the color of the sky, as if to give the impression of boundless liberty. The guards that in-processed Palomino searched every cavity of his body for weapons and drugs while stepping on the bunched up remains of the pinstripe suit.

“You're no one here. Remember that. You're here because you were too slow and stupid to get away,” the guard said.

Palomino decided that no one had bothered to tell the prisoners in La Modelo that *La Violencia* was over. As The Authorities escorted him to the second courtyard, he saw concrete battle lines separating communist and right-wing combatants from each other and the common criminals. He thought that it—the ideological struggle—was fruitless, that after seeing fourteen years of fighting across the world, no side would ever win the war between socialism and capitalism, because ideas could not be sniped, burned or mortared.

The second courtyard, its inmates and its Authorities were ruled by Doctor Echeverry, a short, balding, middle-aged *cachaco*—a refined man from the capital. El Doctor, as he insisted his subjects address him, depending on the weather claimed to be an economics professor, a lawyer, a provincial mayor, or a medical doctor, but everyone knew him to be nothing more than a common swindler whose skill was *labia*—the art of bullshit. El Doctor ruled simply because he had money. In the midst of *La Violencia*, he had been ingenious enough to offer American entrepreneurs access to the ancestral crop of the Chibcha Indians—cannabis leaves.

El Doctor was not a leader, and the deplorable condition of the second courtyard as compared to the courtyards ruled by the quasi-military order of *La Violencia* combatants showed it. The yard smelled like mildew.

The guards gave Palomino a haircut so hideous that it immediately attracted the attention of the *carros*—El Doctor’s henchmen—and identified him as a new arrival. “A spot in a cell comes with status, *compadre*,” one of them said. “Or for fifty pesos, El Doctor can let you sleep in a cell of four.”

“I thought the cells came with the prison.”

“Not at this prison.”

Palomino slept directly above a cat-hole latrine with three other commoners in a meter-wide tunnel where El Doctor stashed marijuana to be sold to the general inmate population. Palomino’s meals at La Modelo came in the form of a cup of *aguapanela*—sugarcane water, and a four peso loaf of stale softbread he ate on top of newspaper clippings, because only the inmates who could pay the monthly fifty peso fee were afforded the luxuries of trays, utensils and foods with nutritional value.

Over the course of the first months of confinement, Palomino learned everything he needed to know from the wrath of baton sticks. He learned to wake up at six thirty to the sound of the bugle, and the proper manner of standing in the *aguapanela* line. He learned to become *tonto, ciego y sordomudo*—to mind his own business and to look down at all times, playing imaginary jam sessions and why not, picturing Etiwanda’s Afro-Cuban dancing—barely clothed—to the rhythm of make-believe drums. He learned the hard way that inmates couldn’t fall asleep in the courtyard because their pinstripe suits would be stolen. He learned that the Authorities had no authority and did nothing other than count inmates and that the *casas*—the

courtyard kings—were the ones who ruled the prison. He learned in the tunnel that a good day was a day started with a stolen *baretico* of marijuana, and that a bad day was a day when his crutch got taken by a *carro* and he was forced to mop the putrid floors of dark hallways with his mustache and his tongue. He learned that the corrupt politicians and the first rate drug runners lived on the third floor, where everyone got to sleep in a cell, even if on the floor, and everyone had the reasonable expectation of completing the sentence alive. He learned that Sundays were visit days, and that after three fruitless months of waiting on the halls for Ivan Darío Albarracín to bring Dick Loco's return letters or news from Etiwanda, he realized he could get a decent spot in front of the courtyard television with the other inmates no one loved if he skipped visitation.

23 Nov 1963

On the day of Comandante Caballero's arrival, Palomino stood in front of the courtyard television following the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination. He wondered how Etiwanda had reacted to the tragedy and if she'd gotten any of the weekly letters he'd sent her. She probably didn't care. When had she ever cared about anything but her dancing and the men who surrounded her? He immediately became concerned that the United States would plunge into the same chaos and violence that had seized Colombia in the aftermath of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán's assassination. He dismissed his fears, thinking that Americans simply didn't have the passion or the foolishness to start a war over the death of a single man.

Over a year of captivity, Palomino had grown accustomed to El Doctor's tyranny, so he initially became upset when the arrival of Comandante Andrés Caballero—Commander of the Altigracia Column of the Communist Revolutionary Army—destroyed the natural order of the second courtyard. Palomino's first impression of Comandante Caballero was that he was the

handsomest rebel he had ever seen. By observing the glimmer of his perfect smile and the meticulous way in which he parted and slicked his fire red hair from right to left, Palomino decided that El Comandante was above all a bohemian and a well traveled man.

The day after El Comandante's arrival, the Authorities found El Doctor's body chopped into ten-square-centimeter cubes inside a garbage bag, which El Comandante's subalterns tossed into a right-wing courtyard along with a note explaining to the prison administration that El Comandante would be in charge of things during his short stay. El Comandante was a leader. Within days, the weeds that grew through the cracks of the floors and the walls had disappeared and the periphery of the courtyard had been painted in the Colombian tricolor. Olive drab tarps were laid over the yard so that the inmates without cells could sprawl out in their sleep. Hundreds of plastic trays magically appeared abounding with *arepas* and *café con leche*. The smell of mildew was replaced by the delicious saffron odor of freshly cooked *paella* after El Comandante convinced the Spanish prisoners to cook for him in exchange for the privilege of weekly phone calls to Spain. It was then that Palomino decided to pledge his loyalty to him.

“Comandante: I will do whatever you ask of me, but I need to call the United States.”

“What are your skills?”

“I play the *congas*.”

“Consider it done.”

Palomino called weekly. Despite the fact that Dick Loco claimed to not have heard of Etiwanda since 1962, Palomino expanded his search beyond Spanish Harlem and began a daily hounding of New York telephone operators to search for every Etiwanda Torres in the five boroughs.

Whenever Palomino wasn't brooding over the telephone, he bonded with El Comandante over stories of world travels and of love for the music of the Eastern Cuban highlands, which El Comandante confessed to having fallen in love with while fighting along El Ché Guevara during the Cuban Revolution. Inspired by Palomino, El Comandante swept all twelve courtyards of La Modelo searching for musically capable convicts. On Christmas Day, 1963 Palomino submitted the approximately eight hundred applicants to the musical test of mimicking percussion patterns with shank handles and AK-47 bolts banging on prison bars. After much deliberation, Palomino commissioned a twenty man Afro-Cuban band from the most rhythmically gifted inmates without regard for race or political persuasion. Palomino named the band El Comandante y su Charanga Colombia. He named it after El Comandante because he—El Comandante—turned out to be a singer as charismatic and talented as the his idol Benny Moré had been before dying earlier that year. While waiting for El Comandante's contacts to smuggle the twenty-three required instruments from the Caribbean coast, Palomino spent twelve hours a day training the Charanga *Colombia* in the delicacies of African percussion and a cappella instrumentation.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*“That’s nothing,” my mother says when I come back from the trolleys, from selling the afternoon extra of El Tiempo. She says this when she asks and I tell her what the paper says. The atrocities of the Nazi concentration camp. “You should see what your grandfather Agamenón did to the liberals during the Thousand-day War.” I already know the stories, because I think this is all my mother knows of her father, that he killed over five hundred people in his lifetime, that no one ever caught him, but that he’d had the entire Republic of Colombia terrified from 1872 to 1900. This is her—and therefore my—only link to the past.*

*I sit down at the table, waiting for an aguapanela she never shares with me, though I hear it boiling on the stove, at the same time that I hear everything else that is happening in this entire building, in this crammed, musky and cold corner of Bogotá, facing the bustle, the trolley carts, the horse-drawn carriages, the cars and the black suits of Jimenez Avenue. I look down and swallow spit because she has forbidden me to speak to her unless she asks me a specific question. She drinks anise firewater.*

*“Besides,” she continues. “The Germans are decent people. They are doing the world a favor, getting rid of Jews, Gypsies and faggots. One day you’ll understand,” she says, blowing smoke through the window to the cold afternoon. She goes to the room, but I still see her undressing because I’m curious, and every man who comes to this apartment watches her undress, and I want to know what they see in the skin of African mixed with British, mixed with Sicilian, mixed with everything else, in the sunken eyes that are the object of my hate.*

*“If your grandfather was here, you wouldn’t be shining shoes or selling papers. For what? My mother never worked a day in her life and look at me. I have to work every night because of you.” She straps on the corset. Rolls the leggings up her thighs. “There is always*

*someone who wants someone else dead. That's why the entire world is at war right now. That's why my mother always had food on the table. With the world how it is right now, do you know how big you could be? What you need to do is make a name for yourself and support your mother," she says, turning around, coming toward me with a slip on a hanger. "You need to make your grandfather and your mother proud. Look at me," she says, and I do. She takes the slip off the hanger and taps the back of my head with the wood. She picks up the paper. "This could be you, doing this. Getting rid of Jews and faggots. This is in our blood."*



4 Aug 1964

On the day of the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the eruption of the Vietnam War—not even a week since Ranger 7 had crash-landed into the moon—Palomino drooled over the beauty of the Charanga Colombia’s hand-crafted *conga* drums, xylophones, flutes, trumpets, upright basses, cowbells and accordions, which had arrived at La Modelo overnight.

He looked and felt like a mambo star, like Tito Puente, Tito Rodríguez or Machito—or even Pérez Prado—playing for sold out crowds in Manhattan. El Comandante had smuggled for him a wardrobe of pastel-colored double-breasted jackets and flannel trousers hemmed to account for his missing leg. The unruly beard that once subjugated his face had been tamed into a bushy Moustachio Fantastico, and his degenerate mane had been chopped into an asymmetrical crew cut with dangling finger curls.

On the night the United States Congress passed the Southeast Asia Resolution, Palomino played his congas and fantasized about Etiwanda’s dance solo rendition of Tito Rodríguez’s “Buenas Noches Che Ché” until the calluses on his palms disappeared into raw flesh. La Charanga Colombia drilled and rehearsed daily under Palomino’s command with military rigor, mastering the canon of Afro-Cuban disciplines.

24 Dec 1966

Orvil ‘Perico’ Macuña, La Modelo’s warden, took notice of La Charanga Colombia’s musical prowess shortly after the Watts riots in Los Angeles. Bogotá city councilmen came to the warden’s office protesting that no business was getting done in the Puente Aranda neighborhood because the sidewalks on Jimenez Avenue had been invaded by daily street parties, and that the hordes of *Bogotanos* and out-of-towners congregating on the outside walls of La Modelo’s

second courtyard to listen to the jailhouse band caused infuriating traffic jams that extended to the city's Northern Highway.

The warden moved the band to La Modelo's third floor and tried to make a profit by selling *buñuelos*, *empanadas*, and Charanga Colombia t-shirts on the side of Jimenez Avenue. When the warden's entrepreneurial experiments failed, Palomino became fearful of losing his newly acquired bunk and the daily phone calls to New York the warden had given him.

Palomino enlightened the warden to the fact that the people of Bogotá had never actually seen La Charanga Colombia. The warden then, after many visits, convinced the Higher Authorities to bless 'The Most Dangerous Concert on Earth,' to be held on La Modelo's second courtyard on the day of the band's third anniversary—Christmas Day 1966.

On the day of the concert, despite the Archbishop's edict banning "stupidity, laziness and mambo," thousands of dark-skinned Colombians hailing from every corner of the country's absurd geography paid the fifty peso admission and gathered on La Modelo's roof and walls for a chance to see the band the national newspaper El Tiempo had dubbed 'The Bogotá Beatles' because of the dementia their music had stirred amongst the *pueblo*—the working class people. They played Tito Puente, Orquesta Aragón and Machito covers while it rained as it always did in Bogotá. The primitive sound system shorted and malfunctioned. The combined weight of the upright bass and the bassist cracked through the makeshift stage. Nevertheless, nobody on the courtyards, the hallways, the roofs, the guard towers or the sidewalks noticed for long enough to stop dancing. *Bogotanos* in the farthest reaches of the city claimed to have heard Palomino's magical solos from inside their homes by listening through glasses held against their windows—and that the *congas* were as loud as the car bombs of *La Violencia*. News of La Charanga Colombia's epic concert reverberated within the nation's borders and took on a mythical power

akin to the legends of *La Pata Sola*—the one-hoofed witch who protected the Amazon rainforest by draining the blood out of hunters and poachers.

Having recorded nothing, La Charanga Colombia became shrouded in mystery and known only by the hummed renditions of fans who could find no words to describe the powerful sound of La Charanga Colombia's timeless Cuban favorites like "Guantanamera," and "The Peanut Vendor." Such was the level of speculation that the daily newspaper *El Tiempo* had mistakenly identified El Comandante as the brains behind La Charanga Colombia in a series of prize-winning investigative columns about the emergence of the jailhouse band. Palomino didn't care. As an apocryphal note, a reporter who had interviewed El Comandante after the concert asked Palomino what inspired his prodigal drum playing.

"My Etiwanda," Palomino said without stopping to talk.

5 Jun 1967

"That is nonsense. Salsa is something you pour on your food," Palomino said. He was appalled. Being the only Anglophone in the band, Palomino was the only one who spoke to Saul Rothstein, the New York chiropractor turned record mogul who had traveled to Colombia for the sole purpose of adding La Charanga Colombia to the all star line-up at La Clave Records.

"Mambo, Cha Cha, Guagancó. Too many names for gringos and Europeans to care about. So we put it all under one name. Salsa. Same music. More money. So the way I see it, you have to be crazy not to do it. The Authorities are willing to commute your sentences to let you record at Fuentes Records right here in Colombia. Think about it. They're talking about letting you tour with the Clave All Stars through Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Canada, the United States—"

“There’s a problem. I’m not allowed back in the United States. Which Authorities?”

“People with power. This is big money business. Do you know how many big names Clave Records has gotten out of Cuba? You play your drums and let me worry about the rest.”

He pushed his Onassis glasses up on his condor-like nose.

“Mr. Rothstein, have you heard about Etiwanda?”

“Who?”

“What about Dick Loco?”

“Moved to Rockland County to count sheep or something. Look. The Montuno Street is done with. They lost their liquor license last year. This is a new era. Clave Records. Worldwide. You in or what?”

“I’m in.” He imagined himself back in New York, with Etiwanda in his arms.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*“Buenas Noches Estocolmo,” El Comandante says and I start with only one hand. He’s high, but still functional.*

*It’s too dark for me to see the thousands of chalk-colored faces, but I know they’re there. I can feel their ears poring over my three drums. I’m playing Cuban drums, in Sweden of all places, in a country with a damn king. The Scandinavians don’t care that we’re outside and I can barely feel my fingers—it’s better that way anyway—and that we can all see each other’s breaths swirling and rising. From where I am, it looks like I’m boiling and steaming the crowd with every tap of the drum. Like my cold hands are keeping them warm.*

*I tap and tap, a simple tumbao. Nothing fancy. It’s the violin’s time to shine. Alfreddito paces back and forth in front of me, sliding the horsehair over the strings while I tap and slap. Cu-cum-pa! Cu-cum-pa! I’m sweating, squirming in my seat and then the piano and the timbal join in and this jam gets good. El Comandante slurs the lyrics I wrote. He taps the clave sticks, but he slurs the words well, and I’m thankful we’re in Stockholm where few people speak Spanish and where my lyrics sound like baby gabble. The drums become powerful. Every time I strike them, I feel the power of mortars landing below me and shaking the earth, as if I am the fucking god of war and I’m commanding everything, like I’m Mickey Mouse in that cartoon where he’s a wizard blowing up the earth.*

*I’m tired, but I play faster and now my palms feel raw. We sing. We all sing the chorus. “Mi Charanga, que rica está...”—my charanga, how good it is...—I mouth the words and then I think I’m saying “Etiwanda, que linda está...” and I think all of Stockholm is singing your name, saying how pretty you are, and then I see your shape, your outline, your shoulders, your thighs that look like mountain ridges, all forming out of the curling breaths of cold Scandinavians. And*

*then you're dancing a mambo with Cuban Pete in front of me, and I get jealous but I remember it's all in my own damn head and I can give myself a second leg and I can ask Cuban Pete to step aside, and I can dance with you if I want and then you tell me 'I have loved you,' and I say 'Me too.' Then I wonder if the private investigator has finally found you, and I see El Comandante staring at me with those eyes that say "Next time I send you on a mission, I'm going to make sure you get mortared" and I realize I've jumped off the clave once again.*

*And I catch up with the — — — — of the clave and I curse the fact that I'm halfway around the world, near the fucking Arctic circle and I don't know where you are, and I curse the fact that there's a crowd standing before me, swaying to my tumbao, and the only thing I want is to have you—the one person who isn't there dancing to it. And then I curse El Comandante, out loud, screaming "malparido" because no matter how many times I jump off clave, it's going to be his passions and his love of money that in the end will destroy this band. And I wipe my sweat, and I don't enjoy the applause every musician in the world works his whole life for. I look at his sideburns, and I imagine what it would be like, the thrill of taking a knife to his throat, from one sideburn to the other.*

### Track 3—Guaguancó

Newark Metropolitan Airport. Newark, New Jersey, USA.

15 November, 1968.

Palomino hadn't heard from the investigator he'd hired to find Etiwanda. The band was on a layover, on its way to record its first live album with the Clave All Stars at Toronto's Canadian National Stadium. Despite the fact that he was being paid well, he was tired—tired of turning down the meaningless women who wanted to sleep with him despite the disgust he knew they felt for his missing leg. But most of all, he was tired of El Comandante's ego, which had grown exponentially since the day the band had gotten its first number one radio hit, "El Dorado Boogaloo."

El Comandante had changed as soon as he had left prison. He began to dress the band in white suits, gold chains and oversized collars, insisting all band members show their chest hairs through their shirts. The jam sessions became lifeless and routine. Music-making was no longer the priority. Instead of drilling to master the Afro-Cuban repertoire, El Comandante decided the band would simply remake the Americanized rhumbas and latunes of the thirties and forties in the deplorable style of American Doo Wop, which had become popular with Nuyoricans since Palomino's deportation. El Comandante devoted time that should have been spent drilling, improvising and practicing to making business deals that had little to do with music and everything to do with money. Nothing was the same anymore. Playing for La Charanga didn't have the purity of drumming in prison, or playing at The Montuno Street.

America felt different on that day. It had a brand new president and was fighting a war in Vietnam and losing it horribly. But even the sky seemed different. Palomino stepped down the staircase of the Avianca plane. He set his crutch down on a slushy and unsteady tarmac—his first

taste of American land in six years—he almost slipped, was struck by a searing wind and pelted by snow flurries that melted against his skin. Looking at the waving American flag, he knew his investigator had found nothing and he felt his heart sinking, slowing.

Palomino had spent months dreading this flight. On the way in, he had seen the Empire State Building as a sharpened black pencil rising out of a heap of garbage in the distance, knowing that he was as close to Etiwanda as he'd ever been since 1962, and that he could do nothing about it. He could almost see her down there, walking down Park Avenue in the Fall, his foot crunching fallen leaves, her slicked hair over her eye, covering the bruises her new boyfriend had given her. That was the type of man she'd always gravitated to. That was the type of man she'd always complained about to Palomino during their strolls of the northern edge of Central Park, while repeating, "But I know he loves me," and Palomino had never said back to her 'I would never do that to you.'

Months before the flight to Newark, Palomino had pleaded with El Comandante to allow him to book a separate flight, one with a layover anywhere else, anywhere where he wouldn't be distracted from the music.

"I don't pay for the tickets," El Comandante had said. "Clave Records does."

"Fine. I'll pay for it out of my own pocket."

"*Carajo!* I'm not saying anything else about this. This band flies together."

As the engines of the DC-8 wound down, Palomino thought about taking the Hudson and Manhattan Railroad into the city to walk the blocks where she had once lived and danced, but he knew he couldn't. Finding her in the vastness of New York City would have been impossible for a man on a crutch. It was pleasant to think that he could channel the angst he'd felt over the past six years into the physical task of finding her, but he couldn't leave the airport anyway. La



Charanga Colombia was on a two-hour layover on its way to Toronto International and the man who was supposed to provide Palomino and the rest of the band with a false American visa was waiting for them in Canada.

A crisscross of wet tire tracks sprawled ahead of him, lining his path to the terminal. Two brown men wrapped in thick layers of navy blue clothing were unloading the bags from the airplane. He saw his congas—stuffed by El Comandante with bricks of marijuana—wrapped in three black bundles, sliding down the luggage belt, crashing against checkered cloth cases and leather duffel bags. The baggage handlers probably didn't even know the first thing about how a man was to treat a musical instrument—like a delicate woman, the way he treated Etiwanda the day she asked him to dance with her, elated that she'd nailed the eight spins she needed to do in her performance to Tito Rodríguez's "Buenas Noches Ché Ché."

The baggage handlers probably knew nothing about mambo. They probably listened to soul or rock 'n' roll. He felt powerless, wanting to take the three drums in his free hand, empty them of the filth El Comandante had filled them with, and drag them himself all the way to Canada so, and why not? Why let some punks mistreat them?

He stopped. The band didn't notice and kept moving toward the terminal. He hopped across the tarmac toward the handlers. "*Carajo!*" he yelled in Spanish, his words getting lost amidst the roar of jet engines and spinning propellers. "Hey. Hey." He tapped one of them on the shoulder with the crutch. "Give me those drums."

"Excuse me?" The one with the long hair said.

"The drums. You don't know how to treat them. Give them to me."

"No," the other one said. "You can't do that. They're too big to be carry-on."

“You let me worry about that.” Palomino reached into his trench-coat, pulled out a wad of rolled twenty-dollar bills and shoved them in the long-haired man’s sweatshirt. “What’s it to you?”

They said something to each other in English while the long-haired one inspected the wad of bills. Palomino couldn’t make it out through the noise and the years of hearing Spanish only. “Your problem,” the man said.

Palomino grabbed all three drum straps and slowly crutched his way to the terminal, leaving a wide meandering track on the snow, not really sure of how he was going to get those drums on the flight to Toronto.

Once inside, after sliding off his trench-coat and shaking his arm to work the tension out of his triceps, Palomino stood under one of the terminal’s heater vents until his nose felt warm again and stood the congas up on the corner next to Cachetero’s flute. La Charanga Colombia had taken over the terminal’s bar. The only open spot that remained was right next to El Comandante—the one person Palomino didn’t want to drink with. Palomino set his crutch against the bar and placed his right butt cheek on the barstool.

“What *putas* possessed you to take those drums out of that airplane?” El Comandante said. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Savages who don’t know what to do with a fine instrument. I’m going to have to tighten these drums.”

“Don’t...do it now. There’s a lot of money in there. This *malparido hijueputa...*” El Comandante slouched in front of five empty glasses, playing with his curls. He leaned forward and muttered something to Cachetero, the flutist, probably something else about the death of

Martin Luther King, which he hadn't stopped pontificating about all day. After a few drinks, Palomino could tell El Comandante was no longer as angry. "See, you're doing fine, Quinto. I don't know why you would even want to go out into this...America," El Comandante said. "That city there is the very root of imperialist tyranny. I'm not mad at you anymore. You're just fucking stupid sometimes, is all."

Palomino sat in silence, watching the flurries dancing past the terminal windows, and a pair of attractive blondes marching past him, one of them wearing shorts that exposed her bare upper thighs, the other one wearing leather boots that reached her knees. America—the world, the universe (Humanity had reached the moon!)—had changed so much during the time he'd spent in prison and he couldn't deal with that. He wondered how Etiwanda was dressing now. Probably just like them. She had been the first girl of the mambo crowd to start dressing like Jacqueline Kennedy before everyone else—even a few guys—started doing it. Palomino ordered a glass of straight rye whiskey. "No ice," Palomino said in English.

"You do know we have a stadium waiting for us in Toronto, don't you?" El Comandante said, pushing his pink sunglasses up on the bridge of his nose.

"Don't you come to me talking about professionalism." The nerve. Palomino leaned back on his stool and let the drink drain down his throat, burning it. He wiped his mouth without replying. "Another one," he said to the bartender.

"No, no," El Comandante said.

"You dragged me to this city, where the woman I love probably is, and I can't do anything about it. At least have the decency of letting me get drunk." Palomino downed the second glass. "One more."

“We leave in about an hour. Somebody watch this guy before he fucks something up again,” El Comandante said.

Palomino drank the third glass without tasting it. He couldn't take this anymore, El Comandante's curls, his comments, being so alone. He reached down and sifted through his pockets looking for the investigator's phone number. He lifted the crutch and placed his weight on it, making a beeline toward a pair of side-by-side payphone booth.

“Where are you going?” El Comandante said.

Palomino crossed a throng of travelers, stopped, turned around and grabbed the drums. After causing a brief traffic jam, he flung himself into one of the wooden booths, his hip slamming against the wall and dragging down onto the chair. He stood the drums next to the booth and slid the door of the payphone shut. Exhaling, he lifted the receiver and waited for the dial tone. A light flickered above him. He ruffled through his pocketbook for the bag of dimes he'd changed in Bogotá prior to boarding the airplane. His fingers trembled as they dialed the seven numbers. He held his breath while the rotary dial returned to its starting position every single time, sounding like unmotivated maracas.

“Montalba,” the investigator answered.

“Pimentel—”

“—I was wondering when you were going to call. Where are you?”

“I'm in the States. At Newark airport. I'm on a layover to Toronto.”

“Good. Great. I got something swell for you.”

“You got what?” Palomino moved the crutch around the booth.

“Address and phone number... in Queens.”

His heart dropped into his chest. He was finally in the same country with La Lupe, and he would soon know exactly where she was. He wanted to thank Montalba, but he didn't know what to say. He'd been waiting for this moment for over six years. He looked outside the telephone booth through a woman dressed in pink, dragging her daughter by the arm. El Comandante and the rest of the band were still sitting at the bar.

“Well, do you want the number?”

He felt like he was writing his fate with the fountain pen, like his leg was still attached to him and he was charging up Hill 391 to his demise.

He removed his scarf. The telephone booth was becoming hot. 1-2--1-2--He looked down at the paper. His hands were sweating, smudging the ink on the number three. 3---4----6-----2---6-----6-----0----- Ring.

Static.

Ring.

Static.

He was about to talk to Etiwanda. He wondered if he'd recognize her voice. He wondered if she'd recognize his voice.

Ring.

The first thing he'd tell her was that he loved her more than he'd ever loved anything and that he was sure of it.

Ring.

He wondered if she'd seen him on the television, or if she'd received any of the letters he'd sent her. He'd tell her he was going to get his papers and go down to see her as soon as the tour was finished, and she'd be so proud of him.

Ring.

"Hallo?" A woman answered. It was a hybrid between the English 'hello' and the Spanish 'aló.' It was her voice. He knew it. He felt his heart speeding and a tingling sensation spreading through his arteries.

"Etiwanda?"

"Who is it?"

"It's me. Palomino. Palomino Mondragón."

"Ah," she said.

Silence.

"Etiwanda?" he said.

Silence. Was it her?

"Etiwanda, I'm back. I'm back in New York...Did you get any of my letters?"

Silence.

"*Bebé*, I've missed you...have you...have you seen me on...are you there?"

Silence.

"I left...They deported me to Colombia and put me in jail, but see...everything's good now...I left...I left without telling you that..."

Silence.

"...I've loved you since the first day you danced in front of me."

Silence.

“Etiwanda?”

Dial tone.

He’d tried calling back seventeen times, but he knew the telephone in Queens was off the hook. He sat back inside the booth and spotted his reflection in the glass. He scrutinized the scars of his face, the wisps of his haggard beard and the profile of his crooked teeth. Despite the new name, the haircuts, the shaves and the clothes, he was still the same Palomino. Of course Etiwanda wouldn’t want him. Through the glass, he saw El Comandante ordering the band to gather its belongings. All of them were throwing on their white coats embroidered with the name of the band in golden letters, wrapping their scarves around their necks, slipping gloves on.

He tried again with no answer. A loud knock on the glass startled him. He looked outside and saw Cachetero pointing to his wrist, though he didn’t wear a watch. The public address system was saying something. Palomino waved Cachetero off. This was the worst thing that could have happened: At least if she’d rejected him, he’d know, but she had said nothing.

He would call the investigator back.

“Montalba.”

“I called the number and no one said anything to me.”

“The information’s solid. Maybe she just doesn’t want to talk to you. Did you dial the area code?”

“I know how to dial phone numbers, Montalba.”

“Then maybe she doesn’t want to hear from you.”

“She’s not that type of gal. We used to talk for hours at the deli after she got done at The Montuno Street. I assure you that at the very least she’d want to know how I’m doing.”

Another knock on the glass. Behind Cachetero El Comandante was yelling.

“You need to get me to talk to her again. What do you think I’m paying you for?”

Palomino said.

Montalba was saying something when the door to the booth swung open, and El Comandante reached in, grabbing Palomino by the shirt collar, screaming, “What do you think this is? We have to go. We’re going to miss our flight to Toronto.”

“I can’t hear you,” Palomino said to Montalba through the receiver.

“I said I’ll try to talk to her. I’ll try to talk to her for you. What’s your number there?”

“Let’s go. Let’s go,” El Comandante said.

“Where would the number be on a payphone?” Palomino said.

The line clicked. The dime dropped. El Comandante was pressing his finger over the hookswitch.

“We have a plane to catch. Let’s go,” El Comandante said. “The whole band’s waiting on you.”

“What would you do that for? I’m this close to seeing Etiwanda,” Palomino said. “She’s right there in New York. In Queens.”

“We’re recording a live album, *por Dios!* There’s a stadium full of Canadians waiting for us. Besides, you and everybody in this band knows that girl’s moved on with her life and is fucking some other guy by now. You should move on too. It’s been six years.”

Palomino hit El Comandante’s in the face with the telephone receiver and thrust his crutch at his stomach. “Don’t ever speak like that about her.” Palomino reached into his pocket for a dime and for Montalba’s phone number.



He was trying to dial Montalba's number when Cachetero grabbed him by the hair and dragged his face against the cold metal of the payphone. "*Gran Hijueputa*," Cachetero said. Palomino bit down on his lip to keep from screaming.

"Leave him. Leave him," El Comandante said, pressing his hand against his bleeding face, drawing the attention of a Port Authority policeman. "He's done nothing but drag us down for these past two years with his fucking sadness. If he wants to throw this all away, he's a fool. We can find someone else to slap the congas."

"*Mi Comandante*, but La Charanga was his idea. He taught me everything I know," someone said in the back. Palomino couldn't tell who. Cachetero let go of Palomino and slapped him on the side of the head with three fingers, as if starting a *tumbao* on the conga drum.

"Look at your jacket." El Comandante took off his jacket and held it up, gold letters facing out. "What does it say? 'El Comandante y su Charanga Colombia?' We can either record a live album or wait for this guy to finish going nuts. He doesn't care about you. Why should you care about him?" The policeman was drawing closer.

"I never asked any of you to sacrifice anything for me," Palomino screamed. "Go record the fucking album. This band has become a travesty, anyway. And this guy." Palomino pointed the receiver at El Comandante. "He thinks he's Elvis Presley. Since when did playing the Cuban *son* become about alcohol and drugs?"

While the policeman stood between the phone booth and El Comandante—right next to the drums—Palomino turned back toward his payphone and dialed Montalba's phone number. He looked through the glass at La Charanga Colombia disappearing, one or two of them looking back at the drums, El Comandante waving them off. Turning around with the receiver wedged between his ear and his shoulder, Palomino made the American 'okay' hand-sign to the

policeman, hoping he'd go away. He didn't care anymore. What he cared about was Etiwanda. As the phone's dial clicked and clicked, returning to its starting place, Palomino thought of music and of being all alone in the world again, as if it was 1948 all over again, and he'd just left the carnage of Bogotá. His band had left him.

"Montalba."

"Sorry, I—"

"—hey, when are you leaving for Toronto?"

"I'm not going anymore."

"What about the band?"

"I want to do nothing else but find her."

"Good for you. Because I got a hold of the gal."

"Was it the right number?"

"Yes."

"Well...what happened? Why..."

"...she was just too excited to hear from you, she couldn't talk. She was crying her eyes out when I talked to her."

"Really?" Palomino inched his butt forward on his seat. It probably wasn't true, but what if it was? Maybe it was. She had always been the sentimental type. He had no other purpose in life than waiting for that moment. He had to take the opportunity.

"You don't have any American papers, right?"

"Why?"

"Well, you can't get out of the terminal without going through immigration...Call me back in five minutes."

He did.

The drums were still there. The cop had walked away.

“Montalba.”

“So?”

“Okay, we can’t get you to the girl, but we can get her to you.”

“I want to talk to her.”

“There’s no time. You will have to catch up on a plane out of the US.”

“She’s coming with me? But she told me once she never wanted to leave New York.” He suspected Montalba was lying to him, that he was going to take his money and run but what else could he do, if this was as close as he was ever going to get close to Etiwanda? He couldn’t just leave the one opportunity fate had placed before him. Money was worth nothing if he could have no peace, and Palomino Mondragón could not know peace until he rescued Etiwanda from the life she herself could never leave.

“To the contrary. She’s dying to get out...Do you want to see her or not?”

“Of course,” Palomino said.

“We’re going to have to put you two on the first flight to Bogotá.”

“I’m going to go buy tickets. I’ll call you back.”

“No,” Montalba yelled. “You can’t without going through immigration. Or do you want to be sent back before she’s with you? We’re going to do what I say. I know what I’m doing. Why do you think you’re paying me?” It was reckless. Being there, still in Newark, while La Charanga Colombia was on its way to Canada was reckless, but being there—the possibility of seeing Etiwanda—was all Palomino had. “Look. I have a man at that airport. You have money on you, right?”

Palomino muttered a positive response.

“He speaks Spanish. He’s a baggage handler. His name is Otilio. I’ll find ticket prices. He comes gets the money from you. We buy the tickets. I bring you your girl and *fuá!* A happy ending for your love story in Bogotá. What airline did you fly?”

“Avianca. I want to talk to her.” If he could hear her voice again, he’d know all was well, and that the nightmare would be over, that she would run to him the way she did at the Montuno Street when she’d introduce him to her ever-changing boyfriends, and she would wrap her toned arms around him and squeeze stronger than a flak vest and she would be the one to tell him, ‘I have loved you in silence. You were the only one who ever listened to me, who put up with my scenes, who never judged me, who never tried to fuck me,’ and Palomino would say, ‘I have loved you.’

“You’ll see her soon enough,” Montalba said over the phone. “How long have you waited for this day? Be a little patient. Look. Do you want to tell this girl you love her to her face, or do you want it to be over the telephone? Think about it. Why don’t you go find some flowers in the terminal instead?”

As soon as he hung up, Palomino tried calling Etiwanda twice. She was probably talking to Montalba and he was making arrangements to bring her to him. Or maybe he would never hear from Montalba or Etiwanda again and his money would be gone. Maybe. He didn’t understand why it was always so difficult for him to accept good things could happen to him. He’d lived his dream of playing on a world-renowned band and never even enjoyed it because he’d been waiting for her. He lifted the receiver to call again and set it down. He was going to wait. Maybe now that he would have her, he would form his own band with Etiwanda singing, and they would tour the world together, and he would finally be able to enjoy it.

Palomino awoke to the beard of the long-haired baggage handler whom he had paid for the drums. He couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep. The drums were still there. "What time is it?" Palomino said.

"Almost eight," Otilio said.

"*Mierda.*"

"He said to tell you two hundred dollars."

"That much?" Palomino rubbed his eyes.

"It's last minute."

"What time does the flight leave?" Palomino rubbed his eyes.

"Three"

"Am or pm?"

"He said I have to hurry if you want to get on this flight."

"Are you going to bring her here?"

"I'm just delivering the money." Otilio kept looking back. "Look, I'm having someone lie for me while I take the drive into the city and back. I have to go. I don't want to lose my job."

Palomino reached into the emergency fund, the wad of dollars he had stashed in the fold of his right pant leg, right below where his calf was supposed to be. He counted two hundred dollars and handed them to Otilio. What else was he going to do with those dollars? What did he have to do in life besides finding Etiwanda? He stood up, stretched and sat down in front of the phone. He dialed the number in Queens. No answer. He dialed the number to Montalba's office. Nothing. Montalba was probably on his way to get Etiwanda, or maybe he was buying a bottle of rum at a *bodega*. Palomino slammed the phone.

Palomino was going to drive himself insane calling. He'd waited so long for this day. What if Montalba was right? He'd waited six years already. He could wait a little longer. He decided he'd retune the drums. As he reached for the zipper to the *quinto*, he realized that it wouldn't be a good idea. He hadn't thought about the *marimba* stashed inside them. He grinned, thinking of his former band, now in Canada without a *conguero* or a set of *tumbadoras*. El Comandante was probably going crazy because more than half of the shipment he was taking to Canada was still in Newark. Bored, anxious, Palomino stood up and exited the booth. The terminal was emptying. He counted the dimes in his bag. He was running out. He searched the terminal for a flower stand. Everything was closed.

Palomino had spent the early night watching planes taking off and landing, and the late night watching floodlights hitting sporadic flurries over an empty tarmac. He sat in front of the window with one of those stolen checkered red and blue Avianca fleece throws wrapped around his shoulders. He thought about the Olympics in Mexico, the dead students and how news of the massacre at Tlateloco reminded him of *El Bogotazo*. He didn't want to think about that. He was a new man, far removed from 1948.

And now that Etiwanda would finally recognize how much she had missed him, how much she owed to his relentless love—who besides Palomino would have the patience to listen to the same stories over and over again: Etiwanda walking through a bodega at 3am, still dressed for the Montuno Street saying: “Dick told me if we did it I'd prove myself. He said we'd be together forever,” or Palomino's favorite, she forking through scrambled eggs at the twenty-four hour diner on Lexington, “Don't worry about it...No...He only hits me because he cares. If he didn't care, he wouldn't hit me.” And she'd confess to him her musings about her *Príncipe de*

*Hadas*, the muscular and hairy man of her fantasies who would come and sweep her off her feet—always the man who was not there, but whom she loved nonetheless, the man whom she was searching for by fucking asshole after asshole after asshole, when what she longed for, what she had always wanted had been before her—skinny, legless, shy, unkempt—but she'd been too blind to see it. A man who would not promise to love her forever, but who would love her till his last day. But she would finally see this and together they would open a new chapter in their life.

It was too late now to call anywhere and he was through being patient. Where the fuck was Montalba with Etiwanda? Maybe they hadn't been able to book a late flight and were coming early in the morning. Maybe there was ice on the George Washington Bridge. He was hungry and frustrated so he imagined seeing Etiwanda in the terminal. First an outline, of course, an outline that materialized in the shadows created by the moonlight crashing through the panel windows, and he'd see her unmistakable face, a face of the world, with the eyes of a Persian princess, the nose of a Portuguese countess, the cheeks of a *Taína* warrior, and the skin tone of a Congolese queen diluted by many doses of milk.

She walked past him without saying a thing. And why if it was his own imagination? No, she turned around and screamed 'Palomino, so long without seeing you. I've missed you,' but she wouldn't say stuff like that. He put the corner of the throw in his mouth and began to chew. After ensuring that no one was around, he unzipped the drum cases just enough to expose the drumhead, and began to beat away in a pathetic low-volume jam session, taking in the inundating scent of marijuana.

He couldn't play. He dragged his things to the terminal's split-flap display, looking for the next flight to Bogotá. The display hadn't been updated all night. He looked outside, pressed

his hands and his nose against the frigid glass, getting a hint of how cold it was outside. Neither Otilio nor his partner were anywhere to be seen.



*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I try to stand still. I am in the ranks of the Chulavita Platoon's formation after all, facing the plaza and the dilapidated government office of a town—a name I don't remember—a town that looks like all the other ones. I can't help it. I shiver, and I fear Black Sparrow will see me. I can't feel my knuckles. I can't feel my fingers wrapped around the barrel of the rifle. I can't feel the rims of my ears. The tip of my nose. My blood-speckled bedroll—the only thing keeping me warm—is slung across my shoulder, dragging on the floor, the butt of my rifle resting on it, because these bedrolls are too big for thirteen-year-olds like us.*

*I executed a man today. He was an Indian. A Liberal. My first kill, and Black Sparrow gave me a pat in the back. A father. I made him kneel before me, because he was so tall, and I placed the tip of the rifle against his temple and pulled the trigger, and the warmth of his head splashed me. I don't know why I killed him. I killed him because Black Sparrow told me to, because the man was a Liberal, but I don't know what this means, and I don't understand why it is wrong to be a Liberal. And I am smart enough to think that this should bother me. That I should regret this, but I don't feel any remorse. I feel powerful for the first time ever, and I like this.*

*“We all have to die sooner or later,” Black Sparrow says to us. “Sooner is better because you suffer less.” He has probably not suffered much because he is fifteen at the most. It has been weeks since any of us in the Chulavita Platoon have mentioned our mothers, and this makes me happy, because I never want to see the bitch again—the bitch that sent me to these mountains to wake up before dawn and learn to see pigeons as meals. No one should learn to see pigeons as meals, and to feel their thin skeletons crunching inside the mouth, piercing gums. No one should*

*have to suck on a pigeon's ribcage to get a strand of tasteless flesh. No one should have to go hungry because they can't shoot a bird that won't sit still long enough to be killed.*

*I shiver, seeing the flocks of pigeons landing and taking off from the plaza—the heart of a town that seems like a fossil of itself. I swear I will learn how to shoot these pigeons, one by one—one bullet, one kill—as they dart through the thin air of the páramo. I will learn to pinpoint the point in the universe where the bullet will hit so that it will blow only their head off, so that I can preserve the most flesh, so that I never go hungry another day in these cold and miserable mountains.*

*This—the tropical alpine grassland of Boyacá—is the highest point in the world, it seems. The low and resilient bushes around the town's plaza, in front of the crumbling church—most of its ceramic tiles cracked or missing—the bushes are dead but hanging to a thread of life, and I am surrounded by local Indians bundled up in their hats, in their wool shawls, in their dark, mourning colors. They stare at me. They know I've killed one of them. I look down at my dusty boots and shiver.*

*Black Sparrow keeps us in line. We are to be inspected by a Mister Stallworthy from the United States War Department, and I can spot the American coming out of the church because he seems unmoved by the cold, because his head is the color of Zipa's legendary gold at El Dorado. Next to him is the priest, and when they are within shouting range, Black Sparrow begins yelling.*

*"We are to do," Black Sparrow says, "What the police cannot do. What the Army cannot do. Quench this popular uprising. Destroy the anarchy the Liberals want to bring us. The godless chaos. These mobs that want to destroy the legally elected government, the choice that the people of Colombia have made. They're trying to disrupt the order of things, the way things have worked for centuries. They're trying to destroy everything that has made us great. We will slit the*

*throat of the heathen Liberals. Drink their blood. The war in Europe has ended but ours is just starting.” He sees the priest approaching, the clergyman’s soutane dragging through the sand.*

*“Platoon! Attention!”*

*Our feet snap together—not in unison—as the American walks by, not even looking at us. A gust of wind almost knocks me over. And I don’t really know what makes me a Conservative, or what makes a Liberal a Liberal. I don’t understand Black Sparrow’s speeches, and I don’t even think he understands them himself. All I know is that they’re the enemy, that they will kill me when I see them. That I will kill them when I see them, and this is good enough.*

*“These are the kids that dug?” the American mumbles in accented Spanish, and everyone’s eyes are on him. And he makes the priest—God’s representative—and Black Sparrow run to his whispers and pay attention. I have never seen an American till today, but this first one I see has power. He is not meek the way we are. He waves, and two trucks roll down the dirt path into the plaza, and Indians start unloading new, shiny rifles, taking ours and giving the new ones to us. This rifle is colder, black, all metal. Humility is not a hindrance for this American. He has more power in his voice than I do with my new rifle, and I don’t feel so powerful anymore. I look at him blowing his nose, at the dirty, sun-colored beard, and I think America has to be much better than this dead and bloodied piece of Earth on which I’m standing.*

Newark Metropolitan Airport. Newark, New Jersey, USA.

16 November, 1968.

At six, the corner of the throw shredded, he couldn't take it anymore—the wait, the angst, the insomnia, his inability to tune the drums, the yellow drabness of the terminal. It all reminded him of prison. He locked himself in the phone booth again. He began to call Montalba's office first and then the number in Corona in ten minute intervals. In Corona someone always picked up the phone and immediately hung up, eating up Palomino's change until he had only five dimes left.

At seven, he changed his last twenty dollar bill for an almost-dead bouquet of lilies, a cup of black coffee, a slice of buttered toast, and as many dimes as he could get. After gnawing on the toast and spreading crumbs all over his scarf, he chugged the scalding coffee without regard for his throat. Palomino dragged the drums back to the phone booth and called again.

No answer. Since he couldn't talk to Etiwanda, he wanted to drink. He wanted to smoke. He wanted to beat the drums. He wanted to forget. He wanted to be inside a hole in La Modelo Prison in Bogotá, a *bareto* of marijuana taking all his worries away. The anxiousness was killing him.

At seven thirty, he dragged his things back to the split-flap display. The first flight to Bogotá wasn't leaving till three. He looked through the window at the tarmac. The little bit of snow that had fallen overnight was melting, and he didn't recognize any of the baggage handlers. He waited.

At three, no one showed up. Instead, a red-breasted pigeon flew frantically around the terminal, crashing headfirst into the windows, unable to get out. No one answered the phone anywhere, and Palomino watched the red and white four-engine Avianca jet take off, sated with

Colombians, leaving a trail of transparent haze that looked the way he imagined an oasis to be. He knew she wasn't coming. He knew—as soon as he'd seen the damned pigeon—that nothing, nothing was going to go well for him.

At three fifteen, he slammed the payphone receiver so many times against the hookswitch that the mouthpiece shattered into hundreds of black plastic triangles.

At four, he leaned against a pillar overlooking the tarmac and held his crutch as a soldier holds an M-2, aiming at the pigeon as it fluttered around and around the terminal. He kept turning back and forth, hopping, watching the entrance to the terminal, looking for his Etiwanda and for a man he'd never seen, as if he was pulling guard duty on the terminal of Newark Metropolitan Airport.

At five thirty-eight, the bird swooped low in front of him, as if taunting him. Palomino flung his crutch at the glass of the terminal, yelling in Spanish while passengers in suits and trench coats glared at him, standing at a safe distance. The crutch cracked the plate glass of the window in a radial pattern and a giant triangle of it came crashing down on the tarmac below, leaving a giant V-shaped hole through which the noise, the wind and the cold of New Jersey in the fall barged with violence into the terminal.

At five forty-six, he was on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind his back and the weight of a bony knee bearing down on his neck as the pigeon disappeared through the hole in the window into the overcast sky. When they asked him what his name was, he told them “Lieutenant Quinto Pimentel, at your orders.”

At six twelve, INS agents took custody of him because he had no papers and he spoke English with a clear accent. At six thirty they opened his drums and discovered forty pounds of

marijuana in tightly packed bricks. The entire time he still tried to hold hope that Etiwanda was still coming to the terminal. He knew she wasn't.

At seven the next morning he stood in the same consul's office on East Forty-Sixth Street in New York City before a different consul, a Liberal, who convinced the American agents from the Bureau of Drug Abuse Control that the Colombian Authorities would be best suited for dealing with scum like Quinto Pimentel.

This time he didn't ask for a phone call, because he knew he'd never hear from Montalba again. Though he never wanted to kill anyone again, Montalba he could kill if he got a chance to do it. Maybe Dick Loco and maybe El Comandante.

At six thirty in the evening, handcuffed, hungry and without drums or a crutch, Palomino departed Idlewild Airport back to El Dorado. With the deportation agent standing over him, Palomino stared at the incandescent skyline of Lower Manhattan. It was so beautiful—the constantly changing lights from vehicles and streetlamps reflecting off the windows of skyscrapers made it look as if the city was snapping a million pictures of itself, as if it was staging its own concert, as if the lights were dancing to their own mambo. He wondered if Etiwanda was somewhere in that festival of lights.

He closed his eyes, hoping to get some sleep for the first time in a long time. Thinking about going back to La Modelo, he grinned and laughed under his breath.

“Why the hell are you happy?” the deportation agent said. “Do you know how much trouble you're in?”

“I do.” Palomino reclined his chair. “I'm tired of hunting and playing and...I'm going to get some rest. See, I've already been to that prison. I already know what to expect.”

“And what's so darn good about that?”

“Have you ever had a dog, agent?”

“Yes.”

“You know how your dog woke up every morning and went to piss and shit in the same spot and then came and licked your fingers and then lay down at your feet, and then he asked you for some food in the exact same way every single day and never got bored of it?”

“I don’t have a dog.”

“Dogs are happy doing the same shit every day. I’m like that. I like to keep things predictable.”

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I sit up and the American nurse lurches back, scared of me because I have the wrinkled face of several wars. My head throbs. The noise. The repetition. Light filters through a scuttle hatch and the ship is cracking below me. Boards snapping beneath my feet. Regardless of what my brain is telling me—that I have a throbbing thigh, a blown-out knee and a sore tibia and fibula—I have only one foot. But the pain, the pain pulls down on my intestines. It is tearing at my spine and the nerves attached to it—all the way down to a foot that pulverized into pink mist at Hill 391.*

*I hear things repeating themselves. And I hear them every day, and I feel this voyage is never going to end, and it will be 1953 by the time we reach San Diego. I hear more things, but I'm not sure I hear anything. I hear jets and thirty-caliber machine guns. Hollow repetition. The hull vibrating, and the farther the USS Mooremacmoon splashes into the Pacific, the further I am from that peninsula, the more talkative the American nurse gets. And I don't like it. I don't understand what she says. I don't say anything back. I stare at her like I'm a caged dog and then she looks down when she's removing my bandages, which are soaked with blood so dry it looks like tar. And the leg bleeds and the impossible blood rushes out despite the leg I know is there. And I like it like that, because I know my brain is fucking with me, but I can trust my eyes. "Keep looking down, bitch," I want to say, but I don't speak English, and if I say it in Spanish, she could understand it as a plea for her pity. I want to tell her to shut the fuck up so I can hear the clanking, the banging, the snapping, so I can let them fill my brain and I can make a leg out of them.*

*I'm not going back to Colombia. Not with a last name like Mondragón. Not to be anything but what every first-born male in my family since my grandfather Agamenón has*



*been—an infallible killer. I don't know what I will do in the United States, now that I'm an invalid, now that I won't ever feel again what it's like to see a human being turn fuzzy through the front sight post of a rifle before collapsing, now that I can't do the only thing I know how to do, I'm going to become anonymous. I'm going to lose my name and invent a new Palomino—one without the last name Mondragón.*

*Fuck, it hurts. I grab the railing and I rise. To go to the noise that has been soothing me and tormenting me since I was loaded on this ship in September. To see the war going on inside the ship. The nurse moves out of my way. She hands me my crutch. I see it in her eyes. I can still instill fear with my stare, and I like that. And I hear the banging, the repetition, echoing through the cabins. And I feel the vibration of the propellers rattling my hands and the ship leans. My center of gravity is to my fucking right, in the middle of a cold white steel wall.*

*The noise comes into focus. It is like a machine gun. Like a barrage of rocket fire, like I'm back in the line at Hill 391 and I'm firing away. I hold onto the handle and hop into the mess hall, gloriously empty, save for a few black and Puerto Rican GIs, converging around drums, and I hear Spanish. “Bomba, bomba, bomba, mi hermano.”—bombs, bombs, bombs, my brother. And I see a short man who looks like Desi Arnaz, behind three tubular drums, which look like unarmed artillery shells. His hands transition back and forth between the drums, firing, firing and to me this is beautiful. This cu-cum-pá sounds like a new beginning. Like the noise the M1 makes when I load a fresh magazine, full of possibilities, cu—I pull back on the charging handle, cum—let the bolt slam forward, pushing a bullet into the chamber, pá—I squeeze the trigger. I could hear this noise all fucking day. Desi looks at me and his eyes ask me if I want to try.*

#### Track 4—Changüí

Modelo National Prison. Bogotá, D.E, Colombia.

1 Dec 1968

From his place in the Mack bus, Palomino saw stretching around the block a line of women dressed in cardigans and carrying woven baskets of food. He knew that none of them were there to see him, to fuck him or to bring him a meal. Once again, he was in familiar territory—all alone in the world and without Etiwanda. He was stripped and in-processed by the same guard who had told him that he was nobody during his first day at La Modelo in 1962. “I’ve gone halfway around the world playing drums and you’re still here looking at cocks, doing the same shit you were doing six years ago,” Palomino said to him while standing naked, leaning on his crutch.

“That may be true, but you’re still mine, *cacorro*,” the guard said.

From the bottom bunk of his cell, smothered in rough wool blankets Palomino’s heart and soul craved the blood-pumping down-beats and up-beats of Latin percussion, which he attempted to create by banging his knuckles against the rails of the bed—to drown out the memory of Etiwanda wearing a gardenia on her ear and to calm the thoughts of how close he’d come to finding her. He even started to doubt he remembered what she truly looked like. Contrary to what he’d thought, the rusting bars, the walls stained with excrement, piss and blood, the paint chips falling off the ceiling—none of those things that looked exactly as they had in 1962 provided him with any comfort or relief from his angst. The natural order of things had changed—even in prison. The leftist rebels who ruled his courtyard were no longer the sons of dead farmers or the men of the country who fought for the land that had bred and nourished them—those causes he could understand, those men he could see as honorable enemies. These new rebels were college

students, the sons of the country's privileged. They were the children of the men under whose direction Palomino had earned his place in hell. These children had everything handed to them and had thrown it all away for a romantic ideal of rebellion. These children looked the way El Comandante had wanted the members of La Charanga Colombia to look. They stood for everything that was wrong with the world.

29 Dec 1968

On a Sunday morning, while most inmates were receiving their visits or hearing mass in the first courtyard, Palomino remembered he had reasons to live. In fact, all three of the defining moments of Palomino's second stay at La Modelo would take place on Sundays at three in the afternoon.

On December 29<sup>th</sup> of 1968, the TV show Heaven's Outpost—billing itself as Colombia's source for the latest Afro-Caribbean music performers—aired for the first time. The show broadcast live from a crowded Cali's Sugarcane Fair—a weeklong celebration of street dancing, bullfighting and holiday excess taking place between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. When the show started, Palomino was dozing off on a bench, imagining Etiwanda was next to him on the 4 Train speeding through brick tenement after Bronx brick tenement, and she whispered in his ear as the train hissed on its approach to the 116<sup>th</sup> Street stop—the gardenia grazing his cheek—and she was telling him “Slow it down, slow it down so I can swing with it.” He roused, sweating, answering the call of the nascent *tumbao* drum pattern on the television.

The communist boy who fancied himself in charge of La Modelo's third courtyard—whom Palomino called El Comandantico—was standing on his tiptoes, trying to change the channel. After going for so long without hearing the soothing reverberation of a conga drum,

Palomino would not stand for this. He swung his crutch and grabbed it by the bottom, pressing the armpit pad against the TV's rotary dial. "This is music for the people of the slums, the people you say your movement wants to protect. If you change this channel, you're telling all your little followers how much of a fake you are," Palomino said, lowering his crutch.

Palomino watched the host of Heaven's Outpost—Nelson 'Mantequilla' Valbuena—in his all-white linen suit introducing the fairgoers of Cali to the "bestial sound" of the Richie Ray and Bobby Cruz Duet, who were coming straight out of New York with fresh *pachanga* and *bugalú*. A new music, combining Richie's all-trumpet sound with Bobby's relentless piano riffs to create a rhythm that people could only react to by bouncing up and down with their hips. Palomino knew by the unsteady crowd shots that Colombia's lowest strata—blacks, mestizos, mulattos and Indians—was finally creating the musical revolution he had craved for Colombia for so long. The music was bouncy and turbulent, sedated and crazy, New York and Colombia, all at the same time. It was like a docile dog waiting for the right moment to flip, to bite its owner's hands. It was a music to live by.

Palomino knew what El Comandantico could do to him. He knew that the area around the television had cleared and all the prisoners were watching him tap on his crutch as if it was a conga drum. He didn't care. What he didn't know was that on Christmas Day, Polo Norte, one of the *mágicos*—one of the pioneers of Colombia's drug trade—had arrived in the third courtyard with little fanfare, and had watched Palomino challenge the hierarchical order of the prison over something as silly as a television show.

6 Jan 1969

Palomino had spent the week hearing rumors about El Comandantico's grudge against him. He had spent the week waiting to be shanked, choked or raped, but nothing happened.

Palomino went about his business of tapping out new *tumbaos* on the metal of the side of his bunk and imagining Etiwanda's skirts—and the tan calves that her twirling exposed—swinging to the rhythm.

Palomino had spent the entire week counting down the hours until the next airing of Heaven's Outpost, when the highly-talented *Neorriqueño* conga player Ray Barretto would release the long-awaited film insert of his new song "Acid." Aside from the hope he saw in Heaven's Outpost, Palomino had nothing to live for. Despite the fact that his love was still strong for Etiwanda—the only woman who had ever treated him like a human being—he was slowly coming to terms with the fact that a legless man was meant to be all alone in the world. He didn't believe in God—not really—but he was thankful for the blessing of drums, the only constant in his life since he'd stopped killing. On Sunday morning, he rose and as customary, he thought first of Etiwanda, his stomach sick, his phantom leg throbbing, and then he thought of the threats of El Comandantico, thinking it wouldn't be such a bad thing if someone stabbed him while he was watching Heaven's Outpost. He imagined himself bleeding to death while watching Ray Barretto's hands making magic out of rawhide, and that wasn't such a bad thought.

As soon as he was released into the courtyard at eight-thirty, Palomino forewent the *aguapanela* line and planted a plastic chair directly in front of the hanging television set. He watched the Noticiero Colombiano—the Sunday morning conservative news show on Channel 1—to anger the little communists of the yard. Palomino crossed his stump over his good leg as best as he could and tried to follow the conciliatory politics of the country's new compromise government, the National Front. He thought, sadly, that the country had settled for the safe way out, a compromise, something one should never do.

At ten fifteen, shortly after the time for visitors had started, two guards approached him with their batons out. “Pimentel,” one of them said. “Someone needs to talk to you.” It was probably a ploy by El Comandantico to get him away from the television and kill him.

“Tell them to go away.” He didn’t want to confront the Authorities and call them liars. He’d rather be ambushed and killed than put in solitary confinement or have his meal privileges withheld—at least dead he wouldn’t suffer.

“*Compadre*, I think you want to take this visit. Besides, you don’t have a choice.” One of the guards lifted him up by the shirt while the other one pushed him off the chair.

Palomino hobbled out of the courtyard, inmates playing *sapo* watching him. He saw El Comandantico taking his seat and changing the channel on the television with a grin on his face. Sure that he was headed to his death, Palomino scanned the short sky of the mountain capital. He scanned the clouds from wall to wall, searching for the pigeon of tragedy he knew would swoop in from the chapel at Monserrate.

It wasn’t there. When the guard opened a chain of gates and led him to a dark hallway painted in green and white, he tightened his abdominal muscles, waiting for the blade that was going to pierce his side, or the bird that he expected to be fluttering inside the building. Nothing happened. A white-haired, light-skinned man, with withering skin and one of those small old-age distended abdomens was waiting for him. And that was it. This was the man who would kill him.

“Leave,” he said to the Authorities, and they did. “I know your name,” he said to Palomino. “You are not Quinto Pimentel. Your name is Palomino Mondragón.” The man sat on the floor, and ordered the Authorities. “Relax. I’m not here to kill you. If I was going to kill you, you’d already be buried, but no one would be mourning you. My name is Polo Norte.” He extended his hand.

“That’s not your name. That’s a nickname.” Palomino shook it.

“Polo Norte. I let that little communist boy think he’s in charge, but I rule this courtyard and this entire prison. These Authorities don’t work for the Authorities. They work for my boss. I can make them do whatever I want because my boss is very wealthy and very unscrupulous.”

“I have a TV show to watch.”

“My boss knows about you. About what you did in 1948. Big fan. Shit, I’m a big fan. I want to let you know not to worry about the communist boy. You can watch your show every weekend. You’re under my protection while you’re here.”

“What do you want with me?”

“My boss is always looking to surround the organization with good people. I just want you to know who I am. To relax and enjoy the perks.”

“What perks?”

“There is a woman waiting for you through that door. A gesture of good faith from my boss.” Polo Norte rose and walked back into the courtyard without looking back at Palomino, summoning the guards the way one summons a stray dog. The guards walked in and led Palomino through another, dirtier hallway. He still thought someone was going to kill him. Why would someone send him a woman to visit him jail? He was saving himself for Etiwanda and for Etiwanda only.

A snaking line of women spread out in front of him, fixing their breasts and carrying baskets of food. They wouldn’t kill him in front of women. Maybe Polo Norte wasn’t lying and he was going to live after all.

“Wait for your visitor,” the guard said.

He leaned against the door of the holding room. It was so crowded that his face was pressing against the glass, and every time an inmate exited to receive his visit, Palomino's body would squeeze out and the guards would have to stuff him back inside as if he was a sardine being canned. The walls were sweating, dripping. He didn't know what time it was, but he knew that Heaven's Outpost hadn't started yet, so there was no reason to get impatient, except for the heads crowded around his, and the breathing of strangers against his arms and neck.

Maybe it wasn't true. Maybe someone was going to kill him. Maybe El Comandante had come to enact revenge for the drugs that never made it to Canada. Maybe Saul Rothstein had come to offer him a new solo recording deal. Maybe Etiwanda had been looking for him as hard as he had been looking for her, and she'd finally found him.

It was none of those things. The visit room was a vast hall lined with bare wooden tables. The guards sat Palomino down in front of a strange woman with large feline eyes and Indian features who had a number stamped on her forearm. He didn't know her. When he looked to the table to his right, he saw one of the communists fucking a woman while the guards were holding up cardboard boxes to give the couple privacy. They were still watching. Palomino looked away. "Who the hell are you?" Palomino said.

"I know who you are, Quinto Pimentel. The drummer from La Charanga Colombia. I am your biggest fan in all of the world. I love how you get so passionate into your drumming and I imagine, if a man can love a drum like that, he must fuck a woman with the same passion." She pressed her breasts together, pushing them towards him. "I own all of your records, and when my boss told me you were here in La Modelo, to come visit you, I knew I had to come. Here, I brought you lunch. The guard stuck his nasty hands all over your rice and ate two of your potatoes, but the beans he didn't touch."



Palomino sat in silence, squirming in his seat. The woman was not ugly. Her lipstick was too bright, her eye shadow overdone, too much blush on her cheeks. He could see granules of eyeliner on her eyelashes. She was slightly overweight and she was no Etiwanda—Etiwanda had no fat on her body—but she wasn't ugly, and she was a woman. But why would someone send him a woman to fuck? Why would anyone care?

“Your food is already cold,” she said. “Don't let it get any colder. I paid the guards twenty pesos and a peek at my tits to give us privacy.”

“What makes you think I'm going to fuck you?”

“Every man in this prison would give an arm to be with me right now. Why don't you want to be with me? Are you a faggot?”

“No. I'm in love with a woman.”

“And has she come to visit you or bring you food? How many times? Are you going to eat what I cooked for you and spent twelve hours in line defending for you? Do you know what I had to barter to get this thong I'm wearing?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you fucked?”

“I don't remember.” He was lying. He was a virgin.

“Well, then.” She rolled up her skirt and spread her legs, showing Palomino her linen.

“Why would you want anything to do with a man who is missing a leg?” The thought of taking her was becoming more enticing. He was a man after all, and he was tired of turning women down in the hopes that Etiwanda would come to him. He knew she wouldn't. He knew his task was futile, but then the image of her almond-shaped eyes, and of a skirt resting on her

hips as her entire body swayed back and forth appeared to him. And then he couldn't help but want to be near Etiwanda again.

"It's not your legs that I want, but your hands. Let me see them." She held his hand in hers, tracing the outlines of his callous palm and fingers, putting his index finger in her mouth, sucking on it and making her tongue dash around his palm. "Ay, *papi*, play with me the way you play the drums."

"That is disgusting," he said.

She kicked off her heels and placed her toes against Palomino's crotch. "Your dick's hard, so you obviously don't think what I'm proposing is that horrible."

He pushed her leg down, but not before feeling the warmth of her feet against him and feeling the nerves firing, feeling alive for the first time in a long time. "I told you I'm in love with somebody."

"She doesn't have to know a thing."

"What's your name?"

"Eulalia."

"Eulalia, I have a television show to watch. Thank you for the food and the time."

"You can't hide from me, Quinto. You have the loneliest eyes I've ever seen, and eyes don't lie. That woman will never love you, but you will keep loving her anyway. One of these days, you'll be fucking me and fucking me on this table, imagining I'm her, and I'll be the happiest woman alive." She didn't know his real name. How much had Polo Norte told her? Palomino stood, grabbed his crutch and leapt to the door, knocking on it.

*“Guardia! Guardia!”* He wanted the guard to come get him before he made a horrible mistake and betrayed his Etiwanda. Before he signed a contract with the devil. That’s who Polo Norte reminded him of, the devil.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I open my eyes, and the cell is equally dark during the day as it is at night, and for that moment in between sleep and wakefulness I don't yet remember you're not there. I don't yet remember my leg is missing and it hurts, it aches, every muscle fiber that I left in that battlefield in Korea is firing through nerve connections that don't exist, nerve connections that my brain has made up and thinks are there, where nothing but air and a wool blanket is. This is all an illusion. My brain's insistence in self-deception, in believing I still have something I haven't had in almost a decade. And I know this, but I cannot be outside my brain. I am limited by the physical being of my brain, by its biology, by its own selfish whims and desires. I am limited physically by the confines of this jail cell.*

*And how do I get rid of you if I've never had you? How can I break things with you if there is nothing to break? How can I get away from you if I'm already so far, imprisoned across a venerable sea, unable to get close to you at all? This, this obsession with you is like trying to put hands on something that doesn't have a head. And this is what I think because I'm tired of waking up with the heavy acids in my stomach telling me I will not find you today, that I will not hear from you today.*

*I don't know the particulars of how one falls in love. You are the only woman I have ever loved. Not my mother. Not the Virgin Mary. No one but you. When you came into my life, I felt as ugly as I feel today, as destitute, as inadequate. Maybe you were a fool for seeking my friendship, for sitting next to me at the in-between-jams shish kebobs, in your black and gold flapper dresses when every other woman around the Montuno Street probably could tell I was an assassin and a deserter. Maybe that's what you liked, because I can think of nothing else worth liking. I was—I am—quiet. I don't speak unless I have to. I avoid eye contact with strangers. Maybe you are a*

*fool. You always went after the men whom we all knew would hurt you. But see, I'd never hurt you. Never. And maybe that's why you never went after me, and maybe that's why I never told you how I felt.*

*But then you came into my life and that's what you were: You were the leg I was missing. I started shaving, bathing daily, doing the laundry, parting my hair, asking Dick Loco for advice as to what suits to buy. I started shining my shoes. Shit, my drumming got better and better, and I even started conversations with random strangers about the traffic on Broadway or your new Arabian-themed dance number with Cuban Pete. I walked around the Montuno Street like two feet were hitting the ground. Like I was a suave, smooth-singing Tito Rodríguez. That's what you are. My fucking missing leg.*

*And look at me now. I'm back exactly where I started. And why would you want me now? After all these years. I should know better. I should know to get you out of my mind. But the problem is not the pain, not the longing. The problem is not your memory. The problem is not the pain. The problem is that I like it. The problem is that as miserable as I am, I would be more miserable if I didn't have you to long for, but am I not a man? I'm four decades old, a man, and still a virgin. And there is a woman willing to spread her legs for me when I know, I know you never will, though you've spread your legs for every other man who could wreck you, who could wreck your self esteem. And I know I am a fool, and I know that you are too, but it is the only choice we have.*

22 Jun 1969

Planted in front of the television as he did every week, Palomino wished he was out of prison so that he could go settle in Cali and live the musical movement that was happening there. He daydreamed about offering his talent and experience to one of Cali's nascent bands, and of touring Colombia and the world—but making good music, not the shit La Charanga Colombia was making under El Comandante. As he did every week, Palomino tried his best to drown out the memories of Etiwanda with percussion or self-persuasion. Eulalia's visits had not ceased, but Palomino had remained strong, never agreeing to see her, avoiding eye contact with Polo Norte. It was pointless. He knew Etiwanda wasn't coming, and that she wasn't going to love him.

He lifted his butt, which was becoming raw from sitting in the same position for such a long time. He watched Nelson '*Mantequilla*' Valbuena sitting in a television studio, dressed in a checkered plaid suit. "Ladies and gentlemen of Colombia and of the entire world. I have the great honor of presenting to you the most monumental event to ever happen in the world of our tropical music that we so love and esteem. Ladies and gentlemen, these images you are about to see were recorded this very week in New York City at the Montuno Street and you, my esteemed friends, will be the first to see them in Colombia. This band of monsters, of beasts, was put together under the genius of the Yankee entrepreneur Saul Rothstein, the Jew of Marvels, who brought under the same roof the biggest and most talented names of Clave Records. Ladies and gentlemen of Colombia, South America and the world, I give you for the next half hour the hottest band on earth: The Clave All-Stars!"

Palomino had feared this moment. He knew that at some point he would be forced to watch the musicians he worked with under Clave Records being featured in Heaven's Outpost. He couldn't recognize the Montuno Street at all. The white floor was covered by silver five-point

stars and instead of the pictures of the mambo legends on the walls, all he could see were hideous burgundy-colored blinds and fake glimmering stars suspended from the ceiling by strings.

All of the band-members were dressed in all-white *pachuco* suits, with hats and ties to match. A thundering and violent trombone roared off-screen and the cameras zoomed to a haggard El Comandante waltzing onto the screen, performing horribly uncoordinated and off-clave dance moves, looking like a Korean soldier being mowed down by a fifty-caliber machine-gun. Palomino could tell by the uncontrollable laugh, the yellow hands, the protruding eyes, the thinning hair and his constant off-key violations of the clave—the worst sin a musician could commit—that El Comandante was high.

Palomino couldn't believe that of all the talented vocalists in the Clave Records roster, Rothstein had picked the worst and most unprofessional to headline his all-stars band. He felt like throwing his crutch at the television when he saw one of the guards approaching him, carrying in his hand a black thong.

“Polo Norte sent you this from Eulalia.” He sniffed it. “If you don't want it, I'll keep it.”

On the TV, a gigantic musical note was lowered behind El Comandante and covered the percussion section, which was a fortunate thing, because Palomino knew he was much faster and accurate than the *conguero* Rothstein had picked for the band. For a moment he felt glad to be in jail, because he knew had he stayed with La Charanga Colombia he would have been asked to play and he would have had to be on television in front of the entire world, being the principal *conguero* for a travesty.

Polo Norte walked up to him, stroking his white goatee. “So what's it going to be?”

His penis tingled as he felt the sandpaper-like fabric of the thong. He was angry, disappointed and horny as fuck. “What happens to me if I take Eulalia?”

“Whether you take her or not has no consequence. She is there for the taking. Regardless of what you do, you will cooperate with us.”

“What do you mean?”

“Enjoy the treatment while you have the opportunity.”

He couldn’t watch the TV anymore. If this man was going to own him, Palomino was going to make the best of it. “You tell her to get ready.”

When he walked into the visit room, Eulalia was wearing a pink sweater that reached her hips and nothing else. The guards had erected a makeshift cardboard fortress around her. Her hair was done up like Jacqueline Onassis. “Are you coming because Polo Norte made you or because you want me?”

“Shut up,” he said.

Palomino crutched his way to her. He almost melted when she started running her hands over his good thigh, whispering, “Such a strong leg, papi, such a strong leg for pushing.” He lifted her sweater to her chest and slammed her back against the table.

“I want you to know I’m going to fuck you because I’m angry and nothing else,” he said.

“Whatever works for you,” she said, her eyes rolling. “You know, this is good for you,” she said in between breaths. “Polo Norte was going to kill you because he was starting to think you were gay, and he doesn’t like faggots.”

Palomino thrust and thrust, pushing his hand against her face, trying to imagine Eulalia was Etiwanda, but he couldn’t. He would never do such violent things to Etiwanda. He sighed as



his body slowed its swaying, as the last of the orgasm left him. “Shit,” he said aloud. He’d just signed a contract with the devil.

11 Oct 1971

Palomino performed his new Sunday ritual for two years without changing a thing: He would skip the breakfast line and reserve the best spot in front of the television. After hearing news of the war in Vietnam, he would sit down on a plastic chair, set a *cajón*—nothing more than a wooden box—between his left knee and the nub of his other leg, and would practice and improvise increasingly elaborate *tumbaos*. He would leave his chair in place when Eulalia came to visit, and after eating whatever cold meal she had cooked and stuffed in clear plastic bags, he would fuck her in the cardboard fortress, never looking her in the eye, never being able to imagine that she was Etiwanda. He would make every effort to avoid seeing Polo Norte, and when he did see him, Palomino would look down and away, pretending not to notice him, avoiding the inevitable conversation, for he knew how prison worked. He knew how Colombia worked. He knew Polo Norte would come to him one day and say “You owe me,” and he would have to repay him.

On that day, he ejaculated inside of her. After he came, he groaned as if he’d been shot in the stomach. He rested his sweaty forehead on her shoulder, winded, his good leg trembling, rendering him unable to pry himself from her as he usually did as soon as he finished. She slapped his back and pushed him away. He slid onto the table, feeling the cold against the skin of his chest, still unable to stand, his pants on the ground, feeling vulnerable for the first time in a long time.

“I’ve been bringing you food, cigarettes and money for two years and you never ask me how my day is going,” she said.

“How’s your day going, Eulalia?”

“Too late now.”

Palomino balanced himself on his trembling leg and bent down to pick up his trousers.

“You don’t even know anything about me. Do you know where I live? Do you know how many children I have?”

“You wanted me to fuck you and I did. I never told you to come here.” He felt stupid because of all things, he started regretting having betrayed Etiwanda.

“I never wanted to come here. I never had a choice, but then I thought, this is a good man. I was wrong. You’re nothing but an uncaring, self-absorbed jerk who hates the world. You hate real people so much you have to be in love with a damned shadow.”

Despite realizing the futility of his attachment to a decade-old memory, he was unable to drown her out of his mind. He wasn’t even sure of whom Etiwanda was anymore. More than anything, Palomino was so dissatisfied with life that he knew he was not in love with Etiwanda, but with longing for her. “If this doesn’t work for you, don’t come back next week,” he said. He tied the piece of rope he used as a belt, and propped himself on his crutch before returning to the yard.

“I can’t wait for Polo Norte to do what he has planned for you. Bastard,” she said.

“What does he have planned?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know? Get the fuck out of here. I never want to see you again. And after Polo Norte’s done with you, I probably never will.”

Once back in the courtyard, he sat down and ignored the TV. He looked at the sad, grey clouds taking the shape of Korean hills and musical instruments. He was trying to clear Etiwanda and Eulalia out of his mind and to smother their faces with music. It was better this way. At least he didn't have to feel bad for fucking Eulalia while loving Etiwanda. He changed the channel to Cadena Uno.

Every week the crowd that watched Heaven's Outpost with Palomino became larger and larger. On Sundays from three to four in the afternoon, Palomino was the king of the third courtyard. When the *bolero* and *tango* theme music of Heaven's Outpost came on, he inched his butt forward and opened his eyes wide.

“Today, on Heaven's Outpost, live from the Discos Fuentes recording studios Cali, it's the birth of the Colombian salsa movement. Finally we don't need musicians from New York or Puerto Rico to come to us because Cali is the new worldwide capital of this craziness called salsa.” Nelson ‘*Mantequilla*’ Valbuena took a deep breath. “I have the honor of introducing to you, without further fanfare, courtesy of your truly Colombian Discos Fuentes, your favorite record label, Fruko y sus Tesos. Strong applause, ladies and gentlemen.”

On screen were blacks dancing in a style he'd never seen before, their legs, their feet moving faster than anything he'd ever seen. A white shirtless man played a piano riff that was too fast for him, too aggressive, but nonetheless impressive. The camera only zoomed on the hands of the *conguero* who wasn't always on clave, which was stirring Palomino and making him upset. He became so enthralled, analyzing the performance, that he didn't notice Polo Norte tapping him on the shoulder.

“You always avoid looking at me. Two years, you always hide from me, when we live in the same prison,” Polo Norte said. “You’ve never come to me and said, ‘Thank you for letting me fuck while I’m prison, Polo Norte, how can I repay you?’ I’m starting to think you’re an ungrateful fucker.”

“Could we talk after the show’s over?” Palomino said without turning back, not wanting to talk to this man ever, because he knew Polo Norte had complete power over him.

“I’m the reason you’ve been able to watch this show undisturbed for the past two years. The least you could do is look at me when you talk to me.” Polo Norte had a round scar extended from ear to ear. “Here’s what’s happening, Palomino. Why I’ve let you fuck one of my boss’s servants for the past two years. This is the day you’ve been dreading. That marijuana you lost in New Jersey was my boss’s and it was worth a lot of George Washingtons. I was supposed to tie you up, gag you and feed you to the rats while you were still alive, but you know something? I like your style, *parce*. I loved the way you stood up to that little faggot over your little fucking television show. I love the fact that you walk around like you’re a royal motherfucker when *malparidos* with both their legs are walking around here with their heads down. I’m not going to lie, I like your style. You keep your mouth shut pretty well, but the walls around here have ears, eyes and a good memory, like Polo Norte. You and I have something in common. Do you know what that is?”

Palomino tried to watch *Fruko y sus Tesos* out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn’t concentrate. Polo Norte was in complete control. Palomino had lost sight of his priorities. He’d lost sight of the fact that in the world that he lived, in the life he’d chosen long ago and could not escape, killing before being killed was more important than anything else.

“We are both very good at killing people...1948.”

“I have only one fucking leg. The only thing I’m good at anymore is playing drums.”

“Palomino, I know you’re just like me. That’s why you killed that Senator’s dog in sixty-two, because you miss the adrenaline, the hard-on—”

“I didn’t kill that dog.”

“Either way, I made a deal with my boss. He’s a very harsh man, I remind you. Either you repay your debt to my boss with your service or I can send Etiwanda your body parts one by one.”

“Don’t you—” Maybe Polo Norte could help him find Etiwanda.

“—and you don’t even think about trying to kill Polo Norte because Polo Norte is ten times better at killing than you will ever be.”

“You can do whatever you want with me, but don’t bring her into this.” The show was over.

7 Nov 1971

Eulalia never came back, and Palomino never asked Polo Norte about her. It was better that way, he thought. Palomino had done his best to keep to himself, to stay away from Polo Norte, but he hadn’t stopped thinking about the man’s words and wondering what else Polo Norte knew about him. He wondered what other card the devil was holding over him. Maybe he’d found Etiwanda. Maybe he was planning to use her as leverage. He couldn’t understand how Polo Norte knew so much about him, when he’d avoided making friends, when he’d spent his life avoiding meaningless chitchat with people, trying to reinvent himself from a worm to a musician, from someone who destroyed to someone who created. Polo Norte’s grinning whispers

were proof he couldn't change who he was anymore than he could pretend that his face wasn't scarred or that he had both of his legs.

On that day, the morning news droned on, and he wasn't interested. He didn't want to know what was happening in Vietnam, what the liberal President Carlos Lleras was doing about agrarian reform. He swore he was going to throw his crutch at the television if the news did another stupid report about the newest Latin American Nobel Laureate—Pablo Neruda. Palomino felt like he was through, at the same time defeated and let down by Etiwanda's fantasy. Things only felt right during the brief stretch of life on Sundays from three to four when Heaven's Outpost aired.

That day's show was supposed to be the monthly feature of an unannounced musical surprise—which had never disappointed Palomino. The theme song had changed, and was now the 1963 remake of Herbie Hancock's jazz standard "Watermelon Man" by percussionist Mongo Santamaría. Palomino took this as a bad omen. Then Nelson 'Mantequilla' Valbuena walked on, dressed in a ridiculous white three-piece suit imprinted with musical notes and glittering lining. "This week, the show has traveled internationally, all the way to Miami, Florida, the new capital of Latin America, the new free Havana, where Cuban notes and bongos are beating stronger than ever. We have traveled to bring you the newest movement in this music that moves us, that incites our passions—Miami salsa. Live from the studios of the first all-Spanish radio station in Miami, *La Más Cubana*, WQBN 1260 AM, I bring you the newest star from Cubabana Records—the voice of Cuba, the beautiful, the unrivaled—Etiwanda—and her Conjunto Peter Pan. Strong applause, everybody."

Palomino fell out of his chair. His jaw quivered. His hands trembled. An inmate tried to help him rise, but Palomino barked at him like a rabid dog, his eyes fixed on the screen, his

mouth open. A vaguely familiar woman walked on the stage, but she looked nothing like the Etiwanda Palomino had left behind almost a decade before.

The woman on the television wore a yellow plastic miniskirt, but her legs were pale, bony and bruised, a ghost of the muscular thighs that used to dance in front of him at that apartment in Spanish Harlem. Her face was wrinkled but taut, sucked to the skull. She paced from side to side, scratching her head, her neck and her shoulders while the host spoke.

“So Etiwanda, tell Latin America about yourself,” *Mantequilla* said.

Etiwanda shifted around, trying to claw at the microphone, but saying nothing.

“Etiwanda, Latin America is anxious. Tell us who you are, please.” She stumbled around behind *Mantequilla*, hugged him and kissed him in the cheek, almost missing, almost falling on her face.

“What are you looking at, ugly?” Etiwanda said, prying herself away from *Mantequilla*, snickering, laughing. She was high. She was fucking high. “Well...you know, you know, Etiwanda is from Cuba, from beautiful Cuba, my brother...” Palomino crawled toward the television and extended his hand, wanting to touch the screen. “...and I bring you, I bring you flavor...flavor...sweetness.” She hopped up and down, shaking her still formidable hips like maracas, her sagging breasts bouncing within her dress.

“Tell us what you’ll be singing to us today.”

“Let’s do a duet, *papi*. Let’s do a duet. I like Colombians, *papi*... what were you going to tell me?”

“I was going to—”

“—I bring you sweetness and flavor...Etiwanda brings you Cuban sweetness and flavor.” She burst into dancing, spinning, doing circles around *Mantequilla*, repeating her sweetness and flavor chant.

Etiwanda was a shadow, destitute—the same way Palomino had become. Time was a motherfucker. Palomino had never cried in front of anyone, but in a yard full of inmates, there was nothing he could do to stop himself. He couldn’t hide his face against his arms, because as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t stop watching. He didn’t bother to wipe his tears. He only had enough self-control to keep the sobbing silent.

“Etiwanda, *papito*, is like, what’s her name from the comics? Like Wonder Woman,” she said, cupping her breasts, shaking her chest from side to side until a hairy man’s hand reached from the side of the screen and grabbed her, pulling her off screen.

Palomino wondered if that hand was the hand of the man who was fucking her, and he wondered who it was, if he was her manager, and he wondered if he was good to her the way Palomino would have been, and he wondered if he treated her the way Palomino had treated Eulalia, and he felt like a cockroach. Instead of feeling turned off by the sight of the love of his life possessed by drugs, Palomino had never been more in love with her now that she needed to be rescued, now that she was no longer a goddess.

Up until that moment, he’d always thought that she was too good for him, too beautiful, too pure. But now, he could see clearly. Despite having a face of perfection, she was vulnerable and had always been—prey to a manipulative men like Dick Loco, and he could save her. He could treat her like a Yoruba Queen. He could worship the ground she walked on. He could make all her pain go away. He could make her forget about the drugs and maybe he could kill again. Maybe he could chop off the hand that had hurt his Etiwanda.



She never came back on the show. Instead, after a few minutes of a recorded promotional clip from Clave Records, a sweaty and old black man in a wide-collared silk shirt took her place in front of the band and interpreted off-clave, flat and unexciting Cuban music standards: “La Bayamesa,” “Guantanamera,” “The Peanut Vendor,” “Black Tears” and the band’s only original production, “Cuba of Yesterday,” which sounded exactly like its title—old, worn out and out of place.

7 Nov 1971

The guard opened the gate to the hallway and turned his back on Palomino. Rain dripped off his nose. He wiped himself with his hands.

“You asked to see Polo Norte?” Polo Norte said.

“I’ll do whatever you say as long as you get out me out of this jail,” Palomino said. “I need to go to the United States.”

“Why? For your girl?”

“Yes.”

“Whatever I say?”

“Whatever you say.”

“Go back to your life. I’m going to get you to my boss and then you’re going to do whatever Polo Norte says.”

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*Blacks and Puerto Ricans in line, mixed with Upper East Side whites and Italians from Brooklyn. The line to get into the Montuno Street looks like a snaking game of dominoes, going all the way out to Broadway and turning uptown, and the police have noticed. The patrolmen snap pictures of the crowd from across 54<sup>th</sup> Street until the summer night becomes too dark. The Big Three are headlining tonight and Dizzy Gillespie is supposed to stop in for a guest appearance after his gig at the Birdland. I am supposed to play until one a.m. when Tito Rodríguez's band takes over. Cuban Pete has already started his Mambo 'on two' dance lesson—without a partner—because you haven't shown. So as I tune the quinto mayor, I know that Cuban Pete is not the one fucking you. Not the one fucking you up.*

*Tonight the Factory is grey suits, sparkling dresses and Navy uniforms, and I don't look at the sailors too much. I don't want to find one I know and have to talk to him. Then you walk in, heels and red-glitter dress in hand, and you start teaching with your Cuban accent, as if nothing, as if you weren't half an hour late. You shine, cascades of diamonds flow from your ears. You've been acting like a bitch for a while now, since you started fucking whoever you're fucking nowadays, since you appeared with Pete in the Ed Sullivan Show, since you stopped calling, since you stopped coming over. I don't know what I did to you that was so wrong, besides listen to you complain about the parade of men that fucked you and then threw you away—all of them greasy, light-skinned dancers, all of them with slicked-back hair, and all of them with two legs.*

*Almost four hours of tumbaos, four hours of wishing I had another leg to brace the drum because I kept slapping it too hard, four hours of sweating through my canvas suit. I stop long enough to loosen my bowtie, to drink gin and tonic, to throw Cracker Jack in my mouth, to powder my hands, to stand up and let my gluteus rest from the stool. You have danced with*

*Augie, with Cuban Pete, with Killer Joe, with Dick Loco and with God knows who else. You have dried your sweat and changed three times into the same red glittering dress. I can tell the difference, because I know what you look like when you're fresh, when you're tired. I know how your eyes drift to the ceiling when your partner's fucking things up and the way you bite your lower lip when you miss a pattern—but I can never tell what you're thinking. You—this woman I see four or more nights a week, the only woman in the Factory who ever seems aware of my presence, who doesn't seem repulsed by my blown-up leg—you—the cause of this stupid obsession that will drive me to my grave—you remain an abstraction to me. The one woman I've ever come close to understanding, I can't even understand.*

*I'm moving the drums back to their case, while Tito Rodríguez's new conguero warms up and you come up to me, glistening, brighter than the mirror ball. I want to be happy you're in front of me, but I see the bite mark below your neck, scarcely covered by the pearl necklace, and I know someone's fucking you, and I probably know that someone, but how do you ask a woman who's fucking her if you ever want her to talk to you again? As you come up, I stand as I always do when I talk to you, and Rodríguez, right on fucking cue, starts singing a romantic bolero.*

*"Dance with me," you say while the maracas swish, your hand reaching for mine, and I look at you like you're stupid.*

*"I'm missing one leg," I say.*

*You hand me my crutch. "I'll hold you."*

*And I'm confused and embarrassed, but I can't say no to you. I can't say no to the opportunity of having a woman's arms around me. I don't even remember what that feels like, and then your palm reaches my spine, and it's warm, and your hand slides up to my shoulder, and every nerve I have is electrified, and I feel like I have my leg again, but it hurts. It hurts like*

*a mortar just took it off my body. I try to rock around my good leg, but I'm scared of falling and you clench me, and every one of my sways is off-beat, which angers me because I know I know music. I know I have rhythm.*

*One hand on the crutch. I feel like the other one should be around you, but my heart is fluttering. My hands are sweating. My spine is tingling, so I don't. The tumbao is soft and Rodríguez' voice envelops my skin like a silk shirt, and he sings with so much love, with so much feeling that I know that he's longed for someone the way I'm loving you, the way people don't love anymore. But I don't have the courage to put my arm around you. What if you think I'm not being a gentleman? Then I have nothing.*

*I look toward your face and you're looking at mine, and something primal tells me I should kiss you. Something primitive tells me you'll kiss me back, that when you're listening to a bolero like "Cuando ya no me Quieras"—When you don't Love me Anymore—even the most hopeless romance is possible. But I can't. I know you don't want me, and why should you want an invalid? You pity me, when you're the one who needs help. Instead of kissing you, I say, "Why were you so late?"*

*"Are you mad at me? Cuban Pete wasn't mad. Why would you be mad at me?"*

*"I'm just saying...we should be professional."*

*"It's my parents...my papi came back home, punched my mami in the face and told me only wenchés dance at night." You sway.*

*"You still live with your parents?"*

*"I'm seventeen. Where else am I going to live?" I stop trying to dance. I know nothing about the woman I've fallen in love with.*

Track 5—Guaracha

Acrópolis, Ciudad Jardín. Cali, Colombia.

17 May 1973

Palomino sat in El Jefe's servants' dining room, waiting, listening to gossiping maids. Cheo Feliciano's voice came out of the chauffeur's transistor radio, sounding as if it was resonating around a tin can, echoing in Spanish "My Sad Problem," to the rhythm of a soft-hitting bolero that made him want to go outside and kill things. It had taken Polo Norte almost two years to get Palomino out of La Modelo, but he'd delivered, saying "It's not the right time *changuito*. It's not the right time," over and over again whenever Palomino got impatient. Etiwanda had once again disappeared, and she had never been featured again on Heaven's Outpost.

Now he waited for El Jefe—Polo Norte's boss—in a compound called Acrópolis. El Jefe's mansion was nestled up in the mountains surrounding Cali, past two security checkpoints and surrounded by four wooden watchtowers. Acrópolis looked like a mixture between a US Army camp and a Greek god's temple, with its columns and its statues of naked men straddling stallions. From his creaking chair, Palomino felt blinded by the whiteness of the inside of the mansion, and couldn't help but stare at a giant painting of a hairy vagina. He scanned the servants' faces for familiar features, knowing that Eulalia also worked for El Jefe. He'd found himself thinking about her from time to time, but hadn't bothered to ask Polo Norte about her. After all, his mission, the whole reason why he'd agreed to work for El Jefe was so that he could go back to the United States and rescue Etiwanda.

"Would you like an *aguapanela*?" A girl no older than ten emerged from the kitchen with an oversized crying baby on her hip.

“No.”

Polo Norte waltzed into the room wearing a brown leather aviator’s jacket. The maids ceased their chatter and the chauffeur turned off the radio before walking outside. Polo Norte pulled a butcher’s axe out of a kitchen cabinet and pointed it at Palomino. “El Jefe’s going to see you when he’s ready. You’re Polo Norte’s little bitch, Don’t forget that,” he said, and left as suddenly as he came in.

“*Niña*,” Palomino said to the little girl carrying the giant, angry baby, “if someone comes looking for me, you tell them I’m outside getting fresh air.” He figured he’d strike a conversation with the driver, a simple working man, a man who surely loved Antillean music as much as he did.

The girl tried to nod, but the baby was clawing at her face and she was trying to keep her eyes from getting scratched.

Palomino grabbed his crutch and left the building. By the time he walked outside, both the driver and the Land Cruiser were gone. He didn’t want to go back inside. He contemplated the greenery of the Cauca Valley and the pear-shaped city of Cali wedged between the mountains. He concentrated, and he could hear the honking of buses and the screams of people chasing after a thief in one of the roofless slums at the bottom of the mountain. He wanted to be down there, in that brick forest of shirtless blacks creeping up the mountainside, that slum buffer between the civilized city and the world of Acrópolis—the slum that reminded him of the commune in Medellín in which he’d spent his first years. Palomino had wanted to come to Cali for a long time, to take part in the salsa revolution, but from behind the tinted windows of Polo Norte’s bulletproof Toyota Land Cruiser careening down the narrow twisting road from Bogotá, he’d been able to see nothing. Standing there, he wished he was wearing a jacket.

His stomach tensed. He heard growling behind him and turned around. A large mongrel, looking like a malnourished German Shepherd, lurked towards him, his head down, every step calculated. He was its prey. Palomino stood erect, trying to make himself as imposing as possible. He thought about swinging his crutch at it, but it would probably catch it with its mouth and pull, and then he'd have no control over his balance. Fucking dogs. It stopped moving forward about a meter away from him and rocked back on its hind quarters, barking and growling at him.

“Alcapón,” a female voice called, and the dog stopped moving toward Palomino. His tail started wagging, and he turned toward the voice. It was Eulalia, in a hideous Hawaiian pattern dress and with the giant baby balanced on her right arm. “That’s how I wanted to see you, you crippled fucker,” she said. “The next time I send him after you, he’s going to kill you.”

“How’s your day going, Eulalia?” It was the first thing that came to mind, the question she’d demanded he ask. “Is that your dog?”

“You should be asking me if this is your child, because he is.”

“What’s his name?” It was impossible. He wasn’t supposed to procreate with anyone other than Etiwanda.

“Elpidio.”

“No child of mine is going to have such a horrible name.”

“He’s your baby. Don’t you want to hold him?”

“I’m not the father of that child. He’s too white.”

“You will answer for this child. That, I assure you.”

“Is that your dog or El Jefe’s?” And the nerve of this bitch, to come and try to change his world all of a sudden, when he’d made the necessary connections to get himself to Miami to rescue Etiwanda.

“He’s mine, and he’ll do whatever I say, like ripping your good leg to shreds.”

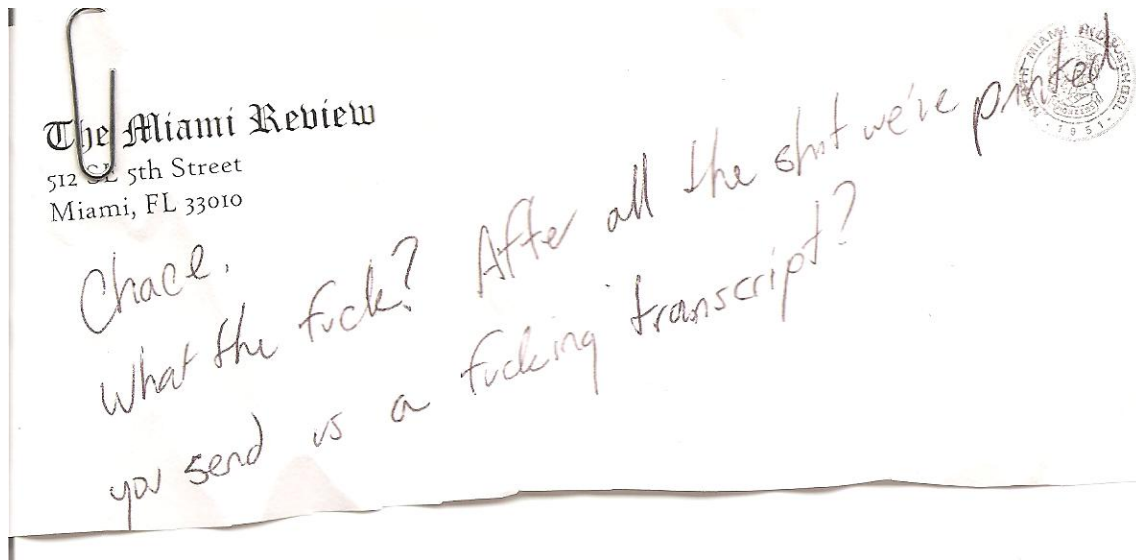
Polo Norte erupted out of the house. “Don Juan, save your sweet nothings for tonight. El Jefe’s ready to see you now.”

“It was good to see you again, Eulalia.”

She spat on his face.



BONUS TRACK: SHRED ME LIKE THE CHEESE YOU USE TO MAKE BUÑELOS



[Recording Begins. Traffic noise in background.]

C.R: —

P.N: Sit down and stop breathing through your mouth.

C.R: —

P.N: Pay attention and write everything down exactly as I tell it to you. What's your name again?

C.R: —

P.N: And you're not going to interfere, right? Because if you're going to interfere, don't come.

Simple. You don't want me pissed off. I'm out of options.

C.R: —

P.N: But don't misrepresent Polo Norte when you write shit down just because you want to be a fucking García Marquez.

C.R: —

P.N: I told you I fucking see it. I see the damn recorder. I have Alzheimer's but I'm not stupid. I know you're going to write this shit down eventually. Think. I want people to read what you write and know who Polo Norte was because I'm going to be dead by this time tomorrow and who's going to tell these stories then? Who's going to tell them if my son couldn't give a shit?

C.R: —

P.N: I have the worst case of Alzheimer's you've ever known and I forget things. When I start repeating myself, you tell me, 'Polo Norte, you already said that,' and I fix it. I know I look like the most violent son of a bitch you've ever seen, but I won't get mad at you for telling me when my mind's slipping.

C.R:—

P.N: I'm Colombian, and a Colombian should die wherever the fuck he pleases. That's what I say, but this son-of-a-bitch gringo doctor says no. If my son—who was born down at Jackson Memorial and lives a completely American life in New Jersey while sticking me in a nursing home in Boca Ratón—can say he was born a Colombian, then I can die wherever the fuck I please.

C.R: —

P.N: *Parce*, I don't remember most of the shit that happens in this nursing home. Earlier today? The things that matter—the things that got me these three fingers chopped off, the things that earned me the nickname Polo Norte—those things I remember like I was right there, *papá*, and I can tell you the stories even better than García Marquez.

If I'm going to die, I'm going to die on my own fucking terms, not some doctor's. The doctor—*ese hijueputa*—can't tell me the news himself. He has to send in a janitor, a short Nicaraguan who waddles and tucks his neck in like a turtle, so he can translate even though I can probably

speaking better English than him. 'He says,' the janitor flicks his wrist as he speaks, pointing outside the door to the doctor that's not there, 'he called your son and a priest because your body can't fight the cancer any longer and you could die any day.'

'Don't call either one of those sons of bitches,' I say. I rip my IV out, and blood spurts everywhere. I grab this sheet, and I clump it and wrap it around my arm, and look, you can still see the blood there soaking through.

C.R: —

P.N: No, it's fine...but pay attention. I'm telling you what happened today. The janitor plops his mop over the floor and starts scrubbing and soaking up the blood with towels. 'I want to die in Colombia. I haven't been since nineteen-eighty-three,' I say. I don't believe that fuck anyway. I don't even know if he's really translating anything the doctor says. I know that janitor hates me. I know he fucks with my head because I have Alzheimer's. He probably tells me this same shit every day because he's afraid of all the things I could do to him—I know he's tried to steal my switchblade before, but you can't steal from Polo Norte. He figures I can't know better because I can't remember shit, but Polo Norte isn't stupid. I write things down, but I write shit down on my skin, that way no one fucks with it. Look at my thighs, my wrists, my arms. Don't I look like one of those tattooed bikers you see on TV? Bet you never thought of that, because you're not that clever. I'm almost blind, but my eyes don't lie to me the way my mind does. I recognize my handwriting and *fuá!* I know the truth. Nobody writes like you when you're missing three fingers.

C.R: —

P.N: A Colombian should die wherever the fuck he pleases. Do you know how many times I almost died in this country? Back then I had a lot of money—and a closet full of leather jackets. I

had my own psychic—just for me—in Cali. I sponsored a soccer team in a commune on the side of a mountain—*Los Polos Nortes* I called them—and on any day of the week I could clear any strip club in Miami by throwing down a wad of cash and like that. *Fuá!* Polo Norte had all the girls to himself. Go see how many people can do that now. Right now, these...ten, twenty...these two hundred dollars you paid me are all I have left, but you know what? Money is money and I'm going to use it to die happy. How many people can do that now?

C.R: —

P.N: I tell you. The nerve of these fuckers. I'm going to die wherever the fuck I want to die. It's my right. In this country people have rights, and this doctor, this hospital, this janitor, my son—they don't want me to have them.

'The only way you'll get to Colombia with that little money is in a casket,' the janitor says to me grinning, his khakis all baggy and shit, shaking as he mops—looking like a little bitch getting fucked from behind.

'Tell him I want to die in Queens, in Jackson Heights.' Jackson Heights is the next closest thing to Colombia in this country. That's what I say.

'He says there's no way you're getting on a plane with two hundred dollars,' the janitor says—without even checking with the doctor.

'Ask him if he's going to let me die wherever the fuck I want,' I say.

'He's not stopping you. That you can do whatever *putas* you want,' he says.

'Did he say *putas*?' I ask.

'He said fuck,' he says.

C.R: —

P.N: What I say is this: A Colombian should die wherever he wants, but since I can't die in Colombia or in Jackson Heights, I'm going to die in Miami—in Hialeah. *Papá*, I used to go travel over Hialeah, Miami, all over this fucking country. Buying auto parts, washing machines and shit like that and delivering them to wherever El Jefe told me to deliver them. That's it. Now Polo Norte isn't stupid. He knows that the tires, the car frames, the dryers—that everything was replete with green bills like these I'm counting, but Polo Norte never asked any questions. That started back when marijuana was good business. Before these *gringuitos* even liked coca. And then I hit the big time with El Jefe.

[Static. Labored Breathing. Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins]

C.R: —

P.N: I miss El Jefe, *parce*. Life's not fair and sometimes one has to do shit that's not right. Sometimes you have to choose the skin on your neck over your mother's. I do that all the time. But do you think I ever tried a drug in my life? Not Polo Norte. Not until that doctor pumped me full of morphine and fucked me up—following my son's orders. That's why I ripped the IV off in front of that Nicaraguan, because if I'm going to die, I'm going to die living.

C.R: —

P.N: Pain? I don't give a fuck about pain. You see these three missing fingers? When El Jefe chopped them off with a kitchen axe, do you think I screamed? You would have screamed like a faggot. Do you think I took any drugs for the pain? Not Polo Norte. If you think the pain from not having that medicine shit flowing through my veins is going to keep me from dying how I want to die, you're pissing outside the toilet. You obviously don't know what it's like to have a day left to live.

C.R: —

P.N: Why are you still standing there with your mouth open like a *pendejo*? Why don't you use that mouth to call a fucking taxi? You think I'm going to live forever? I'd call one myself but I don't trust cell phones. They look like they belong inside bombs.

[Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins]

P.N: Since I can't die in Colombia, I'm going to die in Hialeah, but Polo Norte tells death how he wants to die, not the other way around.

C.R: —

P.N: This is the plan. I know how I'm going to die. I'm going to have my last meal—Colombian food—at the Tres Monitos Bakery and I'm going to stand in the middle of that railroad crossing by the old horse racetrack, and I'm going to let the Metrorail grind me and shred me like the cheese you use to make *buñuelos*. Do you know when the last time I had Colombian food was? It was January 6, 2004, the day my motherfucker son came to get me and put me in a nursing home. Can you believe the nerve? Polo Norte, the most feared man in Miami, in a nursing home. I know the exact day because I wrote it down. Look.

C.R: —

P.N: Grudges are the type of shit you can't afford to forget even if you have Alzheimer's. He came back to Miami after all those years, not even speaking proper Colombian Spanish, wearing some fancy pinstriped suit—as if he wasn't an Indian like me. He bought me a *bandeja paisa* and said to me while I'm gnawing on a pork rind, my fingers shining from the grease, 'We have to put you up before you hurt somebody.' As if I was a dog you could put in a kennel. As if Polo Norte hadn't hurt anyone before.

C.R: —

[Phone Beeps]

P.N: Who are you calling? You are calling my son. Aren't you, motherfucker?

C.R.: —

P.N: Polo Norte is old and sick, but he can still slit your throat. I don't even remember how many throats I've slit, and that's the type of thing I would remember. Hang up the fucking phone and let me see that tape recorder.

C.R.: —

P.N: Don't lie to me. I know you have the number. You got it from the fucking Nicaraguan.

[Rustling. Labored Breathing. Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins. Traffic Noises. Low Radio. Honking.]

P.N: I should get to die however the fuck I want to die. I've been telling death what to do all my life. I earned the nickname Polo Norte from El Jefe, the same person who took these three fingers from me. Best boss you could ever have in this business. I earned the nickname in the sixties, in Cali, because I had balls like a bull and was afraid of nothing. I wasn't like the other motherfuckers who turned faggot when it came to blowing someone's head up. After I did a little necktie on a Military Police Major—you know the necktie, when you pull out their tongues through a cut in their neck and it looks like this with the blood flowing down, like they're wearing a little red tie. Then I put him in ice. In a bathtub full of ice so that he wouldn't smell when he got back to Cali. After confirming the Major's identity, El Jefe said to me, my sleeves still all red, my face all splashed, 'You look like you enjoyed that. Somebody get Polo Norte a towel,' and the name stuck.

I'm going to die under the Metrorail. There was a time when having to deal with Polo Norte meant you died. Even in that nursing home, I always kept a switchblade in my right front pocket.

To teach people respect for their elders. As a matter of fact...*Fuá!*

[Clicking Sound]

I didn't scare you with this little thing, did I?

C.R.: —

P.N: You get scared easily. Don't you, little bitch?

[Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins. Indistinct Spanish-language Shouting. Bass rattling. Sirens]

P.N: *Hijueputa*. This here is where I want to die. Hialeah has changed, but it's still Hialeah.

Don't look so scared. I know it's different, but Polo Norte will take care of you. You're my guest.

I don't let anything happen to you while you're here in Hialeah. You see those crazy people cutting in front of us? The salsa blaring from the car next to us? That's why I want to die in Hialeah, because it's one place in this country where people actually live life. People like you, you walk around like you're dead, like your life is so sad. I'll take this knife and carve a smile from this ear to that ear, that way no one ever has to look at you being such a little bitch, moping around like life's a fucking tragedy. Did I tell you my son put me in a fucking nursing home?

C.R.: —

P.N: He goes for a decade without seeing me and then comes to pass judgment on his father—on Polo Norte. He might as well have thrown me in a grave and shoveled dirt on top of me because.

[Heavy Breathing]

I don't know how people can be so boring the way they're boring in that nursing home. All of them are mouth-breathers—like you. How many times should I tell you to close your mouth?



I don't even remember the last time I was here in Hialeah. I know that mall was already there, but all that business, all those billboards with the faces of Cubans weren't there before. The Westland Mall is run by Cubans, but not good Cubans—*Marielitos*. You can buy anything there, even the things Uncle Sam doesn't want you to have.

C.R.: —

P.N: You're going to turn left on Twelfth Avenue or Sixty-Seventh Avenue. It's the same thing. The street numbering in Hialeah is all fucked up, but if there is one thing Polo Norte knows is maps and streets. Because Polo Norte is not a man of family, but a man of the world. My father had a nickname too—*Perro Bravo*—but I could only call him *Papá Señor*. He taught me how to fuck a prostitute without getting attached, how to behead a chicken and how to clean a revolver—the things you really need for life. He liked none of this sensitive shit your generation likes. My son—that's another story—always complaining and complaining like his mother, 'Why don't you ever hug me?' and then he embarrassed me. Do you know what he did?

C.R.: —

P.N: He went all soft and faggot when I took him to his first whorehouse and I had to kick his ass right there.

C.R.: —

P.N: We never saw eye to eye because I'm a man and he's a fifteen-year-old girl whose balls never dropped. Once when he was seventeen I punched him in the face just to see if he was a man—just to see what he would do—and the bitch cried. He cried.

C.R.: —

P.N: I want to die with a full stomach. The place is called Los Tres Monitos Colombian Bakery. It's going to be on the left in a strip mall that looks like a fake Spanish mansion, but then again,

everything in Miami looks like a fake Spanish mansion. You're going to see a Colombian flag hanging draped over the door. This is the best Colombian bakery in all of Miami. The *empanadas* are even better than the ones in Colombia. That's why I want to die with ten in my stomach. I want people riding the Metrorail up and down Miami to smell that grease and know that Polo Norte was there.

C.R: —

P.N: You don't want to come in? What, are you scared of Colombian food?

C.R: —

[Idling Car Shuts Off. Door Opens. People Speaking Spanish Outside. Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins]

P.N: Alzheimer's or not, this shit I'm going to remember. You should be glad you didn't go into that dump. Do you know how much self control it took for me to not pull my knife out?

C.R: —

P.N: I walk into that place, and no one says '*Buenas Tardes Polo Norte*,' not even because I'm old. No one even greets me, like I'm invisible, like I wasn't a legend around here before everybody became a faggot. Before, this bakery used to be covered in pictures of Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Cartagena. Paisa saddlebags, machetes, burlap sacks stamped with the *Café de Colombia* logo, framed obscene jokes written in the most horrible *paisa* grammar. You name it, if it was Colombian, it was on the wall. Before, they always used to play Cumbias from Pastor Lopez, or the yearly hits from the Carnivals in Cali and Barranquilla—and the place was always full. Now, I walk in there and they're playing some soft American music for *maricas*—when Miami has its own Radio Caracol station that they could play to make the place feel Colombian—the way it should be.

I'm there by myself and no one greets me. No one asks me 'Polo Norte, would you like the usual today?' The walls are bare. The shelves aren't stocked. Instead of baskets and baskets of fresh *empanadas* they have three little dry patties that look sad, deformed and lonely. But that wasn't the worst sin. I go to order and the girl is a fucking fat Cuban. How is a Cuban going to serve *empanadas* in a Colombian Bakery? That's why I want to die today. I forget everything and the world makes no sense. Could you imagine how horrible this world would seem if I actually could remember shit?

'Do you have fresh *empanadas*?' I ask the girl.

'What you see is what we have,' she says, being rude like the *Marielita* she is. So I buy the *empanadas*, a *pandebono* and a *Pony Malta* because I have no choice. I'm having Colombian food before I die. I sit down at one of the dancing tables and the paper placemats have a map of Florida I could have drawn better with my fucked up hand—instead of having something beautiful and Colombian printed on their tables. She brings me a red plastic basket with the *empanadas* and there isn't even any grease soaking through the napkins. She's waiting there in front of me, breathing through the mouth like you, probably waiting—like I'm going to say thank you to her.

I ignore her staring. In my day, I'd have already backhanded her, but it's my last meal, so I decide to be nice. I sink my teeth into the first *empanada*, thinking that I hadn't had one in so long and that my brain is so fucked up that I won't even know if it tasted right, but I do. I know right away that they're old, that they're stale and that they're nothing like the *empanadas* that made this bakery famous the way Polo Norte was famous. I burp sour in my mouth, like the way diabetes tastes. Doña Sandra's *empanadas* never make you burp.

So I ask her '*Niña*, is Doña Sandra still making the *empanadas*?'

‘She left for Virginia five years ago, I think.’

‘So who’s making the *empanadas*?’

‘We get them frozen. There’s a factory in New Jersey.’ That’s the problem with this world. Everybody wants to take a shortcut. Instead of coming to see his father, my son—did I tell you what he did? He came back from New Jersey just to throw me into a nursing home. Polo Norte, who never got caught, who never spent a day in jail, gets put in a house by his own son. I would have rather he took me to the Everglades and shot me in the head, but he’s too much of a *marica* for that. He took the easy way out. Polo Norte doesn’t do that.

C.R: —

P.N: I’m going to end it today. The Metrorail is going to crush me. I’m going to stare at that train head on. I’m going to feel it sucking me under its carriage, and I’m going to enjoy every second of it. I’m going to roll up my sleeves so they can read my wrists, my arms and my legs if they find them. I wrote it all over my fucking forearms that today I’m going to let the Metrorail kill me. I don’t know how many times I’ve forgotten it today, but I looked at it while eating that horrible *empanada* and I thought to myself, Polo Norte, you are a motherfucker full of great ideas.

And I say to the girl, ‘Bitch, you’ve ruined my last meal on this earth,’ and I stand up. She goes to help me and I say, ‘Don’t you touch me. Don’t you touch Polo Norte if you know what’s good for you.’ That’s the first time I wanted to cut her face, but I didn’t. I’m not going to hurt someone on my last day on earth. It’s not that I have a conscience. I’ve done so much shit that I know I’m going straight to Hell, and I’m going to make the motherfucking devil itch when I get there.

C.R: —

P.N: I forgot your name. Not that it matters. You tell people that Polo Norte died the way he lived. Living life. And you tell them that Polo Norte is not afraid of anything. I'm going to step in the path of the Metrorail, and I want you to stay there and watch until I disappear under that train, and don't you look away. Don't you look away.

C.R: —

[Phone Rings]

P.N: Put it down if you don't want to get cut. Around here you can catch a cab just by standing on the street, like you're in New York or in Colombia, so don't you go calling my son, because I know what you're doing. Polo Norte isn't stupid. In my country people get dropped from cliffs for less than that. Give me the cell phone.

C.R: —

P.N: Then you know what this bitch says to me because I don't give her a tip? 'I bet you if I was a stripper or a bartender you'd tip me, but I bring you your drink and your food all the way to your table and you can't even give me two dollars.'

So I grab her by the wrist like this and I say 'Bitch, it's my last day on this earth and I could just as easily take you with me.'

C.R: —

[Rustling. Heavy Breathing]

P.N: It hurts, doesn't it? Not too weak for an old man, eh? And then when she dropped her rags, when I saw in her pupils that she recognized who Polo Norte was, I let her go. That's all I wanted. A little bit of respect.

C.R: —

[Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins]

C.R: —

P.N: I don't care about that. What do you think you're doing?

C.R: —

P.N: Driver! Don't listen to him. Where the fuck are you trying to take me? You don't think I know Hialeah better than you? The deal was that you don't speak. You don't interfere. You follow me on my last day on this earth. You listen to what I say. You stand back and don't do shit. You knew the deal. Don't make me cut you. Don't tell me you're starting to get faggot on me. Don't tell me you're trying to grow a conscience all of a sudden.

C.R: —

P.N: I wrote down right here on top of my hand, at nine forty-two last night, that I was going to kill myself today and you were going to memorialize Polo Norte's death for the world. There's nothing I hate more than *maricas*. What we're going to do, we're going to turn this cab around and we're going to go to the Metrorail Station right past the old racetrack, or people are going to start bleeding.

C.R: —

[Loud Honking]

P.N: I've been reading my notes because I don't trust you. You're too much of a *pendejo*, fumbling with that recorder, to keep up with a senile old Polo Norte.

You see that life-size Jesus and Mary? Don't they look like they belong in one of those cheap church stores, and the purple San Lázaro back there? That's why I'm going to die here, because people in Hialeah have no shame, and that's the way life should be. Not like my son, who's too

ashamed of his own father to ever bring him to meet his wife and kids in New Jersey. It's probably better that way, because they're probably all faggots like their dad.

It's right there. You're going to pass those pink letters that say Hialeah Park and you're going to turn right. Well, you see the Metrorail crossing. That's where it is. That train's going to take me all over Miami.

[Recording Ends]

[Recording Begins. Car Door Opens. Train horn. Train passing. Cars Speeding by.]

C.R: —

[Feet Striking Metal]

P.N: Don't you help me. Polo Norte is going to get up these stairs even if he dies trying. You know what? Here. Take the phone back. Call him. Call my son. Maybe by the time he gets here I'll be up the stairs and he can watch me get pancaked like an *arepa* against the front of the train, dying all the way to downtown Miami. He'll probably be happy.

C.R: —

[Labored Breathing]

P.N: I haven't been up here in a long time. This is it, *papá*. Those buildings are going to be the last thing I see on earth—when I wanted to see my Colombian mountains where my *mamasita* lived, where my soccer team played, but I guess Miami will have to do. When I first came here, half of those buildings weren't even there. These trains weren't even here.

[Train Whistle Approaching. Train Rumbling on Elevated Tracks. Train Station Shaking.]

You hear that? It's coming for me. You can almost see the Miami-Dade Transit M from here.

[Rustling]

C.R: —

P.N: Get your fucking hands of me or I'll cut your face. Why would you piss Polo Norte off when you know who Polo Norte is?

[Clicking Noise. Ripping Noise]

C.R: —

P.N: I didn't want to do that to you, but you pissed me off. I don't know why you have to be such a stubborn little bitch. The next time you touch me, I'll take you to hell with me. You don't know Polo Norte's life, so don't you feel sorry for me.

C.R: —

[Train Coming Closer]

P.N: You don't know what it's like to have to write everything on your body and to suspect that everyone's lying to you because you can't know anything. Don't act like you care because to you, all I am is a fucking good story. If you really care about me, you're going to turn off that fucking recorder, and you're going to watch me walking that way down the track and you're not going to say a damn thing to me, and you're not going to look away for a second, because I want your eyeballs locked on me when the wheels of that train flatten me against the tracks. I want you to hear the clank when it hits me, and I want you to watch the train jumping and rocking as it flattens my body, one wheel at a time, and you're going to describe to my son every fucking detail, every fucking speck of blood splattered on the train's silver metal, so that he knows exactly how Polo Norte lived and died.



*Descarga en Miniatura*

*This is what I do. I shoot officers. I snipe them from afar and then I shoot them with the camera. I take another sidestep, my feet diagonal to negotiate the steep hill at Old Badly, and I raise the camera to photograph a dead Chinese Major. His purple face fills the square in my viewfinder. His eyes receded into his skull. The right Quadriceps still receded. I capture the rank, the crossed swords, the name-tape. This could be an Intelligence Officer, I think, but I really don't know. The battlefield is fresh. It still smells like gunpowder, and decomposition has not yet set in.*

*The Batallón Colombia commander Lieutenant Colonel Polonía—another conservative—tasked me out to the American Brigade Headquarters, to help them gather intelligence on the Chinese and the North Koreans, because he had heard that not only had I been the chulavita's best sniper during La Violencia, but that I was the man for responsible for photographing—one by one—every single body on the piles of dead Liberals our Platoon had killed in Tolima. We had been handpicked by the Generals to represent Colombia in front of the world in its first overseas military action. We were the best. We were handpicked, those of us who had contributed to the campaign, who had done our part to rid the country of the godless Liberals.*

*This is my last picture before I have to go back to the Americans, to the Puerto Rican translator from the 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry to translate, to let them now I need more film. I enjoy the shooting. I do. I'm good at it. I like looking up, opening my right eye, and seeing the last of the body hitting the floor, and I wish I could shoot both the rifle and the picture at the same time, to capture that body collapsing, to see in a still frame what I had just done, to freeze it for posterity so that I could think about, so that I could be proud now, so that I could regret it in the future.*

*I shouldn't be going back. Not just yet. I have been taking pictures of dismembered enlisted men, of rabbits burnt to their skin, of the individual pieces of dismembered birds, because they strike me as beautiful, because I think maybe it could have been I who had killed them, and before the tyranny of death sets in and devours their bodies into granules that will become indistinct when mixed with the soil, before there is nothing left but bones, before the identifying features of their faces and the hair of their arms wither away, someone must capture them, tell the story of the last, most permanent and defining moment of their existence. This will get me in trouble, but it is the least I can do for those who die, for those who can no longer speak.*

*I part the gates to the tent, remove my helmet and wipe my sweat. "I need more," I tell the Puerto Rican Sergeant in Spanish.*

*"So soon Corporal Mondragón?"*

*"Yes, Sergeant."*

*"That many dead officers?"*

*I shrug.*

Acrópolis, Ciudad Jardín. Cali, Colombia.

17 May 1973

Palomino stood with the crutch flush against his side, silent, focusing his eyes around the office on one of the ten plaster replicas of the Colossus of Rhodes. El Jefe was nothing like he'd expected El Jefe to be. El Jefe was a woman—but large in every way a man could be large. She was manly, dressed in the too-tight and unflattering clothes of an American male teenager—no bra for her tiny poking breasts, only a t-shirt with a black PUMA logo ironed on it, a long dangling gold chain bearing a crucifix, and too many bracelets and rings to count. She stared him down and walked around him, tugging on Palomino's pants and shirt while smoking a cigar. When El Jefe was done examining Palomino, she dismissed Polo Norte with an upward tilt of the head.

“Do you smoke?” she said once Polo Norte was gone.

“Yes.” That baby did not look like him at all. Eulalia had to be lying.

“What do you smoke?”

“Cigarettes. Unfiltered.”

“There are three types of men in this world.” El Jefe took the cigar out of her mouth and inched closer to Palomino, placing the orange glowing tip millimeters from Palomino's hand on the crutch.

“I did not know that.” He could feel the embers burning, flying from the cigar to his skin.

“Intellectuals, educated people who waste their time thinking too much, they smoke pipes. Peons, prostitutes, common people who are happy doing others' bidding, they smoke cigarettes. The men who rule the world, the men who grab the world by the balls, the men who

decide what the pipe and cigarette smokers do, they smoke cigars. That's why I smoke cigars and I say education be fucked, because I was born in a commune. I was a prostitute in the streets of Cali by the time I was thirteen, and look at me now."

"Up until five minutes ago I thought you were a man."

"If you tell anyone otherwise, I'm going to strap a bomb to your neck and make you into fireworks for the next carnival."

Palomino nodded.

"You know what I know about you? A lot. Like the fact that I knew you wouldn't flinch." She put the cigar back in her mouth. "That's how I know I made a good decision letting you live. Everybody else flinches but you didn't. Why do you think I didn't order your death at La Modelo?"

Palomino felt like he was deep in a trench, overlooking Hill 391 with the Borinqueneers at his side, his breath swirling and fogging the blade of his bayonet. He tried to picture El Jefe as a Chinese soldier, and then he tried to imagine his crutch was a rifle with a bayonet, but his fantasy collapsed because with one leg it would be impossible to parry properly and stab her.

"I let you live," she said, "because I have a literary sense of justice. You lost my money, and now you're going to prove your loyalty to me and then triple the money."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Don't worry about that. I'll tell you when, if ever, your debt is paid off. You're on borrowed time."

Palomino hopped in place to shift his weight. His leg was cramping.

"How good is your English?"

"Good enough to pass for a New York-born Puerto Rican."

“Polo Norte said you wanted to go to Florida. Do you know why they call Polo Norte Polo Norte?”

“No.”

“He once chopped one hundred bodies with a chainsaw, put them in ice for five days, and then dumped them on the Cali River at Christmastime. They say the water was nice and red when it reached the Ermita Church downtown. Do you know why he did that?”

Palomino took another hop and tried to bend and straighten his knee.

“Because I told him to, because some people around here need to learn how to respect me. Some men think I don’t have balls because I’m a woman—you look uncomfortable.” She flicked ash off her cigar and smoked it. “Are you uncomfortable taking orders from a woman?”

“Not at all. I’m feeling very well.”

“Polo Norte is my right hand, and he’s the only reason you’re alive, because he liked you. He said you kept things quiet the whole time you were at La Modelo, and I value that, because every *hijueputa* I got working for me is always trying to prove how heavy his balls are. You don’t look like a drug dealer or a killer. You look like a pathetic cripple. That’s a good thing. I need someone who has lived in the States...if I find out you’re opening your mouth about anything I’m saying, I’m going to burn that baby of yours alive.”

Palomino nodded, thinking of the things he did in 1948, after the *Bogotazo*, thinking of how he made Liberals surrender intelligence by pouring sulfuric acid on their extremities. He wasn’t sure whether Elpidio was his baby, but he didn’t want anything to happen to him. He kept whispering to himself that he was standing in front of this woman in order to rescue Etiwanda, but he knew it wasn’t the only reason. A very neglected part of him, the part that liked

photographing dead things and watching the expressions of pain in people's eyes when being tortured, was salivating at the idea.

“I was a very big fan of La Charanga Colombia until you got arrested. It kind of saved you. That first set of instruments your band got in jail, who do you think paid for them? I did. I like your music, but Comandante Caballero, that little bitch...that little bitch, after you got arrested with my shipment, he decided not to come to Colombia personally and apologize to me for his stupidity. He decided to stay in the United States, and do you think I saw a dollar from that whole shipment? Do you know how many people in Toronto and Montreal got high for free because of him?”

Palomino moved his head from side to side as an answer.

“So in exchange for your life, you're going to the United States with Polo Norte. You're going to find El Comandante and tell him that he fucked with the wrong man before you shoot him up. I want the hit to be like a fucking Western movie, but with machine guns. You kill him and everyone who's with him. When I get confirmation, I'll take the price off your head and give you the fifty-thousand dollars I was going to give Polo Norte to kill you both. If you make me happy, I'll let you stay in Miami, working for me. Miami's getting too big. There's too much money. I need someone I can trust on the ground. These Cubans there are out of control, and they're ripping me off.”

He thought about it for a second, digging for a thought or hesitation, for some indication that he didn't want to kill El Comandante, but he did. He wanted to kill the arrogant fucker who'd robbed him of the ability to lead his own band and make pure Cuban music. The only thing that would have made him happier was to find and marry Etiwanda. This could just work out. Getting out of Colombia, he could focus on searching for his love and he could send dollars

back to Colombia for Eulalia to take care of Elpidio. Why was he thinking about the stupid baby? Elpidio wasn't his baby. "I'm going to need M-16s and a Hasselbad camera."

"Why do you want a camera?"

"Do you want confirmation or not?" The camera was a necessity. He couldn't conceive killing someone and not taking his picture. He was becoming an animal again, and he hated the idea of it, having come so far, having learned how to play drums of all things, but there he was, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I know why you want to go to Florida, and I'm going to warn you. It's not worth it. I've had to kill four husbands. People will cheat, lie and get greedy. That woman is not worth your love." She stood up and poured herself a glass of whiskey without offering any to Palomino. "Follow me. You're going to love this." She chugged.

She hadn't mentioned her name, Palomino thought as he thrust the tip of crutch on the carpet, as she waited for him at the bottom of a spiral staircase. He followed her, weaving around Italianate columns and artistic depictions of female body parts. Above her dining room wall hung a framed painting, possibly an original by Fernando Botero, depicting El Jefe in a man's suit, looking corpulent and rotund as did all the subjects in Botero's paintings—though not too far from her actual appearance—as a lord towering above the Peak of the Three Crosses, overlooking the city of Cali as a pastel-colored goddess wielding an Uzi.

She led Palomino through another hallway, one not as ornate as the rest of the mansion. She stopped before a white door. She fought with her stretched jean pocket for a pair of keys and opened it. "Welcome to the temple." Before Palomino was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen: Shelf upon shelf of record sleeves. Above the shelves were engraved the names of places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, New York, Mexico, Colombia, and each shelf was organized

chronologically, starting in the 1930s. Palomino pivoted on his leg, moving the crutch around. He was surrounded by music, and by speakers mounted on the walls. He looked down. The floor was made of solid wood.

“Are these..?” Palomino said.

“Caribbean music,” she said. Palomino felt like he was back in the Montuno Street. El Jefe turned on the lights, which shot up from in between the bookshelves and reflected off a mirror ball hanging from the ceiling. “I became addicted to this music when I worked in The Tolerance Zone, and I used to fuck johns to the sound Daniel Santos.”

“I learned this while I was stuck on a hospital ship from Inchon to San Diego with a bunch of Puerto Ricans and American negroes.” Palomino scanned the walls, and the slender profiles of the records, which told him nothing about what music was inside. He thought of the milk crates full of records he’d left in New York in 1962, and he’d wondered if Dick Loco had found them and done anything with them. They seemed so insignificant in comparison to the contents of this room. He was in heaven. “They played Cachao for me. Do you have any?” She wheeled a ladder to the New York section. “No, his Cuban years.”

Palomino hopped over to the overflowing section titled CUBA and found records released in 1957 with his index finger, praying that the record he was looking for was there.

“They are sorted alphabetically by year,” she said. Palomino stopped, realizing he’d gotten carried away and allowed himself to get comfortable around this woman.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean any disrespect,” he said.

“I brought you down here so you could look. I only bring people here if I know they will know how to enjoy this.”



He continued scanning until he found the vinyl of Cuban bassist Israel ‘Cachao’ López, and pulled out record after record until he found the one he was looking for, the record that he had mistakenly broken the first night that Etiwanda had danced in front of him in 1960. He examined the yellow cover, and the cover picture, with Cachao standing behind the bass, smaller than his instrument, and behind him, his band *Ritmo Caliente*, six musicians holding up their instruments and smiling generous smiles, so stupid-looking that they had to be real, as if a moment of true happiness had been frozen in time. Released in 1957, back when life was simple, the only time that Palomino genuinely had enjoyed life. *Cuban Jam Sessions in Miniature*. Twelve revolutionary *descargas*—jam sessions, none of them longer than three minutes, the type of late night jam sessions that Cachao made popular in Havana before it fell to the communists, jam sessions of pure music with no audience, no orchestration—just raw art, instruments talking to each other using no words—the type of jam sessions that could not physically last longer than three minutes because the musicians had poured all their life, all their energy into the instruments, creating sheer, unadulterated intensity—percussion so complex that it got lost in itself, and caused seizures—the type of music that should play during a gun battle. “Can I?” Palomino said to El Jefe, trying hard not to let his mind drift to that snowy night in Spanish Harlem.

“I’ll do it,” she said. She opened the record player, pulled the black disc out of its sheet and dropped it on the turntable, Side A facing up. The table spinning, she put down the needle indiscriminately. At first the disc scratched, but then “*Malanga Amarilla*” started blaring, playing halfway through a chorus, through a high trumpet solo, through *tumbaos*, through bass, through timbales, through bongos, through *güiros*, and Palomino was sucked in, and he couldn’t help but think of Etiwanda dancing in front of him, her thighs tensing, her mouth open, as if she

was going to say ‘I love you too,’ but she couldn’t—she wasn’t brave enough—and that steadfast gardenia on her ear, holding on despite the spinning, the weaving, the bending and contracting knees.

He was trembling. He hadn’t lived like that in a long time, not even while watching Heaven’s Outpost. He could even smell her, that smell of cheap roses frozen in time, locked up in a bottle. When “*Malanga Amarilla*” was finished, when the musicians took their hands and their mouths away from the instruments, there was silence, scratching, random noise and the memory was dead. The dead space, the disc spinning, wobbling and nothing happening. It seemed to take forever—enough time to play another jam session, enough time to live three lifetimes—until “*Pamparana*” came on, and Palomino felt like he could live again, like he had a purpose. He had to fight so that he wouldn’t get lost again in the power of that moment that seemed so much more vivid than the rest of his life.

Then it occurred to him, while his gaze was lost on the polished brown wood of the record cover’s congas, that his life had been lived like that, that he only felt like he was living in those moments—those *descargas*—when the world disappeared and there was only music, only Etiwanda. Those moments when his hands were raw from hitting the drums, but he didn’t know it, because he was too lost in the music to notice anything else. Those moments when Etiwanda danced in front of him, and he could truly *see* music. Those moments when he could hide his face, his scars, behind a camera viewfinder, the sight post of a rifle, the barrel of a pistol, and he could capture death. Every other moment in his life had been static, noise, the void in the record between the *descargas*. Every other moment had been a living death, waiting for the opportunity to live.

The mongrel bayed outside. Palomino was spent, as if he'd just had an orgasm, and then he tried to remember the last *descarga* he'd gotten to live. It had been a long time. Maybe it had happened at the airport in Newark, thinking he would finally see Etiwanda. Maybe it had happened while he was playing the *conga* solo in Stockholm, but no. It hadn't felt true, because the shadow of not having Etiwanda had been too powerful, and had ruined his opportunity to enjoy living the dream—traveling the world making music.

“That woman's not going to love you the way you love her. I can tell you that now,” El Jefe said. “If you do right by me in Miami, you repay your debt to me, you could have daily access to all this music. Hell, you can have access to my *taberna* downtown. You can play your drums every night and be Cali's king of salsa. I could give you your own band, and you could be the biggest act in all of Colombia. I'll own '*Mantequilla*' and that TV show. You can be on there any day I say. I can put the best musicians in Colombia at your feet, and you will be in charge of them. It will be monumental...I know! We can make a professional dancing troupe just for the band. We can call it the Cali Salsa Ballet, and they can travel the world showing all those motherfuckers how we dance in Colombia.” She was really excited, and so was the dog outside, baying and baying. “And as far as that woman, you'll be so rich that you can have every ass in this country worship you. Think about it. Love is overrated. Four husbands, I was done. Now I fuck anything I want anytime I want. Man, woman, it doesn't matter, and I've never been happier.”

He knew it was true, but he couldn't help himself. He loved Etiwanda hopelessly, but she was right. She'd robbed him of his *descargas*. When he was at war in Bogotá, in Korea, the adrenaline was flooding him daily. He'd lived. He'd truly lived—lighting fires, squeezing triggers, detonating charges. Ever since he'd met her, since he'd tried to reinvent himself, since

he'd tried to dilute his need for death with music and photographs of roadkill, the *descargas* were more and more infrequent, and now he wasn't even sure that he could have them again unless he found her. Fuck her. Fuck that tyrannical bitch. He was going to work for El Jefe, and he would live his *descargas* again, and he wouldn't look for Etiwanda.

He couldn't not look for her. He needed to look for her. It was the whole reason for everything. The dog was going insane outside. "Is that your dog?"

"No. It's—Eulalia—the one that tends to my Doberman Pinchers."

"Can I kill it?" He was going to live a *descarga* right now and he was going to get even with Eulalia. How dare she? How dare she come to him with a baby? A man like him was not supposed to have babies, not like that. He was a killer, and he was in love with another woman. He was. He was a killer, and he'd spent two decades running away from it.

El Jefe stopped the record and she thought about it, Al Capone baying and baying.

"Sure."

"I need a pistol."

"Do it with something else. Bullets are for people."

"Great."

Palomino let himself out of the temple and crutched down the hallway with bravado, the servants moving out of his way, the crutch creaking musically, like a Charanga violin melody every time Palomino pivoted his weight on it. It creaked faster and faster, building up to a mambo—to a *descarga*. He charged through the stairway landing, through the living room, into the kitchen, into the servant's quarters. The driver's radio was on. The keys to the Land Cruiser next to it. He grabbed the keys, flung the door open, and servants were talking, but he couldn't

tell what they were saying. In his ear was music. The creaking of the crutch. The jingling of keys. The baying of the dog, alternating, talking to each other.

He opened the door to the car, got in the driver seat and threw the crutch in the back. He hadn't driven in so long—since Korea. He got his bearings in the car, turned the ignition, revved the engine. The driver ran outside, yelling, but Palomino peeled off, the tires spinning, the Land Cruiser skidding before straightening out. A guard ran out of a guard tower with a rifle, but El Jefe screamed, telling him to put the weapon down. Palomino drove a lap around Acrópolis, spraying dirt on the walls, almost rolling over while conquering a hill until he found Al Capone, who stood defiant, barking and growling, while Eulalia ducked behind a tree.

Palomino rammed the Land Cruiser into Alcapón. A giant thud, throwing him over the hood of the vehicle, sending the animal crashing through the windshield. Palomino slammed his foot on the brakes. He sat, his chest heaving, glass shards, dog hairs and blood stuck to his face. Alcapón lay limp across his lap, stained with red. White smoke rose from the tires. He was trembling again, smelling burnt rubber. He'd just given himself a *descarga*.

El Jefe ran up to the Land Cruiser, and Palomino saw her in the mirror, thinking she would kill him for ruining his car, and he would have been okay with that. He took a deep breath, trying to take in the moment. "I like the way you do things," she said, winded. "We're going to do great things together."

"*Jefe*, I don't know your name," Palomino said.

"You can call me mother."

And he wished he had a camera.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I wake up sweating, smelling you again, the trail of lavender you leave in your wake as you waltz around a room, and I'm claustrophobic, locked in a fucking tube all the way from Bogotá to Miami. And then I wipe my forehead and I'm sure before I woke I felt your lips grazing my ear, whispering, telling me something I don't understand with that raspy voice of yours, sounding like the waves of the Caribbean crashing in my ears, and then I think I remember you saying, "Only your hands can make me dance like this." I don't know if you actually said that, or if you'd ever say anything like that, but it feels like you did. What's the use of words? When it comes to you, I can't tell you where fantasies end and memories begin anymore.*

*And how will it be when I see you? I don't care about how thin you look, how much the drugs have sucked out of you face. You'll be my same Etiwanda, the girl who truly brought me back from the hills of Korea. You'll be my same Etiwanda, the woman who would lean on the drums when I spoke to you, balancing your head on the palms of your hand. You'll be the same woman who gave me those moments when you listened with your eyes, and made me feel like the entire world ceased to exist and like your existence was mine.*

*The engine drones. I look out of the window and notice we are flying over the green crumple of Cuba—that land of his fantasies, that birthplace of the music I love, that island I will never visit. And I imagine it as heaven. I imagine the legendary dead musicians, the soneros of the thirties and forties running through the streets of Havana, playing sones. I imagine the solares of Santiago de Cuba, Santa Clara, Bayamo, Guantánamo, Pinar del Río, Matanzas, Cienfuegos and Camagüey, the slums of place-names I'd heard millions of times in songs, places I had played my drums for, yet had never and probably would never see. I stretch my neck, trying to look down past the wing of the airplane, to see if I can recognize something, anything, but all I*

*can see are fuzzy mountains of military green, and then I picture you dancing a rumba in front of your native Malecón in Havana, the waves crashing against the seawall, and I see myself playing the drums louder and louder, trying to overpower the roar of the Caribbean, but I fail because the spray of salt water darts into my eyes and instead of continuing to play, I clench my face and gasp.*

*I wake up again, startled, your lips of air barely pressed against my cheek, and I think you have said something to me again, but I don't know what it is and I'm not sure you've said anything at all.*

Side B

Track 6—Mambo

Taberna Ochún, Cali, Colombia.

19 June 1973.

Polo Norte found Palomino drunk at seven in the morning, in one of El Jefe's salsa *griles*, playing a jam session with the Lebrón Brothers who were visiting from New York, trading the congas and the timbales with Wilmer, a short and prodigal man who could not only play, but sing, a man who spent his life driving a taxi when he should have been as famous as El Comandante or any of the members of La Charanga Colombia.

“Get up,” Polo Norte said.

“Good morning,” Palomino said without lifting his head from the drum.

“Your friend. They found him in Miami. We're going to the airport right the fuck now. Your bags have been packed.” He yelled at the bartender. “Get this motherfucker the strongest coffee you can brew.”

Palomino thought briefly about asking Polo Norte to let him see Elpidio, to say bye to him in case he didn't come back, but why get attached now if he'd spent this whole time avoiding seeing him. He gave Wilmer a hug and a drunk promise. “I'm going to make you famous one day,” Palomino said. “We're going to be on Heaven's Outpost.”

El Jefe's repaired Land Cruiser bumped up and down on the rural road to the brand new regional airport, built in the outskirts of the city for the Pan-American Games Cali had hosted the year before. Polo Norte reached into his coat pocket for a green passport and US visa for a Medardo Ulloa, complete with Palomino's picture printed on it.



Polo Norte passed Palomino a folded piece of notebook paper. “This is your story. Study this and throw the paper away before you get on that plane.” His name would be Medardo Ulloa. Born 17 June 1929 in Mompox, Colombia. Forty-four years old. No family in the States. He would be staying in the United States for six months, in Miami. He was going to Jackson Memorial Hospital for a prosthetic. His doctor’s name was Dr. Siddhartha Raymond. Orthopedist Surgeon. “There’ll be a cab waiting for Medardo at the airport. Take it. And don’t even acknowledge my existence until we get to the hotel. With all this Nixon guy is doing to fuck us and all this marijuana shit going on, being a Colombian trying to get into Miami is bad news. But don’t worry. You’re bringing nothing illegal to the United States.”

“Except a fake passport.” If there was something he’d become leery of over the years, it was US immigration and Colombian Authorities.

Miami International Airport, Miami, FL, USA.

19 June 1973.

After switching planes in Bogotá, Palomino and Polo Norte’s flight landed at the Miami International Airport. As was customary of Colombians, no one made any accommodation for his handicap, and he was the last person to deplane. Palomino stood at the end of the long immigration line in Concourse B, about to enter the United States ‘legally’ for the first time in his life. Miami was surprisingly hotter than Cali and reminded him more of his brief stop in the Philippines than of the time he’d lived in the United States. Everything was flat. He felt like he was submerged in a soup and immediately wished he was in the familiar territory of New York. Everybody in the immigration line was sweating. Most of the travelers in the sparsely filled Boeing 707 were Colombian, save for an obvious American man in a sweat-soaked flower-

patterned silk shirt. He was probably in the marijuana business—a dying business, according to El Jefe. Cocaine, she had said, was the future. So far, Miami smelled like mold and was several shades too bright.

Polo Norte was five places in line ahead of him, but they hadn't spoken at all since leaving Cali, and they would not do so until reaching the Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach. Polo Norte had insisted on keeping a low profile, on not straying from character. One family of three cleared the line. The customs agent sent them on their way. Palomino was nervous, and he felt the sweat erupting out of his pores. He flipped open his passport again, trying to do something besides think of Etiwanda, and remembered Polo Norte had told him not to do that. He knew that scene that had kept him up on the plane—him playing the drums and her dancing in Havana—would never happen, so he moved it. To somewhere in Miami. But all he could picture was a palm tree, because he still didn't know what anything beyond Terminal B of Miami International Airport looked like.

He was fixing his crutch, about to step forward, when two immigration officials plucked the American from his place in the line. One of the uniformed men held a large leather valise a German shepherd was going crazy over, clawing, biting, lunging. It looked like Alcapón, Eulalia's dog. The last two times he'd seen American immigration officials, he'd spent several years of his life in prison. His stomach tingled. The digestive juices settled. He wanted to turn and to run back toward the plane, to escape onto the tarmac and sprint to somewhere in Miami and kick down a door, and Etiwanda would be there, and she would run up to him and she would hang from his neck saying 'My love, you've saved me,' but the fantasy—as his fantasies often did—crashed because he only had one leg, and one-legged men couldn't kick down doors. No.

He wasn't going anywhere but forward, following the line. He looked up. The American was on his stomach, being handcuffed.

Almost an hour later, Palomino got to put his poor-man orange-colored sweater on the immigration official's counter along with the green Colombian passport, open to Medardo Ulloa's visa, with Palomino's picture on it. The agent was a short brunette who looked like an overweight cross between Snow White and one of her seven dwarves. "Name," she said in a well-groomed *gringa* Spanish.

"Medardo Ulloa."

She eyed the passport and eyed him, and he could see her following the words with her eyes. She looked up at him for a second that seemed eternal. She looked back down and then tried to peer over her counter discretely, looking at where Palomino's leg should have been. He felt his hands sweating, so he rubbed them against the sweater, slowly trying to make the gesture seem natural.

"Customs declaration, please," she said.

Palomino passed the white card, completely filled out, declaring a two-pound bag of Colombian coffee, twelve *pandebonos* and twelve *buñuelos* that Polo Norte had told him to declare. But he hadn't even seen his bag. For all he knew, Polo Norte could have done the same thing that El Comandante had done and filled his bags with drugs. El Comandante. He felt good. He was finally going to get that bastard back for all he'd done to make his musical life miserable, for getting him arrested and put in jail for a second time. Palomino's eyes were darting, and he knew it, tried to contain it, but they were looking for the pigeon that had been there the past two times he'd been deported.

While the agent read through his customs declaration and his I-94, Palomino thought of the terminal at Newark and how close he'd thought he had been to Etiwanda, but he hadn't been close at all. He looked forward, toward the baggage claim, and Polo Norte looked as calm as ever, pointing another man's attention toward a woman's ass. Palomino kept expecting for the bird to be once again trapped in the terminal, to steal from him the opportunity to tell Etiwanda that he loved her. And would he go back to La Modelo for a third time—or would El Jefe keep him out? The agent was waving in front of his face. Palomino's head tilted like a surprised dog's.

“Enjoy your new leg, Mr. Ulloa,” she said. “Next!”

Palomino and Polo Norte rode separate cabs along the 14<sup>th</sup> Street expressway toward the Eden Roc in Miami Beach. Palomino's cab driver was black and tried to make talk about the hot weather, but Palomino pretended not to speak English. He settled back into the flatness of it all, climbing the Miami River Bridge and seeing the pink, peach and sherbet houses of a pastel-colored city. In the distance, the skyline looked pathetically small when compared to New York City's, but there were cranes everywhere, along with three medium-sized buildings that stood out because everything was so flat. As Miami whisked by him, as he rode the Julia Tuttle Causeway over the reflective blue waters of Biscayne Bay, Palomino felt like he was locked in a bizarre dream, like he was in outer space, in the future, but in the future of the 1950s.

“Turn the radio to 1260,” Palomino said, remembering WQBN, the radio station from which Etiwanda broadcast her tragic show, “please.” Maybe he'd be able to hear something about her.

“That's a Cuban station. I don't speak Spanish.” The cab driver turned the radio to 99.1 fm. Strange electric sounds that didn't sound like music at all to Palomino scratched from the

cab's blown-out speakers. They sounded as if a rat was trapped inside them, trying to get out because the music being beamed from the radio station was so horrible.

“What is that?”

“You ain't ever heard of disco? This is the biggest shit ever.” He turned the volume up.

Every time he spent time away from anywhere, the world changed. In 1962, the United States was a country fascinated with the art that he and his fellow musicians at the Montuno Street were creating. Now they were listening to rhythmic beeping. Then he thought of Elpidio, and of the pains he'd gone through to stay away from him, and he felt bad. How would Etiwanda feel if she found out Palomino had a son he didn't care for? “Stupid,” he muttered, and the cab driver was staring at him through the mirror.

A part of him just wanted to do the work. He'd never killed someone he knew, but then he couldn't deny the fact that he'd fantasized about killing El Comandante many times while touring with La Charanga Colombia.

The taxi slowed when it reached dry land, the traffic lights of Miami Beach. The art-deco buildings along the Arthur Godfrey were miniature versions of early New York skyscrapers—but they were painted in a bleached white that compounded the brightness of it all. Everything was surrounded by towering royal palms. Hasidic and Haredic Jews dominated the sidewalks, wearing biblical beards and curling sideburns over black suits too oppressive for the heat. If the buildings were taller and the palm trees gone, Palomino could have felt like he was back in Brooklyn in 1962, but he knew he wasn't. He was in 1973 Miami and he had a mission to accomplish. Having a mission felt good. It almost felt like he was living again.

Eden Roc Resort and Hotel, Miami Beach, FL, USA.

19 June 1973.

His stomach leaning on the cold railing of the ninth floor's curved balcony, contemplating the purple twilight over the Atlantic, Palomino waited for some local Colombians to finish unloading boxes under Polo Norte's direction. He never knew there were so many Colombians living in the United States, but he felt no connection to his compatriots, to the way they dressed. He didn't want any of them to see him, to know that he was missing a leg, to make small talk with him, to recognize him later when he would be taking Etiwanda out to dinner. All he wanted was to do the job, get the money and find Etiwanda. The things that he could do with fifty thousand dollars. He would buy Etiwanda a ranch in one of the mountains overlooking Cali, where she'd be able to stand and see all the way to the Pacific, and the children—how many of them? Three?—would be running around the corral, playing with the dogs and the cow. He could send money to Eulalia and Elpidio, to have them stay away out of his way.

A whiff of breeze hit his face, smelling of sea, of algae. He wanted to do the job like a sniper—the way he'd taken out that Chinese Colonel at Hill 391. One shot from an M1. Three hundred meters out. One kill. Get out before anyone figures out what has happened. Get the money. Find Etiwanda.

Polo Norte had said nothing to him since leaving Colombia. He still knew nothing about how the actual job would go. The wait was killing him. He looked back toward the dark room, toward the light from the hallway shining around the closed door. It was empty. Finally. Palomino grabbed his crutch and entered the room, leaving the sliding glass door open, and the smell of sea swirling around the room. He found the alarm clock by the bed-stand, and flipping the rotary dial, he looked for WQBN, looking for any link to Etiwanda. He found only English and static.

Polo Norte flung the door open. Despite the unbearable nighttime heat, Polo Norte was still wearing his leather jacket. He turned on the TV and put on Jeopardy. “The category is...Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,” Art Flemming said from the TV.

“Why were you such a jerk to my boys? They’re going to be your friends while you’re here in Miami,” Polo Norte said.

“When am I doing this?” Palomino said once Polo Norte closed the door. Twenty years since his last kill. Twenty years since the last time he’d fired a weapon.

“Doing what?”

“El Comandante.”

“Take it easy, cowboy. Tomorrow we blow the fucker’s head off. We get some rest tonight. Maybe get some Cuban girls to pay us a visit. Have you ever had a Cuban girl?” Polo Norte flipped through the channels, swinging the remote up and down. He opened a bottle of rum from the wine bar and started chugging from it. “But what about Papa Bauer?” the television said.

Etiwanda was Cuban, and no, he’d never had a Cuban girl, or any woman other than Eulalia. “When are you planning on telling me anything important?”

“All right.” He turned the TV off, cutting off the laugh-track from The Carol Burnett Show. “The fucker’s selling *marimba* in Hialeah. In this new shopping center. The Westland Mall,” Polo Norte said. “He’s working out of a liquor store, distributing small-time stuff to some Cubans to sell in this town called Hialeah. Some Cubans El Jefe doesn’t like. One of my boys saw him last week. He grows his shit right here in Miami, in his own fucking house.”

“So where? When do we do it?”

“What do you mean it?”

“It. The singer.”

“He gets to the mall at eight thirty in the morning and starts unloading his shit.”

“At that time the malls are empty, right? I’ll pick him off from the parking lot. Right from the car. I need to see my rifle. I need to zero the sights in the morning, get my eyes back into it.” At first he’d been happy about being tasked to enact El Jefe’s revenge on El Comandante, but lately he just thought about the singer as ‘the singer’ and tried to strip all humanity from the man who had once been his friend. And the voice. He’d be taking out one of the great voices of Colombian salsa, but since he’d been living for so long in the United States, was his voice part of Colombian salsa anymore? Did it matter?

“Negative on that. First, don’t worry about weapons. I got that more than covered, and don’t worry about zeroing shit. From where you’re going to fire, you’ll smell his breath. Second, El Jefe wants this shit to make the news even in Colombia. She wants us to turn the Westland Mall into a John Wayne western. She wants machine guns. Broken glass. Dead civilians. She wants to send a message.” Polo Norte peeled off his socks. His feet smelled.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. That’s a suicide mission. We’ll be caught.”

“No *parce*, you’ll be caught. You make it, you get \$50,000 and you get to live. Or if you want, I can blow your head off right now.” He took a .38 revolver out of his jacket. “Have a drink. You didn’t think El Jefe was going to make this easy, did you?”

Palomino looked at him, and couldn’t bring himself to say anything.

“Lie down. I bite,” Polo Norte said.

20 June 1973.



Palomino's day had started at a groggy and dark four in the morning, when crabs running sideways had invaded the sidewalks and roadways of Miami Beach. Collins Avenue had turned into something that looked like a field of stomped grapes, but instead of grapes, there were pink bits of crab flesh splattered over the yellow and white road markings, being flattened and scattered by every passing car. He and Polo Norte took a cab to the mainland, to a warehouse somewhere by an old racetrack on Bird Road, where they picked up a white Ford Econoline in need of a wash.

The inside of the van looked like the arms room for Kilo Company, 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment. Mounted on weapon racks were AK-47s, M-16s and Uzi submachine guns, as well as several pistols Palomino couldn't recognize. Below the racks were cardboard boxes which Palomino knew to be full of ammunition of different calibers.

"Put on gloves before you touch anything."

"What are we doing, fighting a war?" Palomino said.

"Believe it. This bitch...it's armored," Polo Norte said, knocking on the van's frame.

It was already hot outside, the humidity was choking him, but when he began to feel his pulse going all the way down to the floor on both of his legs, he felt the pain of having and not having his leg at the same time. He was confused. He didn't know whether it was because he'd been thinking of Etiwanda so much or because he felt closer than ever to his time as a soldier—as a killer. The absent leg felt as heavy as the real one. And then he remembered he needed a camera. How could he have forgotten about the camera?

Westland Mall, Hialeah, Florida, USA.

20 June 1973.

With Polo Norte at the wheel, the engine idling, Palomino swallowed excess spit, looking across an empty parking lot, past a few palm trees bobbing with the wind. He looked at the sharp rectangular edges of the mall while the rush-hour Palmetto Expressway honked, buzzed and screeched behind him. The Hialeah Discount Drug Store had its door propped open, and there he was, El Comandante, looking more crippled than Palomino, hunched forward while carrying boxes. His hair was long, despite the large bald spot on the crown of his head. He looked so spent, a shadow of the glorious rebel commander he knew a scant decade before. Palomino felt old. Maybe too old to be running around Miami trying to be Dirty Harry. He felt ridiculous, like the way he imagined a perverted old man would feel when getting turned down while trying to get a teenager into bed. He looked at Polo Norte.

“Not yet,” Polo Norte said. “Take one or two pistols in your belt.”

“I only have two hands.”

“Don’t come back until you’ve spent all the bullets.”

“This is ridiculous. One man. One bullet.” It was clear that Polo Norte had never been in the military.

“El Jefe’s orders. I execute. El Jefe wants one hundred bullets in a faggot. El Jefe gets one hundred bullets in a faggot. This is your chance. If you do right by El Jefe, *parce*... you’ve never had it this good.”

“Are you going to drive up?”

Polo Norte’s head turned slowly from side to side, enjoying telling Palomino no.

He looked at the distance between the van and the store. “Do you expect me to run across an open field to that drug store with a crutch and two Uzis hanging from my shoulder?”

Palomino charged a .44 and slid it between his jeans and his shirt.

“You won’t be doing this for a while. Not until the store is a little more crowded. Maybe you can even get some buyers in there.”

“Why don’t you just shoot me in the fucking head right now and get it over with?”

“El Jefe likes you and El Jefe does things in a particular way. Like this is all a fucking novel, like *Don Quixote*. You’re basically earning the right to stay alive. Think about it like that.”

The engine idled until ten fifty-seven in the morning, when Polo Norte put the van in second gear and drove around the mostly-empty lot to the door of the Hialeah Discount. Palomino’s heart raced. He fastened the gloves around his fingers and un-tucked his FILA t-shirt. Holding the Uzi in his left hand, he thought it would be so easy to turn the barrel in Polo Norte’s direction and blow his face off. He’d be free. He’d roam around Miami, looking for Etiwanda. But then what of El Jefe? How far could she reach? And then, what of Elpidio? What if she did something to him in retaliation? No. He had a mission to accomplish. A purpose who was hunched behind a counter full of plastic pill bottles. “You take your fucking Uzis,” Palomino said, putting them down on the floorboard. “You can shoot me in the back when I’m done, but this is all I need.” The van still moving, he opened the passenger door, as Polo Norte eased in front of the Hialeah Discount.

Palomino grabbed his crutch. He was going to put it down first, then slide his leg down on the pavement. His ghost leg started throbbing, and “*El Dorado Boogaloo*,” La Charanga Colombia’s biggest hit, started playing in his head, and he felt like he was back in the sold-out concert in Stockholm. Palomino could hear his own *tumbao* repeating and repeating, the scraping of the *guiro*, the incessant bouncing claps of the boogaloo, and a younger, more erect, still honorable Comandante Andrés Caballero, in his Fidel Castro fatigues, singing “...*Guatavita...el*

*oro pa' Bochica...*” and the chorus behind him whispering in a low English, “...shing-a-ling, shing-a-ling...”

The beat playing in his head, Palomino stood, feeling the hot breath of the underbelly of the van rushing to his face, ready to do something that felt real, that felt natural, something that he'd been trying to suppress for so many years. It didn't matter what the consequences would be. It didn't matter that El Comandante had once been a friend. Maybe this, and not longing for Etiwanda—or simply longing—was his true purpose in life, and he'd been a fool not to embrace it. His ears were now bouncing, jingling, playing a boogaloo. His foot struck the ground, dragging on a puddle. His crutch leaving circular wet spots on the pavement. He threw the door open and was hit by a blast of musty air conditioning, by the aisles of medicines that blocked his vision and by the sight of a fat woman digging through her purse in front of El Comandante, who looked disillusioned with life.

Palomino thought of conjuring Etiwanda's memory at that moment, of savoring some last thoughts of her before someone shot him, but his senses were in full alert. He was already too far gone. His awareness of everything heightened, especially of the leg that wasn't there. The leg that felt like it had pores and was secreting sweat along with the rest of his body. He tried not to look driven, but how could he not, if he was in the middle of a *descarga*. A moment that would etch itself in the cerebral cortex, away from the forgotten everyday memories of insignificant stimulus. A moment that would live as long as blood flowed through his brain.

“...*Mamasita... vamos pa' Guatavita...*,” Palomino heard boogaloo bouncing inside his head, despite the fact that Mexican *rancheras* were playing over the store's speakers.

El Comandante looked up. Palomino was half an aisle away. El Comandante squinted, moving from the counter to an open register and stopping. Palomino had been recognized.

“Quinto,” El Comandante said. “What a great pleasure after all these years, man. How did you find me?”

It wasn’t supposed to be personal. One shot. One kill. In and out. “Clave Records still keeps tabs on you, Comandante.” He lied.

“Call me Andrés. I’m not the commander of anything anymore. Quinto Pimentel. After all these years. You look like shit. Dried up...” El Comandante handed the woman some cash. “I had the world in a microphone, and I gave it all up. Fucking drugs, man. So I take it you’re still chasing after that girl. You’re going to throw your life away too. But I can’t talk. It’s not like I have much going on. The band...it was never the same again after you left. Who would have known no one wanted to listen to boogaloo anymore.”

*...El Oro pa Bochica...*

“No, I’m over her,” Palomino said. But he wasn’t. He was still after her, but he didn’t need to explain anything to a man he was about to kill. Was he ashamed of the fact that he was still after her? No, he couldn’t be. He couldn’t be ashamed of it. It was at the core of his being—he didn’t have time to ponder these things or for small talk with a dead man. The fat woman left the counter, and a line began to form behind Palomino. It was so different, killing someone he knew.

“Too bad. You were so stupid about that girl. It was entertaining to see you. Like a dog chasing his own tail for days, going and going in circles.” Palomino heard the door opening behind him and reached into his belt for the pistols. “You didn’t ask, but I’m going to tell you. I gave up on all that revolution stuff a long time ago. I don’t know that I ever really believed it. I think I used it as an excuse for killing people.” El Comandante lowered his voice. “Because killing people’s fun. But, now, nobody even wants me to sing. Maybe we can get together and

play again. Like old times. Jam Sessions. It would be a great consolation for me. But anyway, your girl. Her name's Etiwanda, right?" El Comandante summoned for an old man to come around Palomino to the register.

"Yes." Palomino rested his hands on the back of his hips, trying to keep the crutch wedged to his side.

"I think she was on the local club circuit for a while...and I think I may have seen her here in Hialeah—" He stopped talking and froze, looking past Palomino. Palomino turned back and saw Polo Norte. Two Uzis out, aimed toward El Comandante, an AK-47 slung across his back.

*...Ma-ma-ma-ma-mamasita...vamos pa' Guatavita...*

"What the fuck are you waiting for, *hijueputa*? Are you going to ask him out for coffee?" Polo Norte said.

"Where did you see her?" Palomino said.

"So you're still looking for her. I knew it." El Comandante took a step back. His hands in the air. He looked at Palomino. "Did you come here to kill me? After all I did for you? After I got you out of jail and got you out of Colombia? Really?"

"I'll kill both of you *malparidos*, right the fuck now," Polo Norte said. Now he'd never know where El Comandante had seen Etiwanda.

El Comandante ducked behind the counter.

In that fraction of a second, Palomino weighed his options: Polo Norte's weapons were drawn, aimed in his direction. He couldn't shoot Polo Norte. The only thing to do was kill El Comandante. With a revolver aimed, hammer back, Palomino peered over the counter and El Comandante was reaching for a shotgun. Palomino squeezed the trigger. The sound of thunder.

His wrist rocked back on itself. An S of smoke rose from the revolver. A hole in the middle of the bald spot. Red splatter everywhere, all over Palomino's forearm. It felt good. The music stopped. He heard screaming, the store emptying, and he heard Polo Norte unleashing the full rage of the Uzis, bottles shattering, glass panes crashing, thuds hitting the green carpet.

Palomino heard El Comandante groaning. He squeezed the trigger again and again, until the drum had rolled all the way around, coming full circle to empty and unsatisfying clicks. He knew El Comandante was dead, that it was time to get out of the store, but he realized why El Jefe wanted a catastrophe and not a murder: The art of it all. He wasn't scared any longer. Whatever would happen would happen. He threw the revolver on top of El Comandante's misshaped head—looking like a putrid potato with tuberous sprouts—and he continued with the other revolver, shooting with his unsteady left hand, not being anywhere as accurate, hitting the carpet twice before throwing the revolver down and turning around, seizing the crutch and moving toward the van while Polo Norte chased down two older Hispanic men into a corner, shooting until all his ammunition in all three weapons had been expended and the weapons dumped on the floor.

Everything so beautiful, so relevant, so permanent, and he didn't have a camera. A panoramic shot, maybe, from the ceiling, capturing every spot with a dead body, telling the story of a hit. It would have been the best picture he'd ever taken. Not more than two minutes could have elapsed. "Let's go. Let's go," Polo Norte said, jogging toward the van, and Palomino crutched, looking at the blood on his forearm, on his white shirt, going through the hole where the glass pane used to be, leaping over the body of the fat woman, stepping on glass shards, getting into the running van.

Putting the van in first gear, Polo Norte said. "I almost killed you."

The van turned on W 49<sup>th</sup> St. toward the Palmetto Expressway, and he could hear sirens now approaching the mall. Riding the ramp, heading north, both men in silence. Palomino kept looking at the rearview, waiting for the spinning blue police lights that never came. At the expressway's big bend, Polo Norte reached under his seat for a Budweiser, and passed Palomino one. "What we just did is what I live for," Polo Norte said.

It was what Palomino lived for too, but he'd forgotten it, chasing Etiwanda's memory. He downed the entire beer in one chug.



*Descarga en Miniatura*

*On this day, this country inaugurates a new President—Jimmy Carter, a liberal—but we are all oblivious to this. Those of us huddled here, outside this warehouse in Hialeah, counting boxes of El Jefe’s product, might have entertained thoughts about how this administration would be good or bad for business, but right now, no one thinks politics.*

*At first, I do not recognize the snowflakes as snowflakes because I am in Hialeah. I think I am watching pollen falling, because the dancing white dots zigzagging and landing around me cannot be snow. As I cut open a box, one lands on my wrist, and I think I recognize the symmetrical shape of a hexagonal prism before it melts on my skin, and then I put my revolver inside the sweater, and I open my hand to capture the flakes, and it is true.*

*“Is it snow?” one of the distributors asks.*

*“It is snow,” I say. “In Miami of all places,” and if snow can land in Miami, I wonder what else can happen.*

*“Nieve, nieve,” one of the Colombians says, kneeling, laughing and executing the sign of the cross over and over again. I remember most of them have never seen snow. And I give them a smile as I fling bricks of product at them, counting the quantities out loud. I remember the momentary awe I felt the first time I saw snow falling in Korea, before artillery started landing and we started dying. I stop counting. “Enjoy it,” I say. “Take a break.” I go outside.*

*Last night, Etiwanda, I killed a compatriot. A distributor. I torched his Pontiac, and I joked about it, telling him, as he clawed at the cracking windshield, “At least you’ll stop complaining about the cold.” I took his picture—him in the blazing car—and I couldn’t wait till the morning to develop it in the bathroom before burning it.*

*And before, before meeting you, none of this would have given me trouble. It would have not kept me up at night. But now, instead of dreaming about you, Andrés Caballero, El Comandante, comes to visit me in my dreams, and I stand in line in his drug store and we replay the last conversation we had. And my list of visitors keeps growing with every man I kill, and my dreams are nothing but stale and awkward conversations.*

*I am forty-four, Etiwanda, far too old for this gun-slinging, and you are nowhere to be found—to save me from this life. As far as I know, you are here in Hialeah—under this same sky, watching these same snow flurries, remembering our years in New York, in Spanish Harlem, at the Montuno Street—but I cannot find you. Etiwanda, this snow is fleeting. We are getting old and we will soon melt.*

*Join me.*

*Let's escape together.*

*I have loved you.*

*And the only thing that keeps me going is the hope that I will find you, the knowledge that you cannot be more than ten miles away. And if I don't have this...I realize the futility of it all.*

*I don't quite remember well the last time I saw you, what you were wearing, because as much as I loved you, I took you for granted, and I didn't make a mental sketch of you every time I left your presence, and now I'm paying for it, being haunted by an inexact memory that doesn't do what I tell it to do.*

*Snow falling in Hialeah, melting on the ground—its sheer impossibility—tells me that in this world anything is possible, that you could be around the corner, that I could find you today. And though I know it won't happen, I will indulge in this fantasy, and as soon as I am free from these boxes, I will cruise the streets of Hialeah calling your name.*

Hialeah-Miami Springs Bridge, Hialeah, Florida, USA

19 April 1978.

He had paid to erect a billboard on the side of Okeechobee Road, near the FEC railroad crossing, reading in Spanish

*Etiwanda, I have loved you.*

*Write to me at*

**PO BOX # 1142  
MIAMI BEACH, FL 33140**

He idled in a silver-colored 1976 Chevy Impala, across a rainy South River Drive from the billboard. He stared at his wristwatch and at the billboard intermittently, through the screeching windshield wipers, growing impatient every time the eternal FEC trains crossed, further blocking his view. On the cassette deck, the new Típica 73 song “Canuto” blared for what was probably the hundredth time in a row. Palomino rewound the tape again, by now having enough practice to know when to stop to press play, to begin the song again with the brass section.

The only good thing about the seventies was the salsa. It was as if in New York and Puerto Rico, *salseros* were breeding like cockroaches, splitting, fragmenting, making new bands, new sounds which were now famous worldwide. The songs were hard-hitting, relentless, and were being released in floods, inundating the stores, each trying to outdo the other, each with more energy, with more complex conga solos.

Palomino should not have been there, staring at a billboard, but back at the Eden Roc, watching one of El Jefe’s cocaine shipments being delivered out in the Atlantic. But nothing would happen, he knew. He’d missed watching several shipments before and no one had noticed.

Today was too rainy of a day to see that far into the ocean anyway. Nothing ever happened. And when something happened, people died. He made sure of that.

Without knowing their names, Miami had become terrified of Palomino and Polo Norte. Palomino had killed forty-eight people on behalf of El Jefe between 1973 and 1978. Polo Norte had killed many more, he was sure. And every death had—for a while—emboldened Palomino, to the point that he'd felt worthy of the Mondragón surname. But he wasn't proud anymore. He was tired, and wanted to find Etiwanda and settle down. To be a grown-up.

Over the years, he'd sent back over one hundred thousand dollars for Elpidio's care, not once sending a note, never inquiring about the child's well-being or growth. Palomino had never known what it was like to have a father or a grandfather. He'd heard about fatherhood from his mother—the bitch—and for Palomino Mondragón, to be a father was to be a famed killer—exactly what he was doing. He'd played over one thousand free jam sessions in the ever-growing number of Miami salsa clubs, always asking if anyone knew Etiwanda, if anyone had seen her dancing, if anyone had heard her singing, before packing up his drums and returning to the Eden Roc alone.

His job was to be El Jefe's quality control and ethics enforcement. His job was to not be noticed. To not be seen. To be the invisible thread that held the inbound part of El Jefe's operation together. In the passenger seat, a gift from Polo Norte—a gift that brought him nightmares—was the framed 1973 Miami Herald headline reading:

SHOPPING AT THE WASTELAND MALL:

THE WESTLAND DRUG SHOOTINGS

Palomino performed spot checks, sometimes dropping in on distributors, sometimes buying from street dealers, making sure no one was stealing from El Jefe's cut. Whenever a link in the chain became greedy, Palomino sent a message, each time more daring, each time more brutal.

The Wild West shootings gave way to drive-by massacres, to house arsons, to mansion bombings. As per El Jefe's orders, in order to instill respect, in order to lessen future retaliations, in order to send messages, taking out a link of the chain meant taking out the link's entire family. The bigger the headline in The Miami Herald mailed to El Jefe, the better. Polo Norte and Palomino never saw each other, though Palomino knew Polo Norte was watching, always watching, the way he'd been at La Modelo.

Staring at his black and white creation, at the simple passion of the billboard, Palomino couldn't bring himself to release the parking brake. Simple, romantic. She would reply to it in a missive, asking 'Who are you?' and then he'd tell her who he was, and she'd be shocked. Her next letter would come back saying 'I have thought about you without end,' and then they would meet, embrace and raise children and goats on the hills overlooking Cali.

If Polo Norte were to see the billboard, which he eventually would, Palomino would risk incurring El Jefe's wrath, but what else was he to do after five years of private investigators and *santería*, of visiting the studios of WQBN and every Latin nightclub he could think of? Palomino would drive around Hialeah, getting lost in the city's fucked up numbering system, trying to find Etiwanda's Cuban cadence in the *botánicas* and the *cafeterias*, in between the thousands of Cuban accents—those accents that he molded in his mind into conversations that made his leg feel alive, conversations where Etiwanda would run up to him, hang from his neck, almost dragging him off balance, saying 'You finally came for me.'—He'd roam the streets of Hialeah, asking if anyone had seen her, black, tall, skinny, a beautiful face withered by a drug addiction, a

gardenia in her ear, the best mambo dancer in all of Miami. From Palm Avenue to Red Road, passing hundreds of front lawn shrines to San Lázaro and Santa Bárbara, to Babalú, Oshosi, Ochún and Obatalá, the pantheon of Yoruba gods for whom the drums had been made, for whom the drums ultimately tolled, for whom he'd been unknowingly playing for over twenty years. But never once did he come close to finding her.

In between inspections, in between jobs, he visited Cuban *santeros*, asking them to consult with the gods. He visited palm readers and soothsayers who'd tell him that they had no clue where she was, but that finding her would be the end of Palomino's suffering, the culmination of his miserable existence.

He stared at his watch again. The shipment, dropped by a monoplane and to be picked up by Dzon Hesker, one of El Jefe's new American distributors, should have been delivered already. There was no point in going back to Miami Beach now. He would check out the Jew's dealers, the nightclubs of South Beach, to make sure no one had gotten greedy. And maybe, just maybe, he'd have to take someone out, to burn through a rifle's barrel. It was time to go, but he stayed for one more iteration of "Canuto," staring at the billboard, looking around the sidewalks to see if Etiwanda would come out and jot down the address to his PO Box. She never came.

A bird—a pigeon, he thought, but he couldn't tell—landed on his windshield and then shit, the brown smudge smearing with every swing of the windshield wiper. Palomino put the car in gear and hit the accelerator, merging onto Okeechobee Road without looking, almost getting pummeled by a fire truck barreling down the highway.

On the way back to the Eden Roc, he drafted and coasted to the sounds of La Sonora Ponceña. Despite the fact that the oil crisis had been long over, he sped behind big rigs on

Okeechobee Road and on I-95, throttling down his engine, riding in their wake, only ten feet from their tailgate, not to save gasoline, but for the thrill of it, for the feeling of being alive.

When he returned to the hotel at eight thirty, it was already dark, and he was craving a steak. He planned to count the dollars he would change into *pesos* to send to Elpidio, and to get dressed to go to Azabache, a new restaurant in Little Havana where Roberto Torres, a former member of the legendary Cuban group La Sonora Matancera, would be singing that night. He turned on his cassette deck and played Rubén Blades *Siembra*, an album with socially conscious lyrics that sounded like El Comandante could have written them. Palomino undressed and turned on the hot water in the shower. He moved toward the room to wait for it to steam.

The window was open.

Salsa jingling droned in the rear of the room.

The curtain was flailing in the sea breeze, and the room was full of the scent of ocean. Palomino turned back toward the bathroom, to reach his revolver, but he was too slow. The tackle came from the side and broke the crutch. His lungs emptied. Palomino hit his head on the side of the bed frame, and felt it bleeding, the warm drops diverting around the curvature of his ear to collect in round burgundy spots soaking into the carpet. He felt the scraping chin against the back of his head, and he smelt the *aguardiente*, the dirty, sweated-on leather, and knew that it was Polo Norte who was on top of him—heavy, enormous and driving his knee into Palomino's back.

“Why the fuck were you putting up a billboard in Hialeah when you should have been watching a shipment?” Polo Norte said.

“It's nice to see you again, Polo Norte,” Palomino said, squeezing the words out of his lungs. Steam swirled out of the bathroom, fogging the full-length mirror by the door.

“I’ve got eyes everywhere. I could tell El Jefe what you’re doing and sign your death sentence. I’ll execute you myself. Or shit, we could kill Eulalia’s little bastard, and I would fucking do it, except I don’t think you give enough of a shit.”

Palomino swallowed spit. “Maybe I should take lessons about being a devoted father from you.”

Polo Norte rose, bearing down on his knee, digging it into Palomino’s back and pressing his head down. “You’ve got too many fucking distractions.”

“Mind your own business.”

“You and I know you’re never going to find your fairy tale, but I want you to do whatever helps you keep your sanity. God knows it takes a lot of self-deception for me to be who I am. But keep your priorities straight. You haven’t finished paying your debt.”

“When’s that going to be?” Palomino was going to catch Polo Norte with his guard down, and he would have nothing to hold over him, to stand in the way of looking for Etiwanda.

“Whenever I say so.” Polo Norte stood and left Palomino without a crutch, slamming the door on his way out.

Palomino rolled on his back and sighed, looking at the steam and at the dust, staring up at the seemingly moving ceiling. He was unable to stand. He wanted to think of something soothing. A good memory of Etiwanda, of one of their conversations when she poured her soul to him over a cup of stale coffee would have been perfect, but he rummaged and rummaged through his brain, finding only snippets—still shots—of her appearance on Heaven’s Outpost, of the bags under her eyes that looked like they were made of wrinkled cellophane paper, and of the branching veins of her clay-colored arms. With the time, Etiwanda was becoming a fantasy that no longer existed, but that he couldn’t live without.



12 October 1979.

“*Aló?*” Palomino picked up the phone, rubbing his eyes, tired from driving loops around the full-sized San Lázaros of Hialeah because he couldn’t sleep, his leg throbbing, thinking of that moment of meeting Etiwanda again. She, looking thirty years past her age, looking like a malnourished dog, saying to him, ‘You’ve wasted your time. Why would anyone want to be with an amputee?’

The voice on the other end of the telephone was too loud for that time of the morning, for that heavy of a hangover. He had to hold the receiver a foot away from his ear. “I don’t know what the fuck you’re doing up there, but you just tripled your debt to me. If you don’t fix this. If you don’t punish those who disrespected me. If you don’t get me my money back. I will kill you and your little bastard personally.” It was El Jefe. Dzon Hesker hadn’t paid.

Palomino was too disoriented to give her a non-groaning answer.

“Polo Norte said the Jew only paid him sixty percent of what is owed to me. Fix it.” She slammed the phone.

Ten minutes later, when he was starting to fall back asleep, it rung again.

“You’ve gotten us in some shit,” Polo Norte said. “Now because of you, she’s going to come here. Why did you have to piss her off?”

“It’ll get fixed.”

“Why did you make her come up here? I’m not going to drown with you. You’re going to fucking drown alone, and I’m going to watch you. I’m going to push you under the water.”

“Fuck you.” Palomino slammed the phone and went back to sleep.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*Kendall. The uniform subdivisions of Kendall are so peaceful at night, so far from the Spanish-accented mess of Hialeah, so far from the rising skyline by the bay. There are swamp sounds coming for the overgrown grass beyond the houses. SW 109<sup>th</sup> Avenue is empty. There is too much space between the streetlights. Pink houses are painted by the shade of newly-planted palm trees still propped up by rafters. Dzon Hesker's house is not. The lights inside are off. His Mercedes is gone. His wife and kids are in Connecticut. His older boy at school in Tallahassee. But I know he's in there, shivering at the thought of seeing me, holding a revolver. Nowadays in Miami, no one wants to see me, and that's a good thing, because it means people are afraid of me. I've become the biggest thing in this town. And that's not bad for a one-legged fucker.*

*And I know that Jew's life is over when I will it to be. So I can sit here under this streetlight and enjoy a warm American beer. If you could see me like this. An Uzi in my hand. A target in my sights. The camera slung across my shoulder. I got swagger. I'm like motherfucking James Bond. This is the shit you like—the bad-asses. The half-assed bad-asses you used to get fucked by in New York. None of them, none of them would ever come close to being who I am. If you could see me like this...*

*But I'm not always like this because I don't have a leg.*

*It's as if the rifle makes up for the missing leg. Isn't that some shit? You'd probably wet your underpants if you saw me shooting this fucker in the face, the way I am about to do.*

*This is the shit I think before I kill:*

*If Etiwanda saw me like this, she'd rip her clothes off.*

*And this shit gets me angry, and fired up because I know you won't ever see me like this. Because I'm also afraid you won't like it, because that's how you women are. You never know*

*what you want. You have never known what you want. I'm too afraid to tarnish the good-boy-you-can-trust-me image you have of me. Because I'm different than all those other fuckers. I've always been too much of a pussy. And I think of all this shit and I get angry, and I let myself think it and soak in it.*

*I was going to put a bomb in the Jew's house and blow it up during dinnertime. To give El Jefe a big fucking headline in Colombia. To teach this Jew not to fuck with me. I don't know what possessed this bastard to think he could steal twenty kilos from a shipment I was watching. I have already killed eight people because of this shit—to appease El Jefe's wrath—and I say this has to end here, but not with a bomb. That's the type of shit that really pisses reporters off and gets the police off their asses. No. The Jew must be just one more death.*

*The next higher person to kill would be me or Polo Norte. And I know Polo Norte's up to something, because he's been buying weekly cars since my shipment went missing, because he talks a lot of shit about being cool, but he hasn't kept shit quiet since we got to Miami. He likes his gold rings too much. He likes his leather jackets too much. He likes fucking too much. So what if I decide to put up a billboard to look for you? Nine people have to die. But no. People have to die because no one wants to accept responsibility for their actions. Because people are not the same anymore.*

*I get out of the car. Mosquitoes flock to me. A lizard scurries out of my way. You better move, fucker, I want to say to it. But I don't speak to animals because they don't understand Spanish. This Jew is waiting for me. He knows I'm coming. I don't come at the house. That would be stupid. I go to the bushes outside his bathroom and I crouch, leaning against a tree. I wait. My skin itches, but I wait, crouched until he walks into the bathroom, lights off, and he takes his nightly bath with the fucking lights off. The dirty fucker. Going to get killed by one-legged man.*

*It's hard to be stealthy when you use a crutch. But you don't have to be faster than your enemy. Only smarter. This kill sounds slow and romantic like a bolero, like a drawn out, resonating tumbao. I raise the Uzi to the height of the bathroom window and I aim down without looking. I squeeze. I spray. Glass shatters. I hear ricochet. I hear groaning. I spray again in the same direction and hear more groaning. Now I'm faster than him.*

*The bolero speeds to a Cha-Cha-Cha. The metals hit hard. The scraper. The cowbell. I crutch to the door and shoot the handle until wood splinters. Until I can see the other end. Until I can stick my fingers inside to clear the fucked up bolt. And his house is full of tile. Black and white, serene tile. This is the way the cultured rich live—unlike El Jefe. Black geometrical shapes are on the tables, on the walls, but I move toward the groaning. Now I'm faster than the fucker. If you could see me like this, about to shoot him in the face. About to take his picture.*

*About to take his picture when a pair of white headlights beam across the living room, and his son barges in—home from school—asking “Is everything okay?” I don't give him a chance to ask the question twice. I spray. I mow him down. I drag him to the bathtub, to let him die with his father. The fat body face down. The blood seeping down the drain. The son's body on its side, one arm over his father. As I snap the pictures from the corner of the bathroom, I think the moment is tender—in a condescending sort of way: The boy, so concerned about his father's wellbeing, is willing to take a bullet for him, instead of leaving and calling the police, which would have been smarter, but not nearly as tender. And I wonder if this ever happened to me—if someone left me to die in a bathtub—I wonder whether anyone would care to come look for me. And I think about Elpidio, and I know he wouldn't. No one would. Not even you.*

*The high of the killing is far gone. I hate my existence again, and think I'm going to drink tonight until I drown the memory of you and of the family portrait I've just taken.*

Eden Roc Hotel, Miami Beach, Florida, USA

4 January 1979.

Palomino was holding the wrinkled note he'd retrieved from the post office box in his hand. The dried blood in his fingernails had smeared on the yellow notebook paper. Palomino was trembling. He'd just finished shooting Dzon Hesker in the mouth, inside of the man's Kendall home, which was a terribly intimate, too well-decorated dwelling to leave that sad and that empty. The killing was—Palomino hoped—the culminating event of the crisis that had stemmed from the twenty kilos of cocaine that disappeared in the waters of the Atlantic on the day the billboard had been installed, on the day he wasn't watching. He turned on his tape player, and played "You Will Cry" by Oscar D'León, a Venezuelan auto mechanic turned into an overnight salsa hit. The tune had so much energy that it made him want to go back outside to kill.

He opened the note. During the past year, he'd received three responses to the billboard. One of them had come from Polo Norte, who'd paid a muscular black cross-dresser to set up a dinner meeting with him in South Beach. The second had come from a chubby Cuban woman—not Etiwanda—who had been moved by the tender desperation of the billboard, but who felt repulsed by Palomino's amputated leg as soon as she finished her meal at the Versailles Restaurant on 8<sup>th</sup> Street.

He held the third response, blood-stained, in his hand. It read

*January 1, 1979*

*It's me. I know who you are. We need to talk. Friday night at 10:30pm at the Azabache in Hialeah.*

*Etiwanda*

*P.s. Come ready to play congas.*

It was her. Who else could it be? It looked like her handwriting. It was her handwriting. Why couldn't she have given him more? Why not a phone number? Why not 'Please go away' or 'I have loved you as well'? Just a meeting at the Azabache, a place too hot, a place where too many distributors, dealers and users liked to hang out. But he couldn't not go.

*"Llorarás..."* Oscar D'León said.

Azabache Nightclub, Hialeah, Florida, USA.

5 January 1979.

The cold in Florida was different from the cold in New York. It felt like the palm trees were mocking him, like they were deceiving him into thinking that it should have been much warmer, that it being that cold in Miami was a terrible tragedy. The rumbling of the train passing through. The houses built to reminisce Greece, Italy or anywhere but where they were, in the middle of the miserable and industrialized Spanish-speaking buffer between an American Riviera and an ungodly swamp. Not a remnant of Hialeah's once glorious past as a playground for the rich remained except for an abandoned horse-racing track and a diagonal road leading to the heart of Miami.

Palomino was dressed in a black corduroy suit and smelled of Drakkar Noir cologne. It was the best he could muster out of a lonely, depressed existence. Out of a life lived in shadows, lurking in the trail of a white powder, in the trail of the fleeting fantasy of a woman who couldn't possibly be the same woman he once knew, but who was nevertheless the only thing he had. He came to the club unarmed, in the off chance that he and Etiwanda got to undressing, to caressing, to the rubbing of thin thighs and sharp hips—so she wouldn't freak out seeing him carrying a gun, so she wouldn't hear the clanging against the floor with the dropping of the pants. Out of

the speakers blared the brassy Joe Acosta Orquesta singing “This Love is Lost,” so sad but heavy at the same time, that it made his legs—both of them—tremble.

“No one yet,” the Argentine bartender said, giving Palomino his usual *mojito* on top of a napkin. A replay of the ’78 World Cup final between the Netherlands and Argentina played on a television suspended above the bar. Palomino tapped on his glass to the rhythm of the cowbell, watching the band set up. The timbales at the center. The microphones for the chorus, for the brass section. A spot for the trombonist to spit. The three upright congas, like an echelon formation beside the piano. A bench for the *bongocero*. In front, a clear section for the dancers. The spot where Etiwanda would be if this was the Montuno Street, but it wasn’t. It was a hellhole in the middle of Hialeah—a city which itself looked like a bad hybrid between gambling Havana and industrial, blighted New Jersey. Instead of wearing suits, men wore jeans and leather jackets—like Polo Norte—and women in mini-skirts, not dresses, charged men a dollar to dance with them, to step on their feet.

“She’s here.” A heavy hand on his shoulder. The smell of *aguardiente*.

“Etiwanda?”

“El Jefe.” It was Polo Norte.

“Shit. Here in the United States or here here?”

“Here fucking here,” Polo Norte said. The *bongocero* began to warm up, tapping and tapping the drums. “I came here to warn you. There’s no time. Let’s get the fuck out.”

“No...That note. Did you send it?”

“What are you talking about?”

The vocalist walked on stage, stringing a banner for *Orquesta La Conspiración*—The Conspiracy Orchestra.

“A note from Etiwanda. To meet her here.”

“Not me. Maybe El Jefe sent it. Let’s get the fuck out. She’s not in Miami to have coffee. Let’s go.”

The vocalist started warming up his voice, singing “Magdalena, without your love I die...”

“No. Etiwanda is coming.” There was a chance. What if this was the one chance for him to have a drink with her, to watch her dance, to thrust himself ahead of her and open doors for her, to be back on East 125<sup>th</sup> Street talking, talking, she pouring her heart out to him, letting him in on the dirty secrets, on the everyday letdowns, and on the sexual positions of choice of the men who used her and left her. Then he and she could catch up, and she’d realize by looking in his eyes how much he’d loved her, and she’d know that he was the love of her life, that Palomino had been the only thing she’d had all along. She’d know that neither one of them had to die alone.

“She’s not coming. You know that. We go. You and me. We make the run for the border and become big in Mexico. We don’t have to work under her shadow. Mexico is going to be the new Colombia.” On the television, the Dutch scored a goal.

“I’m not leaving this place. You’ve had it out to make my life miserable since the day I met you. I don’t trust you. No. I’ve been waiting for this day,” Palomino said. It was probably another one of Polo Norte’s ploys, another one of his intrigues. “Besides, it would be foolish for El Jefe to come here to Miami. She’d get arrested.”

The singer continued, “...Magdalena, I wait and I wait and you never come...”

“You’re a fool. Your bitch has to know you’re looking for her. She doesn’t give a shit. How many women in this world are called Etiwanda? Someone had to have told her about your



stupid billboard. If you want to stay here and die for her like the little bitch that you are, you do that. You do that, motherfucker.” On the television, the soccer ball came to a stop in front of a Coca Cola banner. A fat feral red-breasted pigeon landed on the ball before an Argentine player shooed the bird away and picked up the ball with his hands. *Shit.*

The vocalist stopped warming up. The *bongocero* stopped playing. Palomino looked at the front of the club. The band was clearing the stage. *Shit.*

When Palomino turned around, Polo Norte was already facing El Jefe. El Jefe was dressed like a cowboy, wearing black leather boots with no heels and a black hat sitting too far up on her head. She looked like she was still in that Fernando Botero painting. Behind her were two kids, who both looked like they belonged in a New York salsa band, or in a disco group for that matter. One of them had giant sideburns that looked like M-16 magazines and a bushy afro. The other one, long hair like the Beatles, a giant collar. Bell-bottom jeans. Sub-machineguns slung from their shoulders.

Clanking and banging behind him. The lights went on. Silence from the stage. The kids cleared the still-empty lounge, walking around with their weapons resting on their hips, telling everyone except Polo Norte and Palomino to leave, avoiding eye contact. Palomino turned his stool around and returned to his *mojito*. He might as well enjoy a last drink if he was going to die, if the pigeon on the television was for him, which he knew it was.

“*Señor* Palomino,” the one with the sideburns said.

Palomino downed the rest of the drink and turned back to El Jefe.

Polo Norte said to the boy, “Do you know that if I decided to go crazy right now you’d be sure to die before your friend fills this bar with bullets?”

“*Perdóneme. Señor Polo Norte.* I’ve idolized you for so long.” The kid was still aiming in Palomino and Polo Norte’s direction as he apologized.

El Jefe walked to the other side of the bar and drank Scotch from the bottle. “I find it ridiculous that I have to come all the way up here, but sometimes a bitch has to do things for herself. I want to ask you two, where are my half million dollars?”

“I already killed the eight people who could have taken them,” Palomino said, reaching into his pocket and throwing the Polaroid pictures of the bodies on the bar as if he was throwing down a hand of poker. The Hesker family portrait on top. “Nobody wanted to pay up. I don’t know what else I could do.”

El Jefe picked up the picture and grinned. It gave her joy.

“What about him?” Polo Norte said. “Do you ever wonder why he wasn’t there the day the shipment was being delivered?”

“Both of you put your right hands on the table,” El Jefe said. “Spread your fingers.”

Palomino said, starting to sweat, “Jefe, ask this guy how he can afford that new watch and a new car every week.” What if Etiwanda was outside, wondering what was going on? What if she had turned around and gone home? What if she was still around and a shootout ensued?

“Are you trying to accuse me of not being loyal to—”

“Shut your mouths. The fact that I’m here means you both have failed me, after all I’ve done for you, and I am terribly upset.” She lit a cigar and smoked it, letting the red-hot ash fall like snow over Miami and land on their hands. What if he died? Who would send money to Elpidio?

“Jefe, I’ve been nothing but loyal to you for almost twenty years. Now this guy already stole from you once....,” Polo Norte said.

“Whatever you plan on doing, Jefe, do it now because the Authorities are going to be here soon,” Palomino said. Then the stupidest thought crept into his mind. “I hope you didn’t do anything to Elpidio.” And maybe she had done something, because she had this fetish for killing families, not that Elpidio was his family. No. He was no family.

“Who do you think you are, challenging me when I’m the one with the guns?” She reached into her beltline, while the two kids drew closer, the firearms resting on their hips the way Eulalia carried Elpidio the last time he’d seen them. From behind her back, El Jefe pulled a kitchen axe.

“Jefe, why do things have to be like this? Do you know how much I’ve done for you?” Polo Norte said, almost crying. Up until that point, he’d thought Polo Norte was fearless, supernatural, but he cried at the face of danger like any other human being—like a little bitch.

“Haven’t you lived by the sword, Polo Norte? Death to those who beg for mercy and mercy for those who accept death,” El Jefe said. “Palomino, grab Polo Norte’s wrist.”

Polo Norte took a deep breath and held it. He leaned back, looking up at the ceiling, at the disco ball.

“If you know where this money is Palomino, this is the time to say it. I have my ideas about who’s disrespecting me,” El Jefe said.

Palomino grasped Polo Norte’s wrist and clenched it like a dog in a fight for the death. “If you ask me, I think Polo Norte took it.”

“You just signed your own death sentence, Palomino Mondragón,” Polo Norte said.

“Better you than me,” Palomino said, and Etiwanda was probably outside, waiting, wondering. Would she be wearing a scarf? Would she be wearing her same winter clothes from New York?

“So you’re just going to let his fingers get chopped off for your wrongdoing, Palomino?”

El Jefe said.

Palomino knew that both of them would not make it out of the Azabache alive. It might as well be him who survived to go outside and see if Etiwanda was there. What did Polo Norte have to live for anyway? “I didn’t take any money.” Palomino stood and pressed his bodyweight down on Polo Norte’s arm. El Jefe turned back toward the bar, to pour herself a drink.

Without warning, she swung the axe down, separating three of Polo Norte’s fingers from their stems diagonally. The axe stuck on the bar counter. A surprisingly small amount of blood spurted out, mainly from the separated fingers, pooling densely around them. Polo Norte didn’t scream, or retreat. He gritted his teeth and didn’t move his hand from the table. Instead, Palomino could feel Polo Norte’s forearms tensing, firing in place, and could see something boiling in his eyes, as Polo Norte stared at the three rocket-shaped bits of flesh that used to be attached to his hand. El Jefe tried to lift the axe from the counter, but she moved too slowly. The kid with them afro moved to help her. It was a terrible mistake.

Polo Norte slammed his head against Palomino’s, kicked the crutch and knocked him down. He pulled a nine millimeter pistol out of his leather jacket, hitting the kid once in the chest and once in the head. Hitting El Jefe once in the stomach. El Jefe was screaming and wailing in the fetal position, clutching her cowboy hat. When Palomino pushed himself off the ground, his head ringing, Polo Norte was standing, pointing his pistol at the kid with the sideburns. “Go ahead, *culicagao*. I’ll take you with me.” Polo Norte walked toward the kid, blood dripping from his fingers. “You don’t have enough weight in your balls. If you were going to shoot me, you would have done it already.” Polo Norte shot the kid twice.

In the time it took for the kid's body to fall limp, for the thud to resonate around the nightclub, Palomino dragged himself onto the counter and un-slung the afro kid's Uzi. In the time it took Polo Norte to face the bar again, to face El Jefe's wails, Palomino was already aiming at him, ready, with a round in the chamber and the safety off. "We can go to hell together or live to see another day," Palomino said. Palomino had one thing up on the dead kids. He knew Polo Norte respected him, and he knew Polo Norte would not hesitate to kill him.

"For you the worst of endings, Palomino Mondragón. Polo Norte will have his way," he said as he backtracked, reaching the Azabache's beaded entryway and running off into the unlit hallway, into the darkness of Hialeah.

Palomino pulled himself up on the stool and looked down at El Jefe's curled body, heard her animal cries, and for the first time ever she seemed vulnerable and human, instead of seeming like a self-professed goddess. "Jefe, I need you to answer me a question," Palomino said

El Jefe groaned.

"Did you send me a note posing as my Etiwanda to get me to come here?" He had to know. What if she was out there?

El Jefe didn't give an answer. She wept, now softly, clutching her entrails and looking up at Palomino for an eternity, while the wail of sirens approached. She moved her head from side to side. *No*.

"Are you saying you didn't send the note?"

She nodded.

He wanted to let her live, but he knew she wouldn't let him live if she survived. "I'm sorry. I have to play by your rules." Palomino emptied the Uzi—the entire thing—at El Jefe and

threw the lightened, smoking weapon on top of her body. He gathered up Polo Norte's fingers and went outside to look for Etiwanda.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I am freezing under the underpass, under the Palmetto Expressway, across from Northwest 122<sup>nd</sup> Street—or in fucked up Hialeah numbers, West Sixty-Eighth Street—hearing car after car run over the gap on the pavement of the bridge. Here in this crevice, I am at home, covered by shadows, battered by wind, and this is the place where I should have always been, because no matter how much I try, I have, and will always look like an indigent, like someone who could hurt you, like someone you'd be afraid to open a car window for. I am here freezing when I should be gone, far away from the Azabache. And I am freezing because I'm looking for a ghost. Your ghost. Because there is a chance. A chance that this note is yours and that you asked me to be here, so I'm not leaving. Despite the cold. Despite the red and blue lights flooding the underside of the bridge, the long shadows of the pilings swinging with every swing of the gumball. Despite the khaki-clothed outlines swarming the Azabache, with their pistols and their badges, I am here, looking, scanning for you.*

*And it is foolish. I know. How would I even spot you? How would I get your attention? Would I yell? Would I run? A legless man running? I would get my face dragged through the pavement by the PSD officers. But nonetheless I'm here. I can't get myself to leave. Because I'm not stupid. I know. I know Polo Norte was right. I know El Comandante was right. I know El Jefe was right, but loving you is my religion. I just destroyed the hand that fed me. I shot an entire magazine of ammunition into that hand. Why would I be under this bridge, when I should be far, far away, sheltered from the cold, shielded from the wind? I have nothing without you. No family. No friends.*

*I have a son, but you don't know that, and I won't tell you because it may ruin the chances.*

*A fat lump covered by a sheet—bloody—is loaded on a stretcher, loaded on an ambulance that drives off without lights, without sirens. And I am mourning El Jefe, in a fucked up way, because I killed her—brutally—but I loved everything she stood for. I had to. I had to kill her. El Jefe never left a grudge unsettled. I even saved Polo Norte’s life.*

*And I have never had you. Have never kissed you. Have never held your hand outside of a dance floor. The closest I have gotten has been my arm grazing your arm, sitting next to you while you tell me what so-and-so did to you, how so-and-so did all the things I wanted to do to you, and I knew I could do better than them, because I—unlike them, I loved you—I who had hated my mother, who had hated every woman except you. I loved you and I never told you. And maybe, just maybe, you had fallen in love with my ears, with what they could do for you, with being able to unload on them your shames, your secrets into them, without fearing judgment. But I have never had you. I have dreamed you into my life for ten times the time that I have known you. And I have a piece of paper that may or may not be from you, and that’s all I have.*

*And I have a son. And I wonder if Eulalia has raised him to hate me the way I hated my mother, the way she made me hate my nameless father.*

*I am trembling. Part from the cold. Part from the rush of killing someone as dangerous as El Jefe. Part from having enjoyed the blood everywhere, the blood from Polo Norte’s missing fingers. And I take them out of my pocket, and I feel sick. I don’t even know why I saved them. I toss them down the slope toward the street, and I lose track of their tumbling, and it’s better. Maybe I like Polo Norte—a little bit—maybe I like what he can do, how he can say fuck the entire world, maybe I like him as much as I hate him. And he too is gone, coming back only to kill me, and in a sick way I want him to come back, because I know I’m not going to see you tonight, but I won’t bring myself to leave. I have a note that may or may not be from you.*



*And I have a son. A son that Polo Norte knows, and if I was Polo Norte—which I'm not—that's where I would strike first. I would kill my son.*

*The kids get pulled out of the Azabache. They don't get a sheet. I have a son. I have a son and I don't know if he's warm, if his mother puts a blanket on him to shield him from the cold. I have a son I have never held. I have a son who will one day be their age, who will one day be like them, who will one day be like me. And I am here, an indigent in a foreign city, waiting for a ghost instead of saving him from this miserable existence of being destined to be a beggar, a man of the streets. I am chasing after an ungrateful ghost when I have a son.*

*I roll over to my back. I don't look at the Azabache anymore. The blue lights, the shadows slap and slap the concrete next to me, and I am trembling because it is cold, because I have a son.*

## Track 7—Rumba Columbia

Immigration and Naturalization Service Building, Miami, Florida, USA.

6 January 1979.

When Palomino woke up under the bridge, he dumped his jacket, which was stained with El Jefe's blood, and took a cross-town bus to Miami Beach. He emptied his Post Office box as well as the storage locker at the Eden Roc, where he had kept what remained of his money and his camera. He slung his camera on his shoulder and put the money in the pant fold of his missing leg. He then took a taxi to the Immigration building on 79<sup>th</sup> Street and handed the Cuban guard Medardo Ulloa's passport, saying, "I'd like to be deported to Colombia." He wanted to beat Polo Norte to Colombia. Polo Norte had done enough damage to his life already. Palomino wasn't going to let him take Elpidio.

This time he wasn't afraid of the immigration officials. He wanted the handcuffs, the walk of shame through the Colombian consulate and through the airport. He wanted to live it all over again, for the last time. He deserved it for being such a fool, for spending such a long time chasing after a useless ghost. He didn't even know how he had ever assumed that being happy was a possibility for him, of all people, who had experienced nothing but sorrow in his life. He didn't know how he'd managed to run from reality for so long, from the fact that there was a son in Colombia whom he needed to father. A son to whom he needed to pass the Mondragón name, a son to whom he could pass his musical prowess, not his ability to kill.

"Take a number and get in line," the guard said.

That afternoon, the immigration official—another woman, one who looked like she belonged in a *chulavita* squad killing liberals—decided that Medardo Ulloa had stayed in the United States well beyond the six month visa and hadn't even gotten the prosthetic leg he had

come for. After a few calls to Jackson Memorial Hospital, she decided that Medardo Ulloa was a prime candidate for voluntary deportation and sent him straight to Miami International Airport—without even checking with the Colombian Authorities. He, three handcuffed Colombians and a deportation agent boarded a Bogotá-bound American Airlines flight at 4:56pm.

El Dorado International Airport, Bogotá, Colombia

6 January 1979.

Bogotá, a flat expanse sprawled between two mountain ranges was overwhelmingly orange, possibly due to an overabundance of bricks in the high plateau. In the years that Palomino had been gone, Bogotá had continued creeping up the mountainside, like an orange stain. The airport looked like an overgrown cow pasture. Everything in Colombia had an amateurish nature to it. Billboards looked like they could have been painted by American five-year olds. A mixture of the Victorian formality of the American northeast with the Caribbean chaos of Miami. Bogotá was a different city when one had a little bit of money—specifically dollars. The Authorities didn't even look at his passport twice.

“You've been deported before,” the agent said. “I remember you.”

Palomino stuffed a hundred-dollar bill in the passport. “Do you know who Benjamin Franklin is?” The agent didn't know. “He'll be very good to you.”

With his camera resting on the back of his hip, opposite the crutch, Palomino made his way through a crowd of Colombians—feeling as if he was in unfamiliar territory when he should have felt at home—and he sweated, despite the fact that he could feel the cool mountain air rushing through the doors of the terminal. Once past his third customs line, he went to the currency exchange desk, and in one transaction, in one second, got knowingly ripped off, turning

his last US \$4,900 into an exorbitant seven million pesos, seven thousand 1,000 peso bills in the devalued Colombian currency—so many that he had to stuff them all through his pants so that he looked like he was not only missing a leg, but he suffered from elephantiasis. He'd thought about it, knowing that dollars would never lose value, but that the Colombian peso would drop every day. But what was the use of having money and not using it? It wasn't like he had anything to do back in the States. "I want change."

"How much?" the girl at the counter said. He passed one of the thousand-peso bills under the window.

"Whatever that gets me."

"In what coins?"

"I don't know. Whatever makes a payphone call Cali."

"Why don't you go to the Telecom office instead?" She pointed upstairs at a room full of windows with a blue globe logo looming above it.

From one of the booths he called the Acrópolis and put on his best coastal accent because he didn't want anyone to recognize his voice, especially now that El Jefe was dead. He didn't know how anyone there would already know what had happened at the Azabache in Hialeah, but he was afraid El Jefe was going to reach him from the land of the dead, or that Polo Norte had already made his way back to Colombia and was going after Elpidio.

"Eulalia, please," Palomino said, speaking into the phone.

After a lot of yells, a lot of banging pots, a lot of barking dogs, Eulalia picked up the phone. "Aló?" she said.

"Is anyone else listening?"

"Who is this?"

“Just answer my fucking question.”

“About time, Pal—”

“—don’t you say my name aloud.”

“I thought you were dead,” she whispered, as if she wasn’t in a full servants’ dining room.

“I’m not.”

“Do you have a Three Kings present for Elpidio?”

“No.”

“People were saying El Jefe was going to kill you and Polo Norte. And you know what? I went into her office and told her if she wanted to kill you, that it was fine with me, and she said she would pay me whatever you were sending.”

“Well, El Jefe is dead. You and Elpidio have to get out of there. If I know Polo Norte, he’s on his way back to Acrópolis to hurt you and Elpidio.”

“Polo Norte would never do that to that boy.”

“Do you know how many babies that man killed in Miami? Think before you speak. That man is a lunatic and you know that.”

“Elpidio is not a baby.”

“How old is he now?”

“You don’t even know. You don’t know anything about your own son,”

“You have to get out of there now. Make up something. Say you’re going to visit a *comadre* in the city. I’m sending a cab to get you, downhill from the first checkpoint.”

“It’s eleven at night.”

“Then first thing in the morning.”

“If I go, my daughter is coming.”

“You have a daughter?”

“I can’t leave here. I’ve been here since I was twenty.”

“I will not let Polo Norte take my son away from me.”

“Now you want to be his father?”

“How much money have I sent you, Eulalia?”

“*Valiente gracia!* Any man can send money. You don’t know the first thing about being a father.”

“I will go into that compound shooting until I get my son. You can stay and rot in there if you wish.”

She was silent for a second, then she whispered, “I like it when you talk like that.”

Palomino said nothing.

“So are we eloping like Romeo and Juliet?”

“Call it whatever you want. I just want my son safe.”

“What about your little American *putica*? Did she turn you down?”

“Don’t talk to me about her.” He was trying to forget her.

“So are you asking me to marry you?”

“No. Stop the fucking questions. At eight in the morning, a cab is going to come get you, my son and your daughter, and the cab’s going to bring you here.” He hated Eulalia, but more than that, he hated himself for having been slave to an illusion for so long.

“Where are you?”

“So you can tell someone who’s going to tell Polo Norte? No.”

“Where am I supposed to say I’m going?”

“To the market. To the doctor. Somewhere.”

“To the doctor. I’ll say we’re taking Elpidio to the doctor.” She sounded excited. She paused. “You killed my dog.”

“El Jefe wanted it dead and you said you were going to kill me with it. Besides, it was a mongrel. I’ll buy you a purebred.”

“What breed?”

“Whatever you want.”

She sighed. “Do you want to talk to your son?”

“Be outside tomorrow at eight.” Palomino slammed the phone. He didn’t want to talk to Elpidio. To him Elpidio was an idea, an abstraction. In fact, he was terrified of the prospect of being a father, but what else did he have to do in the world if the alternative was chasing a ghost? He told the operator to dial the number to Wilmer’s head office in Cali 4-44444 and left a message for him. Palomino sat in the booth and waited for Wilmer to call back, watching the Colombian policemen—children from the mountains—walking up and down the terminal with their German Shepherds in tow. Instead of looking like the law, the way Authorities—in theory—should, these policemen looked young, inexperienced, riding in vehicles as old as they were, the paint chipping off scratched and worn bumpers. These policemen were highly overdressed, in green linen suits that didn’t fit their still awkward bodies.

He thought that this was what it felt like to be a grown man, being responsible for someone else, and it was the strangest of feelings for a forty-six year-old man to have for the first time in his life. It would have been horrible—the responsibility—of having Etiwanda, the woman he’d so adored. It would have been horrible—the pressure to keep her safe, to make her happy. Nothing in almost a half century of living had prepared him for this. The telephone rang.

“This is Wilmer.”

“I met you at La Taberna Ochún. I was the guy who could always play faster than you.”

“How many legs do you have?”

“Still the same number of legs. Sometimes it feels like I have two.”

“Of course I recognize your voice. Who do you think I am? *Que chimba*. We have missed you. We need a good *conguero* in the band. Are you in Cali? I guess you don’t know they closed the Taberna.”

“I need a favor. How much do you make in a day driving?”

“Why?”

“How much?”

“Fifty-thousand pesos. A little more, a little less. It depends.”

“I’ll pay you one hundred thousand pesos. I need you to go to Acrópolis at eighth tomorrow morning and pick up three people. Then I need you to bring them to Bogotá.” He opened the phone book in front of him and flipped until he found the name of a hotel that sounded familiar. “...to the Hotel Tequendama. Look for a Medardo Ulloa.”

“Who’s Medardo?”

“It’s me.”

“I thought your name was—”

“My name now is Medardo.”

“It’s a twelve hour drive to the capital, *compadre*, and Acrópolis—”

“I’ll pay for you to stay at the hotel and you can go back to Cali the next day.”

“Look—”

“I need this. How much money do you want?”



“It’s not the money. You don’t fuck with Acrópolis.”

“El Jefe is dead,” Palomino whispered. “Acrópolis will crumble.”

“What?”

“It’s my son. I’m trying to get him out of there before chaos sets in. If you can’t do it, I’ll get someone else.”

“You never mentioned having a son.”

Palomino couldn’t say anything to reply to that. “Can you do it?”

“Only because you’re a friend,” Wilmer said.

He’d never been a man of many friends. He wasn’t even sure of how many friends he’d ever had. Had he shot one of his friends in the face? No. Had Polo Norte been a friend? No. How about Dick Loco? Never. It wasn’t until that moment—until he’d tried to rid himself of longing for Etiwanda that he’d truly thought about how lonely he was, how lonely he’d always been.

“I’m trusting you with my son,” Palomino said. Wilmer would probably be better to Elpidio than Palomino could ever be. “Don’t tell anyone where you’re going.”

Palomino hung up the phone and walked outside the terminal, feeling the chill of the Bogotá Savanna in his cheeks. He took a yellow taxi to the Hotel Tequendama. To wait for a woman he hated and a son he didn’t know.

Hotel Tequendama, Bogotá, Colombia

7 January 1979.

Bogotá sounded like revving mopeds. Thousands of them, poorly maintained and overwhelming. Bogotá sounded like pops from buses and aging trucks—many of them dating back to *El Bogotazo*—which sounded like gunshots. It was all so overwhelming. He knew he

was hearing knocks at the door, but pretended not to hear them, pretended to be confused, until the knocks became loud and urgent enough to demand immediate action, until the ambiguity, the possibility of having mistaken knocks for anything else was null. Palomino stood, sauntered, and opened the door to the hotel room and didn't know what to do. He was still dressed in the same clothes he wore when he had shot El Jefe. The same white shirt. The same corduroy pants. He knew he smelled like sweat and Miami despite the two showers he'd taken. In front of him was the scene he'd spent the entire day hoping for and dreading at the same time. Wilmer was right by the door, shorter than Eulalia. She wore one of her horrible flower dresses and had gotten fatter, much fatter. She smelled like *tamales*.

In front of Eulalia was Elpidio—gigantic, enormous, big-headed. Elpidio was not a baby anymore. His bones, his hands were too large for his frame, too large to be a product of him, too large to be his son's. Elpidio reminded Palomino of himself when he had started fighting liberals in Boyacá. Elpidio's brown hair and his wax skin still seemed too white to be the product of two people as dark as Eulalia and Palomino. But Elpidio was his. He could see it in the furtive stare, in the avoidance of human contact. It was his son. Elpidio looked down, avoiding Palomino's eyes. He was his son, and he was real.

Behind Eulalia and Elpidio was a girl of the times, in flared pants, long slicked black hair held back with a white diadem. Her hips were wide enough to be attractive. Her waist was so small, smaller than a *conga* head. It had to be Clemencia, Eulalia's daughter, and Palomino had not pictured her being such a woman. Now he remembered her. She was the *aguapanela* girl at Acrópolis. He had not pictured her like that, such a woman with that same cayenne pepper skin tone, so reminiscent of Etiwanda getting ready for a twenty-minute dancing set on a Thursday night.

The only person Palomino could greet was Wilmer, with a semi-firm, prolonged handshake. "Come in," he said, hopping out of their way. Four people entered the hotel room. It was musky, stuffy, stuck in the inhuman bleakness of the fifties. The flower-pattern drapes were stained by several shades of brown. The bedspread was red, somber and quasi-European, too poorly lit, a nice break from the ever-bright pastels of Miami hotels.

"Elpidio, greet your father," Eulalia said.

Elpidio muttered something under his mouth, not looking at Palomino, and Eulalia slapped the back of his neck, leaving red finger marks on the white skin.

"Speak up, boy," Eulalia said.

"He doesn't have to say anything," Palomino said and crutched over to the window, using a head nod to ask Wilmer to follow him. Palomino froze, lost in Clemencia's green eyes, so striking against her skin, which was the color of treated mahogany. There, toying with the television, she looked like something out of an Arabian tale. She looked like Etiwanda when he'd first seen her.

"What's up?" Wilmer said.

"This is the key to the room across the hall." Palomino counted one hundred bills and placed them in Wilmer's hand, closing Wilmer's small fingers around the stack of bills. "Thank you."

"So we're here. Now what?" Eulalia yelled, too loud for the confines of the room, sitting next to Clemencia, messing up the bed sheets while Elpidio was already curled up like a fetus, taking half of the bed, drowning in his own universe. It was his son, all right. Palomino found himself glaring at Clemencia, studying the way her thighs folded into her body, the way her

small breasts filled the tie-dye shirt she was wearing—instead of looking at his own son. Instead of contemplating his creation. The boy he would raise to not be like his father.

“I haven’t thought that far,” Palomino said.

He hadn’t.

Hotel Tequendama, Bogotá, Colombia

8 January 1979.

While Eulalia, Clemencia and Elpidio slept in the room across, Wilmer and Palomino shared their second bottle of *aguardiente*, playing a violin salsa record by Alfredo de la Fé. He and Wilmer had run out of things to catch up on. They’d run out of bands to critique, of songs to praise. They had never learned much about each other, aside from playing music, but yet Wilmer knew enough about him to consider him a friend. Palomino didn’t want to leave his company and finally be alone with his new responsibility, in the same bed with Eulalia and Elpidio, and then he didn’t want to be there, looking up at the popcorn ceiling, fantasizing about Clemencia.

“Those days at the Ochún, they were good,” Wilmer said. “I don’t know if you remember. You were probably too drunk, but the day you left, you promised you’d make me famous. Here I am six years later, still a cab driver.”

“I haven’t done much of anything worthwhile.”

“What have you been doing this whole time anyway?”

“Nothing to be proud of.” Palomino poured himself another shot of *aguardiente*.

“Acrópolis?”

Palomino nodded. “I’m not going back to Cali. I’m going to stay here.”

“And do what?” Wilmer said.

Palomino looked through the window, saying nothing. “Let’s start our own band, *parce*, here in Bogotá,” Palomino said after a pause.

“In this city? Everyone here thinks they’re fucking British.”

“Salsa is big in London.”

“But that’s different. The people there actually are British, so they don’t have to pretend. Here, they’re still trying to be like Queen Victoria. Plus, you can’t make a living playing music in this country. What about your family?”

“My family?” That’s what they were, Eulalia, Elpidio and Clemencia. They were his family. He had a family for the first time since he was thirteen. “I don’t know how to do anything else.”

“How about driving a taxi?”

“None of us are going to get famous driving taxis.”

“You can listen to music all day long and play at night.”

“I don’t think anyone is going to want to get into a taxi driven by a one-legged man.”

“You’re sitting down in the driver’s seat and the people sit behind you.”

Palomino leaned back and downed the shot, wondering what else he could do. Life as he knew it was over. He now had a son. He couldn’t live the life of Miami, the life of Polo Norte anymore. He couldn’t dream of salsa fame anymore. He had wasted his dream on an illusion, instead of soaking up his time at La Charanga Colombia, he had chased Etiwanda. He was now old. Out of practice. Too many people had gotten much better than him at the drums. He was too old to be a soldier again, to deal with the intrigues of the likes of El Jefe and Polo Norte. No. This is what adults were supposed to do. They were supposed to settle for dull and uninteresting

lives, to drive taxis, to assume their responsibilities, to care for those entrusted to them. “How much does a taxi cost?” Palomino said.

“Your own? I don’t know.”

“Move here with me. I can’t do this alone.” Maybe he could make it in Bogotá with a friend, without a pointless quest, without an adventure. But only with a friend. In the other room was his pride, his pack, a hostile crowd he wanted to care for, but one he didn’t want to be responsible for. But at least they were real human beings. They were not illusions. “Wilmer, I’ll buy you your own taxi. You won’t have to work for anyone. We’ll start our own band and get famous, and then we’ll be on Heaven’s Outpost.”

“We can’t. They canceled the show two years ago.”

“So what are you saying?”

After a long wait, Wilmer said “Fuck it. Let’s do it.” He downed a shot.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I drive to my orange brick apartment through empty streets, the third apartment in six years, somewhere in another one of the new urbanizations built by Mr. Mazuera in the extreme north of Bogotá. They—Eulalia, Elpidio and Clemencia—they are all captivated by the television: In the screen, in color, the Palace of Justice is in flames. The M-19 guerrillas are shouting out of bullhorns in front of the Plaza de Bolívar, bowing to hold the building till the death. It is 1985, and Bogotá's Plaza de Bolívar is once again on fire, ablaze, the way it was during the Bogotazo in 1948. The Army tanks are shelling the Supreme Court building. Smoke bellows out of the halls of Colombian justice and the television announcer tells us to stay inside, to not fear, that the country is not collapsing.*

*This is the future, they say, and it makes me want to shoot someone. The sun is setting on this century, and I have nothing to look forward to. My music has been killed. Made to sound like a ballad. Musicians are now expendable. Craft has been traded for boyish faces, for colorful suits, so that record companies can sell more records, so that poor teenage women all over Latin America can build their own useless love fantasies to the rhythm of apostasy, to a sound that resembles a music I used to love. So that fools can believe in illusions, because there is no feeling more perverse, no condition that can be manipulated for profit more than this: Being in love.*

*Love does not exist. What exists is hardship. What is real is sacrifice. Six years of dreadful salsa romántica, driving ungrateful people around an unexciting and gray capital, always too cold, always too overcast. The inhuman architectural rectangles of the sixties never went away. Instead, they became crowded by signs, by brick high-rises, by draping power lines and lines saturated with drying clothes—everything is sagging.*

*My son. His long hair like El Comandante. His Dallas Cowboys t-shirt too tight, rounding over his stomach, his belly button a depression in the fabric. His gaze is down like mine. He hates my music and loves American noise, loves Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. Hates Celia Cruz and Ray Barreto. "Medardo," he calls me because he does not admit I am his father.*

*And he hates me because I tell him the United States are putrid, that Colombia is no better or worse than that country, that it is not the paradise he sees on the television, that people are shitty all over the world, but he doesn't believe me. "What do you know? You're just a cab driver. This shit," he says, pointing to the television, "this anarchy would never happen in the United States." And I think he smells of marijuana. I think he has for the past two years, but I say nothing to him. We have made progress. He now talks to me, asks me if the world will end.*

*Eulalia doesn't look at me either. She hates me. Makes my life impossible so that all I want to do is drive, so that I never want to come home, so that I'm driving around neighborhoods I have no business driving through. Tonight she overcooked my steak and gave Clemencia my potatoes, and I look at my empty plate and think that with every meal Clemencia's frame becomes thicker, more inviting.*

*In the kitchen, Eulalia's transistor radio plays whiny Mexican rancheras. She never looks at me. Never touches me. Does not want to fuck a withering legless man anymore. But I don't want to fuck her either. And Clemencia, more of a woman every day, sits on the couch across from me, her legs crossed, exposing the brown thighs that her skirt cannot contain. And I think I want my hand wandering around that almost non-existent void between her thighs, my nails grazing them, leaving white trails on her skin, and then I look at her face, and I sometimes*



*picture you, the way you were back in the sixties, and in my mind I do the things the assholes did to you. Because driving around this wretched city gives me a lot of time to think, to imagine.*

*Because I haven't stopped thinking of you since the letter came, because I don't know how it got here from my PO Box in Miami Beach. Because I don't know how you got my address, because I can't believe that when I finally stopped looking for you, you started looking for me. The letter is on my person. I know it shouldn't be. I should have burnt it. Thrown it away, but your words are how I escape. I know it to be foolish, but the letter is in my pocket. It has not left my side.*

*"I have to shit," I say, as a Colombian Army Colonel unloads bravado to reporters inside the television screen. The toilet is the only place where I can have both privacy and stillness, where the open world isn't rushing past my cab's windows. I reach into my pants and unfold the letter, my link to the past twenty years. I drop the pants, my hand against the wall, and I plop myself down on the cold ceramic toilet.*

*January 6, 1979*

*I hope you're okay. I never went. I couldn't. I'm sorry I didn't. We still need to meet. We need to talk. I am in the Westland 49 Apartments, across from the mall, # 571. Come by only in the morning*

*Etiwanda*

*You had always been like that, never revealing anything worthwhile to me. I will be right there, I want to say. I will drop my life to go back to Miami, to find you. But then what? Will you even still be there? How did you fare with the riots? Why only in the morning? You are married, aren't you? You want me to go all the way to Florida to shoot me down, to tell me 'You should stop chasing me.' And I have been having this conversation with myself since the letter arrived, and I don't know how the letter got from my mailbox to here. And this is what I think as the world*

*crumbles outside these walls, as in the next room there is a son who hates me, who fantasizes about the same land I'm now fantasizing about—but for different reasons—where the woman who loathes me makes me think more of your ghost every day, as my desire builds.*

*And though I know it is foolish to pore over your handwriting, to dwell in your words, to fuck my stepdaughter in my brain—though I know it is pointless to love you again—though I never stopped—I cannot help having these conversations as I sit here, the back of my legs pressed against frigid ceramic. My pants collected against the floor.*

*The TV announcer changes to unrelated news, the threat of a volcano dormant for one hundred and fifty years poised to drown and burn the entire city of Armero in the Department of Tolima. And with all of this, how can I tell Elpidio 'no' when he asks me if the world is ending?*

*I smooth the wrinkles out of your letter, thumb my lighter, and I burn you, taking pleasure at seeing your writing disappear in retracting coils of crumbling black, in thin threads of smoke.*

Conjunto Mazurén, Building 10. Apt. 518. Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia.

August 19, 1992.

Palomino dozed on the couch, wasting the cool of the dying morning. The singing of the mockingbirds sounded like men's catcalls, and Palomino wondered if they were pigeons. The movement roused him. Once again, Eulalia had left the radio on in the kitchen, and her *carrilera* music, that music of low-rent whores, was blaring. Palomino rose in mid-snore to see the dining room chandelier swinging from side to side like a pendulum. The floor tiles moved in waves. One after the other. It was an earthquake. The radio crashed to the floor and ceased playing.

Palomino wiped his eyes and threw his hand around, looking for the crutch. What was it one did during earthquakes? Crouch under a table? Stand under a door frame? He was contemplating these things when a bearded man—a man he had never seen, or had he?—came running out of the bathroom naked, a condom still on his penis.

“Yonlenon! Yonlenon!” Clemencia screamed from the bathroom, holding a towel and nothing else against her breasts. “Get back here.”

“Love, you don't understand. I almost died in an earthquake in Popayán,” Yonlenon said, and though the world swayed and rocked, Palomino's world stopped, as he contemplated Clemencia's bare thighs, the dimples of her round buttocks, the towel swinging over them. Palomino wished that towel would fall. Yonlenon ran out the door, leaving it wide open, and Palomino could hear his bare feet plodding down the stairs, all the way to the first floor.

Palomino lay back down. Clemencia stood under the doorframe, balancing herself, holding the yellow towel though the earthquake had long ago ended. “Where's your mother?” Palomino said, wanting to tell her to remove the towel.

“Don't tell her anything.”

“I won’t, but I’m sure she already knows.” He placed a cushion over his rising penis and shut his eyes. He hoped for a dream in which he was fucking Clemencia. “Place my crutch by the couch,” he said. But he couldn’t sleep because he was now thinking that the earth would shake again, thinking that despite the fact that they didn’t have power for a third of the day, the apartment complex had been migrated by the Authorities from Third Social Caste to Fourth Social Caste, which gave Palomino a slight high at his family’s rising status within the city’s feudal system, which turned into a much sharper emotional down at the realization that with a single signature, the Authorities had made his services more expensive, and his life more miserable. But the thing that really kept him up was the imagined picture of Clemencia’s towel dropping.

“Why are you not going to work today?” Eulalia yelled from the kitchen, rousing Palomino from his almost slumber in the bathroom. The radio blared. Some horrendous, arrhythmic song about a woman cutting her boyfriend’s face with a razor blade. What passed for music nowadays was deplorable. Startled, Palomino rose and pulled up his pants, the images of Clemencia and young Etiwanda, the sensations so burned into the walls of his brain, that he forgot to wipe the drops of cum from his checkered green shirt.

“I’ve worked seven days straight, Eulalia. I deserve a day off.” Palomino walked out of the room and hopped to the television to turn the news on. The earthquake had ruptured a mountain in the coffee-growing region, many kilometers away. The streets of a village had cracked open and had swallowed the public square as well as the schoolhouse. The Catholic Church had crumbled and only the crucifix remained standing, surrounded by bricks, by dust, by shattered rafters.

“I found something today,” she said.

Palomino watched the news reporter hiking through rubble and felt like he was watching the Armero Tragedy all over again. The world crumbled a little more every day, and he was watching it through a television, doing nothing, wasting his withering days on earth next to this woman, subjected to atrocious music.

“You’re not going to ask me what it is?” Eulalia said.

“Turn down that noise. I can’t hear you. I thought the radio broke.” And he was wasting his existence dwelling on a letter, on a memory, on a son who didn’t appreciate him, while the world shattered. And then he realized, at the same time that Eulalia did, that he had a very tangible reminder of his dwelling on that letter, staining his shirt, shooting up at a forty-five degree angle from his crotch.

“Is that?”

“What?” Palomino said.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“What do you think it is?”

“It’s cum, isn’t it?” Eulalia said.

He looked down at it, as if he’d never seen cum before, as if masturbating was a horrible crime he didn’t know was illegal.

“Who were you thinking of? Your little American *putica*? Are you still thinking about her after all these years?” Eulalia said.

He should have said yes, and let it go, but he knew that Eulalia was still and would forever be jealous of Etiwanda. Somehow this seemed like a better answer. “Clemencia.” It wasn’t. In retrospect, it was a very bad answer.

“My daughter? You’re masturbating and thinking about my daughter? You green old fuck.”

Palomino stood, as if waiting for a firing squad, while the television said “Bracimaxx will not only improve your posture, it will help you get rid of that sagging cleavage you’ve always hated.” Palomino knew he had fucked things up and there was nothing he could say to make it better. In fact, he knew that anything he said would almost inevitably make things worse.

Nonetheless, he said this: “She’s not a girl. She’s a woman.”

Eulalia went into the kitchen and flung a metallic tea kettle at Palomino’s head. Palomino continued playing the firing squad victim role, and stood still. His only reaction to the flying tea kettle striking his temple was a slight, muted flinch.

“You green old fuck,” Eulalia said. “Do you know what this is?”

“A condom wrapper,” he said and turned back to the television.

“It’s Clemencia’s, isn’t it?”

“Why couldn’t it be Elpidio’s?”

“Please,” she said. “When have you seen a woman talking to him? There’s no way it’s his.” He knew it couldn’t be. The boy was a recluse, a jerk who had as much passion for marijuana as Palomino had once had for salsa and for drums. The boy was Palomino in his youth, a boy who had not yet found what he was good at, floating around a university, lost.

“Hmm. Don’t you think maybe I had a woman in here?”

“Aside from *Manuela*—Mrs. Hand?” She laughed. “It’s that boy she talks about. What’s his name?” Eulalia said.

“Yonlenon.”

“Who names their kid after John Lennon? Those cannot be respectable parents.” Eulalia came back out of the kitchen pointing at him with a steak knife as she talked, and Palomino’s mind was back in Miami, with the near-miss of seeing Etiwanda, watching Polo Norte getting his fingers hacked. He hadn’t thought of Polo Norte in a while, since he stopped playing the drums, since he’d burned Etiwanda’s letter. Maybe Polo Norte had fled to Mexico and started his own operation as he’d said he would. Maybe Polo Norte was watching him across the parking lot, in Building 4. Palomino ducked behind the couch, and after a second he looked up through the satin curtains to the other building and almost expected Polo Norte to be there, lying prone on a couch, aiming an AK-47 directly at him, shooting him in the head as soon as he looked up.

“Like *we*’re a respectable family,” he said. “I am missing a leg and I drive a cab...and you...and who names their kid Elpidio?” Palomino said while a Coca Cola advertisement played on the television, a blonde and beautiful American girl skating around a boardwalk.

“Why aren’t you outraged by this? My daughter is having sex in this house while you’re masturbating, thinking about her having sex in this house.”

“Clemencia is a grown woman. She’s thirty-two years old. She should be married and have her own life by now. You should be glad she’s with someone. And we, we don’t fuck. If I want to fuck my hand, that is my prerogative as a faithful man,” he said, taking a napkin and wiping his shirt, leaving black spots on it.

“She’s my daughter, Palomino.”

“And what do you want to do about it?” he said.

The radio said: “The time is now four fifty-nine p.m.”

“First. Never, ever masturbate to my daughter again. Second. You will make sure that boy goes away. I don’t like that boy with his long hair and his beard. He could be a thief or a murderer. You will forbid her from seeing him again. I need you to tell her.”

“I’m not her father, Eulalia. That’s your job.” If Clemencia’s in love, he wanted to say to her, let her be. Let her seize that moment so that she doesn’t spend the last of her days in misery, thinking of what could have been.

Bolívar City, Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia.

20 Aug 1992.

Eulalia banned Palomino from the house that night. Not knowing what else to do, he drove south on the Southern Highway, watching the city’s skyline against the shadow of the mountains. He entered the worst sections of Bogotá—Bolívar City and the slums of the southern half—where the rural immigrants lived, where he had to roll down his windows when conquering corners to be identified as a non-threat and avoid being shot by block-watchers. Palomino climbed higher and higher up the eastern mountain range until the streets stopped being streets and became stairs, until the doors stopped being doors and became tin sheets laid haphazardly over doorframes, where everything was made out of bare brick and unpainted. He felt out of place, despite the fact that he’d been born in a similar miserable commune near Medellín. He stopped at a corner *tienda*, where everyone stared at him and knew him to be an outsider, where the owner played Mexican *rancheras* and Argentine *tangos*.

He ordered a Poker Beer, and he sat outside the *tienda* on a plastic chair, freezing, while a black Labrador mongrel that smelled like armpits trotted up to him from the unlit block, bringing



him a heavy rock, and dropping it on the floor, where Palomino's foot would have been. After taking a sip that overflowed, Palomino took the rock and threw it downhill.

“Go away,” Palomino said.

When the rock landed, there was a thud, and a flock of pigeons flew through the darkness. Pigeons. His life was once again tragedy. The mongrel went into the dark, where the pigeons were, scattering them again. With the rock in his mouth, the dog came back to Palomino. Palomino grabbed the rock from the dog's mouth. He squinted his eyes, moving forward to see the flock better, while Darío Gomez's uplifting *ranchera* “No One is Eternal” finished playing inside the *tienda*. There were about fifteen pigeons pecking the ground, congregated around what seemed like a corn spill.

Palomino grabbed the rock and brought himself back to Boyacá in 1946, to the things he'd had to do to survive, and he aimed at the group's center mass. He threw the rock, but he wasn't as fast or accurate a thrower as he had been as a thirteen-year-old. The birds were mocking him, mocking his existence and he wouldn't let them. Pigeons would no longer ruin his life. He grabbed the bottle from the table and threw it. His life was already ruined. The sound of shattering glass caused the mongrel to bark at Palomino, and the owner of the store to come running out with a machete in hand.

“Why are you destroying my bottles? Get out of here before I call the authorities.”

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I'm supposed to be at practice—clear on the other side of Bogotá—but instead I think of you, of the ashes of your letter, of your words that told me nothing. The roaring mist of the waterfall resonates inside my brain—El Salto del Tequendama—a mythical cliff Bogotanos have used to kill themselves for over five centuries. How dare you? You expect to waltz back into my life when I've toiled to move beyond you, to be an adult, to be responsible for what I have, for what is mine, instead of worrying about you—you—who have never and will never be mine. The human brain is unquenchable. Our desires boundless and thirsty.*

*I think of jumping because I know that when I'm older—confined to a chair, to the mercy of others—I will look back and think of these days as the good old days because I can still throw my body-weight around using this crutch. Because I can still admire Clemencia's thighs every morning when she walks from the shower to her bedroom, dampening the carpet. Because Elpidio and I still ride daily for forty silent minutes, en route to the Externado University. And yet, my life is miserable. I look forward to nothing. I hope for nothing.*

*Wilmer waits for me so I can play the drums, the one thing I used to look forward to. But I'm not going. Never again. Last night, Etiwanda, after dropping off my last fare I didn't want to go home, to see Eulalia's frown, to hear her tell me of her own misery, so I roamed around the city, burning a half tank of gasoline while my brain idled. And then, in the middle of it all, I heard the music you and I used to love. We fought—the music and I—and I lost.*

*I was thumbing through the dial when this rhythm emerged, faintly familiar, a trace of a clave. A boyish singer sang lies about love, love, love—lies that are reprehensible, fantasies that don't exist. And then, a tumbao without any passion, without any soul, repeated itself, without reason. And I pulled over in front of Salitre Park to let the realization sink.*

*I now play like that. I couldn't say to myself that I now played with passion. I couldn't say to myself that I now played good music. I couldn't say it for my own sanity—though decades of longing for you have made me a master of self-deception.*

*Etiwanda, I play the same tumbaos of this salsa romántica. Of this music I abhor. I used to think that it was the generation, that young musicians knew nothing of the mambo, of the clave. That record executives had perverted our music for profit. But this is false. Etiwanda, it is the times. These modern times have sucked the passion out of everything, and how I wish you were back, how I wish the sixties and even the seventies were back—how I wish I could once again crave.*

*My drums, my congas, my quinto mayor, my tumbadora, and my salidor all stand in line beside this cliff, like a team of soldiers in formation, and I am their squad leader, taller than them, standing at the end. I feel nothing, Etiwanda, except a watered-down longing for you. Even my lust for Clemencia is false, for I know if she undressed in front of me and said 'take me,' my penis wouldn't rise, and I would probably cry. Everything is dull, empty noise, the roaring of this mist. Things that used to anger me, to fuel me, now make me sad. And if I don't have anger, I have no emotions left.*

*And though I have thought about jumping, wondering what the rush of air will be like on the way down, as my lungs choke, I won't. Instead, I push the drums, one by one, into the precipice and watch them disappear into the white cloud of mist. I don't hear them crash. I sit back down in the Renault 4 taxi, cold, and I change the station, looking for news, for people talking to themselves, to each other, for people's voices to rescue me from this abyss. And I promise you that the music that brought me so much life is now dead, and just like I have*

*exorcised you from my heart, I will exorcise the clave from my life. I drive back down the mountain and then back home through empty streets, listening to empty chatter.*

Santa María Bullfighting Ring, Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C.

21 Aug 1992

Palomino never went home. Instead, he took the September rent money and bought a spot in the royal box of the bullfighting ring. He had never in his life had enough money to watch a bullfight, let alone from the royal box. He didn't now, but he decided to go anyway, and on the way into the brick plaza, he bought a disposable camera. He needed to watch things die. To see the demise of something other than himself. With the money he spent—the rent money—he could have gone to Cali, to watch the Clave All Stars, the aging members of his old record label, performing hardcore Afro-Cuban music at the Pascual Guerrero stadium, but he was done with salsa.

After all the ritual fanfare of the bullfight, watching caped men dressed in glittering tights run around a sandy ring, being chased by a giant bull, looking like a cartoon based on *Don Quixote*, after getting drunk by shooting chamomile wine into his mouth from a leather *bota*, and after listening to the entire bullfighting ring clamoring for bovine blood, Palomino found the entire spectacle ridiculous. The one thing that enthralled him was the blood gushing out of the winded bull and the red stains on the sand that formed when the *picador* thrust his lance into the caramel-colored bull's back muscles—as the animal charged the *picador*'s armored horse. The blood kept coming and coming, streaming down the bull's back, leaving a rust-colored trail around the sand and Palomino enjoyed this. The *matador*, in his suit of lights, taunted the bull, turning his back to it, and the crowd loved it.

After a *faena* that the crowd loved, the *matador* got the steel sword ready to kill the bull, propping himself up on his calves, aiming in between the animal's shoulder blades. When the thousand-pound animal charged, the *matador* thrust the entire length of the sword into its back—

severing its aorta—while moving out of the way of the stampeding animal, and the crowd cheered. They couldn't get enough out of the lethargic bull as it tried to find a calm place to heave, puke blood and die.

Palomino enjoyed this, and the cheers of the crowd. After the bull was down, he watched the *rematador* thrust a knife behind the bull's head, which made the bull's muscles spasm before the thousand-pound body went limp. Palomino snapped away as soon as he knew the bull had died. The *rematador* wiped his knife on the bull's neck while a team of kids Elpidio's age gathered the bloody sand, to make the bullring spotless for the next fight. Palomino was drunk. He hadn't been home in two days. Hadn't talked to Elpidio, to Clemencia or to Eulalia. As the crowd applauded the dead bull being dragged around the ring by unwilling horses, Palomino kept clicking the camera, thinking that these people weren't so different from him. So what if he threw bottles at pigeons and enjoyed it? What if he killed people and enjoyed it? What if he enjoyed taking pictures of dead animals? All of the people attending—most of them outstanding citizens, he was sure—had just watched a gang of men torture and murder a large animal, and they had loved it. They had cheered and marveled to one another at the quality of the bull. It was such a good bull that it got to be killed and to be praised in the form of carnations falling from the crowd. It was such a good bull that the *matador* got to keep one of its ears as a memento.

Palomino bet none of those people in the stands would call themselves killers, but he knew that they all had what it took, that ability to love and appreciate what you kill, that ability of learning to see death as an art form. So what if he'd killed in Boyacá, Bogotá, Korea and Miami. He killed well. These people would have cheered him, were they not all hypocrites.

He raised his *bota* and drank to them, to those people he knew felt they were better than people like him or Polo Norte, but who were not. Watching the *rematador* cutting the bull's other

ear to give as a trophy to the *matador*; Palomino remembered Polo Norte's three fingers tumbling downhill and shuddered. That was the life he'd chosen to live, to be the *matador*, and now he'd let it all go for what? For a bitch and a thankless son, relegated not to be the *matador* but a helpless, drunk spectator. What else could he do?

He had a family to feed. Drunk as he was, he drove back north up Seventh Avenue, almost hitting a soldier crossing the street in front of the Army's Infantry School. He envied the kid, a very tall and very black kid, who would get to go into the mountains and live with a rifle. Live under the threat of death.

He couldn't run away from seeing Eulalia anymore. He had to face reality.

Carrera 13, Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C. Colombia.

24 August 1992.

Palomino drove past the American embassy in silence. Elpidio was behind him, his hair now unmanageable in an unkempt ponytail, and he was fat, fat like his mother. His radio was nothing but words from the AM dial.

"Can you change the station? This is lame," Elpidio said.

"What do you know about this Yonlenon boy your sister is seeing, Elpidio?" Palomino said as he turned down the radio.

"How many times do I have to tell you? It's Eddie now."

"Your name is Elpidio." Palomino couldn't blame him. It was a horrible name.

"It's Eddie, Medardo."

"It's Elpidio."

“He’s trying to play nice. He bought me a joint at the U the other day.” Elpidio had changed degrees again at the Colombian Externado University. Now he wanted to be a sculptor instead of a philosopher.

“What does he do for a living?”

“Why don’t you ask Clemencia?”

“She won’t tell me anything.”

“I don’t know what he does. All I know is that he has money.”

The rush hour traffic headed away from Bogotá’s northern suburbs was building and building. The frequency of the honking was rising. Palomino saw the American flag in the distance, in front of the fenced and barricaded American fortress. He looked in the rearview mirror. Elpidio was staring at the American flag. Outside the gates of the embassy was already a line of Colombians wearing their best tattered sweaters, carrying briefcases and manila folders—having waited years for these appointments—begging to get out of a Colombia traumatized by the successors of El Jefe. Every time he drove past the embassy he wondered how he could get himself back to the United States. He wanted to go only for a visit—not to leave Elpidio or Clemencia—but to have a cup of Cuban coffee with Etiwanda, to see how she was doing, to talk about the past thirty years.

He heard honking. The light was green. He hit the gas, but the van in front of him wasn’t going. He slammed on the brakes. The taxi rocked forward. Smoke poured up from under the van’s hood. In seconds, the van was surrounded by American security guards armed with assault rifles—barrels pointed toward the driver. Mirrors prodded under the van’s carriage. In the time it took Palomino to back up far enough to drive around the stopped car, the van’s driver was walking with his hands up into the embassy complex, not having waited in line at all.



Palomino imagined himself slamming his foot down on the accelerator, careening across the irregular lanes of two avenues, running over a few pedestrians, slamming his taxi against the gates on the embassy and dying in a hail of bullets from US Marines. He had no good reason to do this other than boredom, simple lack of excitement, and he knew he wouldn't do it, because Elpidio was in the backseat, but the fantasy was delicious. He almost missed Polo Norte, the way he added a sense of urgency to everything, the way everything around Polo Norte seemed like an action movie.

On the radio, today was all news. Today was all gloom. The successors of El Jefe—whose brutality had made her look like the Virgin of Chiquinquirá—had thrown the country into deeper war, into deeper turmoil. Today, Radio Caracol was complaining about the ineptitude of the Colombian government, about Pablo Escobar—the worst of El Jefe's successors—having escaped from his self-run prison. The broadcast was interrupted by the low budget movie-climax music Radio Caracol always played for bad news.

The radio announcer cut in, "Attention: Attention: This is a breaking news bulletin from Radio Caracol. Breaking News: Many neighborhoods in the city of Miami in the United States of America, a city with a large population of Colombian émigrés, have been completely flattened by the passage of Hurricane Andrew, a Category five hurricane with sustained winds of 228 km/h and gusting winds in excess of 341 km/h. The reports from Miami are few, but they all paint a horrible picture, reminiscent of the Armero tragedy of 1985. The reports are of chaos and looting. No one knows how many have died..."

"But what about Hialeah?" Palomino said aloud.

Elpidio was looking at him through the rearview mirror. "What's in Hialeah?" Elpidio said.

Palomino thought about it. “Nothing. What station do you want to listen to?”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m tired of news.” How had she fared after the storm? What if her apartment had been blown away by the wind?

“Radioaktiva.”

“Hmm?”

“102.7 FM.” Palomino turned the dial.

The announcer, young, male and arrogant, announced the next song, by The Little Green Dwarves. A blaring rock guitar and Palomino couldn’t stand this either. He turned the volume down. “Do you still want to go to the United States?” Palomino said. What if he went, just to know if Etiwanda was well? But he could only go with Elpidio. He couldn’t leave his son behind, so insufficient, so unprepared for reality.

“What?” Elpidio paused, probably thinking about it. “Of course. Why?”

Palomino said nothing.

Conjunto Mazurén, Building 10. Apt. 518. Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia.

26 August 1992.

Eulalia was going bald, Palomino noticed. Her hair was turning white, and not even her breasts were attractive anymore. Her breath smelled like alcohol, and Palomino knew that she was getting drunk whenever he wasn’t around, but he could say nothing to her. The more sedated she was, the better. She stared him down as he drank the last of the fatty chicken broth from the bowl. “What time is it?” Palomino said.

“Gaviria time or real time?”

“Gaviria time.” César Gaviria, the President of Colombia, had moved the country’s time one hour ahead of its natural earth-given timeframe in order to compensate in daylight for the daily power outages he’d ordered.

“Three forty-five.”

“One day I want to have the time named after me too.”

“You’ll never have anything named after you,” she said.

“I’m going to shower before the power goes out.” And he was sure Etiwanda in Miami had no power either, because not even the United States could stand up to the fury of nature. He looked at his wrinkled arms. He stood and grabbed his crutch. “I have to change the oil. I’m two thousand kilometers past due.”

“She won’t stop seeing that boy,” Eulalia said, raising her voice.

“Again? Why are you telling me this?”

“If you love this family, you will get him away from my daughter. We know nothing about this boy. He could be a murderer for all we know.”

“That would be a bad thing,” Palomino said, and then chuckled.

“At the very least, find out who this guy is.”

“If I find you some information, will you leave me in peace?”

She took a glass of water and flung it at his face. “In your dreams.”

Embassy of the United States, Santa Fé de Bogotá, DC, Colombia.

27 August 1992.

After dropping Elpidio off at his sculpture class, Palomino drove by the embassy again, and he was sure that the security staff already had him in some sort of watch list. He drove by

almost daily, just to see it. Just to feel like he was still looking for Etiwanda though he wasn't. Times had changed. Getting into the United States was not as easy as it had been during the fifties, sixties and seventies. Now it took several years waiting for visa appointments, income statements demonstrating a productive life in Colombia and affidavits promising not to stay in the United States. And he had run out of names. Palomino Mondragón and Quinto Pimentel had been arrested and forcefully removed from the country, and Medardo Ulloa had left voluntarily, but had been deported nonetheless. He could get another name, a new identity, but how many one-legged Colombians could go through an immigration checkpoint before arousing suspicion?

Palomino slammed on the brakes. An entire family had almost leapt in front of him. A man, a woman, two little girls, and a National Police Lieutenant Colonel in his green dress uniform waving his arms behind them. The police Lieutenant Colonel opened the door. "How much to take them to Usaquéen, right by Unicentro, and then to the airport?"

"For you, Lieutenant Colonel, twenty-thousand pesos," Palomino said.

The Lieutenant Colonel handed Palomino four five-thousand peso bills. "No delays. Usaquéen, Airport. They have a two o'clock flight. This is my card. You call me if you have any problems." The adults bore grins, while the two little girls, both younger than ten, kept wiping their noses and looking up at the Lieutenant Colonel. The policeman grasped the two girls in one embrace and Palomino could see his eyes reddening. "Learn lots of English."

"Yes, uncle," one of the girls said.

The policeman, graying but distinguished, his chin sagging over his green collar, stood with the door open while the traffic whisked by, scanning the inside of the cab, probably trying to form a mental picture. Palomino knew that the next time the Lieutenant Colonel would see his nieces, they would be grown and American, having tasted the deceptions of men, of adult life,

and they would not love him the way only kids could love—the way Palomino had never been loved. They would be ungrateful and hate their uncle, his career choice, his values, though he'd done nothing but want the best for them. The policeman shut the door, stroked his chin and patted the taxi, sending it on its way. Palomino shut off the radio. He didn't know what to play, or what to say. He never knew what to do around families.

They were already getting on Fifteenth Avenue from to the 100<sup>th</sup> Street traffic circle by the time he gathered up the courage to say anything. He could have reassured them, told them about the skyscrapers of New York, and the sunny beaches of Miami. He could have told them that the streets in the United States were free of litter, free of potholes, and he could have told them that Americans actually followed their traffic laws, that their girls would grow in a world of order, but he didn't say any of those things. Instead, Palomino was jealous.

“So did you get the visa?” Palomino said.

“Even better,” the man said. His skin was flushed. The tip of his nose was red. “Political asylum.”

“What is that?” Palomino said.

“If you can prove you're being prosecuted in this country, the Americans, they give you residency and they send you a check every month. We're going to this...How do you say it, Socorro? Ee-dah-oh?”

“Idaho,” Palomino said.

“Yes, Idaho,” the man said, over-enunciating. “They found us a job at a barrel cheese factory.”

“How long did you have to wait?” Maybe he could do that. Get political asylum. He could escape and have a chat with Etiwanda. Maybe he could take Elpidio. Maybe he would

show him Miami Beach. Palomino took 127<sup>th</sup> Street toward Unicentro, the city's first shopping mall.

“Two days.”

“How?”

The man didn't say anything.

The woman spoke. “There is a death threat. This man is trying to kill us for no good reason.”

“Socorro,” the man said.

“Gumercindo, it doesn't matter. We're leaving this country today.” Socorro looked into the mirror. “We've never seen this man who wants to kill us,” Socorro continued, “but he sent us a message last week saying we had offended him because we refused to sell the land. Then someone set our barn on fire with our cows in them, and they shot the groundskeeper in front of me.” Socorro stopped talking. Palomino could hear Gumercindo sobbing. “They gave us a note signed by this man, saying we had to leave our land in two days or be killed.”

Palomino turned down Fifteenth Avenue. He didn't want to interrupt. “You're going to have to tell me where to turn.”

“Right behind the mall, but those fuckers—excuse me—didn't think I was armed.” He lowered his voice. “Cover your ears, girls. I followed the men to town and I shot them both in the head. I mean, what would you do in my place?”

“The same thing.”

Palomino stopped in front of a brown brick tower. The car idled. Gumercindo ran out of the car into the building. As soon as he was out of sight, Socorro continued. “His brother filed all the reports for us. They photographed the *finca*, the barn, made copies of the death threats. His

brother comes in his uniform, testifies for us in front of the American official, and they say, 'you're going to...'"

"Idaho," Palomino said. He couldn't think of what to say, and he wondered how many families he'd destroyed doing El Jefe's bidding, how many Gumercindos and Socorros he'd created.

"The worst thing," she said, "is that this guy doesn't even have a name. Cover your ears, girls. This son of a bitch calls himself Polo Norte. Who the fuck calls himself Polo Norte?"

Palomino turned around, feeling tingling in his extremities, feeling the presence of his phantom leg throbbing, and he wanted to run. Palomino looked through the rearview mirror, expecting to see Polo Norte there, holding a pistol to his head. He contemplated telling them to get out. To leave. He wanted them to run far away, to get the curse of Polo Norte away from him, but then he didn't want to be responsible for another family's life, after so many wasted lives. Why would they bring Polo Norte to him? After all the time. After he'd given up that life. Looking at them through the mirror, he thought, what if Polo Norte was chasing them? If Polo Norte was after him and his family, he too would have to get out of the country. He could do the same thing. He could use the police Lieutenant Colonel's help to get out. That was exactly what he would do. No, he couldn't tell them to get out of the cab. Polo Norte would find them and kill them.

Gumercindo got back in the car, carrying two suitcases. Palomino didn't help him, nor did he say anything. If Polo Norte was in Bogotá...Elpidio. Palomino buried his foot into the gas pedal and he desperately needed a gun—and a camera.

Avenida Jimenez, Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia.

27 August 1992.

Palomino rode with a sawed-off shotgun in plain view on the passenger seat. He felt powerful again. The master of his and his family's destiny. He had purchased it in San Victorino immediately after dropping Gumercindo and Socorro at the airport. He was now in the streets—following Yonlenon—after having embarrassed Elpidio in the middle of his Cubism class, after stopping by the apartment to make sure Eulalia and Clemencia were okay. He had been accosted by Eulalia once more to discourage Yonlenon from seeing Clemencia. Eulalia had been very happy to see Palomino wielding a shotgun. “I’ll make sure that boy never sees Clemencia again,” Palomino said to Eulalia.

“That’s the man I fucked in prison,” she’d said.

Though the shotgun was not for Yonlenon, it could always be reloaded.

The initial wave of fear was wearing off. Rational thinking was setting in. After all, nothing had changed. Polo Norte had no way of finding him, even if Polo Norte was back in Colombia, still doing the same things he had done in Miami. Palomino had kept the lowest of profiles, lived in the largest, most anonymous city in Colombia

He’d even stayed away from playing music, the one weakness which he knew Polo Norte could use to trace him. He’d fallen out of touch with Wilmer, his only link to those times. Palomino had even stopped searching for Etiwanda. Thirteen years had passed. There was no way Polo Norte could have found him, and yet his name was back, the image of three chopped fingers.

No. Picking up Gumercindo and Socorro had been a mere coincidence. If anything, the encounter had given him a new way of getting to Etiwanda—just to make sure she was okay—



political asylum. It sounded so important. If he could get political asylum, he'd be like all of those intellectuals that had arrived to Spanish Harlem in the fifties and sixties.

He checked the rearview mirror, looking for Polo Norte again. He couldn't help it. Looking forward, he felt tailing Yonlenon, tailing anyone again, was exciting. Something to do. A task—something he'd desperately needed for so many years. It was even more challenging in the chaotic streets of Bogotá than in the expressways of Miami, which seemed orderly by comparison. It was one of those breezy and overcast days, and there was something dramatically calm about it, something that lent the day to the task of tailing someone.

Running a red light in front of the El Tiempo building, Palomino thought that Yonlenon's driver was a professional at being followed. Taking random turns, hiding in front of box trucks, weaving in and out of Bogotá traffic with the best of them, which was not an easy feat: In Bogotá pedestrians and cars all competed for the same space, and they did it fiercely, and sometimes to the death. Palomino passed a car that was passing another car, almost pummeling a college-age boy. For Palomino it was okay to thrust the taxi—without slowing down—at pedestrians running across the street as long as he gave them a small tap of the horn as a warning.

But then it had been such a long time since he'd followed anyone, and Yonlenon's driver had a disadvantage that the distributors in Miami never had. There must have been a hundred yellow cabs just like his riding down Jimenez Avenue. Palomino was tailing Yonlenon because Eulalia demanded it, he kept telling himself, but the truth was that he was doing it because he was bored, because he had a shotgun and there was nothing else to do. Because the power was out.

It was fun. It was as if Yonlenon and his friend were giving Palomino a tour of northern Bogotá, of the affluent neighborhoods, of El Chicó, of Chile Avenue, of the financial district, of

the Pink Zone. It was as if they knew they were being followed through their random little stops by apartment complexes, condominiums from the fifties and Queen Anne style homes meant to emulate architecture that had gone out of favor in America almost a century before. Yet Palomino kept his distance, traversing the city, staying a block behind their white Renault 9 hatchback, until he figured out what they were doing. They were drug dealers, pushers of the lowest kind. They had to be. They followed the same patterns that he remembered in Miami, and brought back onslaught of memories he would rather suppress.

He was all for love, but he would not allow Clemencia to fall for a pusher, to get swallowed into the world he'd gotten her out of. Of course. He figured it out while idling near the Colsubsidio Hospital on El Dorado Avenue.

Yonlenon was working for Polo Norte.

He had to be. He was one of Polo Norte's minions. He was using Clemencia to get closer, to figure out how to destroy him. Yonlenon was spying on him, preparing for Polo Norte to kill him and his whole family, because Polo Norte would not give up his revenge. Because there was no man on earth more vindictive than Polo Norte.

On the opposite end of the street, a white motorcycle sped off toward the mountains. Palomino recognized the beard. It was Yonlenon. Maybe he knew he was being tailed. Maybe he'd gotten orders from Polo Norte. Palomino turned the steering wheel and drove with his elbows while he loaded the shotgun, following Yonlenon all the way to his own apartment.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*I've driven through empty streets to this fourth apartment in twelve years, and I've followed Yonlenon all the way here. His moped at the landing of my apartment building angers me. I pass it on my way in. I feel the heat from its engine radiating on my leg, and I almost feel it on the absent leg. Before I go in, I go through my trunk. I put on my leather gloves, the ones for cold weather, and I wipe down the double-barreled shotgun. I slide my hands over the pump, as if I was charging it and was ready to fire. Etiwanda, right now, with this shotgun in my hand, I feel like I'm in so many places at once: I am here in Bogotá in 1948. I am in Villavicencio in 1943. I am in Korea. I am in Miami and I am right here, right now, with this loaded shotgun, and Clemencia is in my apartment, getting fucked by the enemy.*

*I wish I could kick doors down, because if I could, I would, but instead I open the lock and fling the door open with as much violence as my shoulder can give it. A crutch in one hand, and a shotgun in another. When I walk into my apartment, and I see her on my couch, her feet up in the air. Yonlenon on top of her, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting. I should feel angry, but I'm jealous. I'm jealous of the sweat, the moaning, the soft banging of her head against the armrest. I wish I was him. I see her legs, her thighs in their entirety, straddled around his insignificant frame, clenched to him. Clemencia's eyes are rolling, farther and farther off-center, focused somewhere in the heavens. And her eyes go into his, deeper, deeper, loving him the way I've never been loved, the way I'd love her if I could. The way I'd love you if I could.*

*She sees me. She yelps. I don't move. I cannot look away. He pushes off from her and doesn't care to cover her up. I see everything. Everything I've always wanted to see. Yonlenon is trying to pull his pants up and I see a revolver peeking out of his jacket. The fucking sleaze. The fucking drug dealer fucking my Clemencia. And you won't believe me, but I felt like he was*

*fucking you, like he was using you, like he was the embodiment of the million motherfuckers who used you and left you, and I have no problem saving Clemencia. I have no problem. She screams and I don't move. I pump the shotgun and raise it.*

*He pulls up his pants, reaches toward his pocket and there is no time to think. I shoot. I blast him, and it feels great. It makes me feel like my leg is throbbing, like I just charged up a hill with a full combat load on my back. It feels like I have sprayed with machine gun fire all of the fuckers who hurt you. The cartridges land on the carpet. He falls. The building shudders, and I have scored another victory over Polo Norte. The carpet, the walls, Clemencia's face, they're all red and pockmarked now. The pellets have pierced Yonlenon's beard, his bowl of hair, his chest, my walls. I check his neck pulse. I don't have to shoot him again.*

*Clemencia cannot move. She screams. She screams. She screams. I go into the room, tearing up the dresser, destroying the drawers. I find the camera. I bring Clemencia a sheet. She screams. She cannot move. I throw the sheet over her.*

*"Get dressed," I say to her. "He was trying to kill us all." And I use the crutch to move the revolver out of his pockets. Clemencia screams. She screams. She screams. "When the police comes," I say, "you say exactly what I tell you to say."*

*She screams.*

*And as my heart slows, as I feel like I've lived for the first time in twelve years, I set the shotgun down. And I know. I know I wasn't sure if Yonlenon worked for Polo Norte or if he didn't. But if I would have taken the time to find out, Clemencia and I would be dead by now, and it doesn't matter, because I wasn't going to let Clemencia be another you.*

*She screams. I shoot stills of the body. Pictures of the limp hand turned palm-side up. Of the blood splatter on the wall, of the maroon seepage on the carpet. And I am more satisfied than*

*I remember being. I am alive. And now, with a dead shooter in my house, there is no turning back. I am coming to see you.*

Conjunto Mazurén, Building 10. Apt. 518. Santa Fé de Bogotá, D.C., Colombia.

27 August 1992.

Clemencia stopped screaming when Palomino grabbed her face and looked her in the eyes, telling her exactly what had happened—that Yonlenon worked for a man who had spent twelve years trying to kill the family, that Yonlenon was planning on shooting her after he got done fucking her. That he had never loved her. That Yonlenon had been a lie. It made so much sense to Palomino that he believed it. He had no facts to corroborate it, but he knew it to be true. That was how Polo Norte operated. He always tried to outsmart his opponents, and he often could. Yonlenon was a piece in Polo Norte’s chess game. Polo Norte was trying to control Clemencia, the one thing Palomino could not control. Even there, he was sure that Polo Norte was present, somehow orchestrating things.

After making sure Clemencia was dressed, Palomino got on the phone. Yonlenon’s body sprawled, the blood soaking into the carpet. He needed to get the family out of the country now. If Polo Norte was on his trail, he’d find him soon, and he’d hurt him where it hurt the most—Elpidio.

Palomino called the police Lieutenant Colonel at his house. Clemencia would be home anytime now, and Palomino wanted the police to be there already, to restrain her. To control her. Palomino sat down on the couch, his foot next to Yonlenon’s body. Clemencia paced outside the apartment like a ghost, almost lethargic.

“Aló,” a child’s voice answered.

“Yes. Lieutenant Colonel Pelayo please?”

“Lieu...dad!” the boy on the phone screamed into Palomino’s ear. “Dad!”

“Pelayo,” the Lieutenant Colonel said. Palomino could hear the television in the background. A Mexican soap opera with Thalía.

“My Colonel. This is Medardo Ulloa. The taxi driver who took your brother to the airport. I need your help.”

“...Ok. What do you need?”

“The same guy who was after him. This Polo Norte. He’s after me. He just sent a man to my house, to kill my family. A common drug dealer. ”

“How do you know Polo Norte sent him?”

“Polo Norte told me personally he was going to kill me twelve years ago. Now an armed man shows up at my house after I get your brother out of the country. I have to get my family out of this country now.”

“Who are you again?”

“Medardo Ulloa. The taxi driver.”

“How do you know Polo Norte?”

“Don’t...I need you to do for me what you did for your brother.”

“Why don’t you call the local Authorities?”

“I killed the man who tried to hurt my family. I shot him in the face with a sawed-off shotgun.” It sounded so good to say that. The Lieutenant Colonel was silent. “I knew he was coming and I killed him. The Authorities are never around unless they’re going to write traffic tickets. They’re not coming, and if they come, I’ll be the one getting arrested.”

“Shit.”

“What would you have done in my place?”

“Shit. The authorities will probably be there soon.”

“I need you to come here and do what you did for your brother. Write the reports. Take the pictures.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“Your brother’s a killer and so am I. Your hands are dirty and I know it. Don’t get fucking moral on me.”

The Lieutenant Colonel didn’t answer.

“If you don’t help me get out of the country, you’re leaving me with no choice,” Palomino said. “I’m not going to leave my family here, sitting targets for Polo Norte. If you don’t help me, I’m going to get my family in my cab, and ram the gates to the US Embassy, and refuse to leave until my family’s out of the country, just like that Cuban bus driver who crashed into the Peruvian Embassy in Havana to start the Mariel boatlift. I will do it.”

“You and your family will be arrested at best...” the Colonel’s voice trailed.

“When Polo Norte finds me, I’ll be sure to tell him where Idaho is.”

After a long silence, Pelayo said, “Shut up. You’ve given me an idea. What’s your address?”

“Conjunto Mazurén. On the Northern Highway and 150<sup>th</sup> Street. Building ten. Apartment 518.”

“I’ll be there right away.” Palomino wondered what had changed in the Lieutenant Colonel so quickly.

By the time Eulalia and Elpidio came home, the entire fifth floor of Building ten was cordoned off by the police. A bottle of *aguardiente* in hand, Palomino brushed Eulalia’s elbow as she caressed an inconsolable Clemencia. He whispered in Eulalia’s ear. “I did good,” he said,



trying to keep Clemencia from hearing, pointing to the bloody carpet, to the outline of a human being. “He’ll never bother her again.”

Lieutenant Colonel Pelayo’s officers took pictures of the house while the Colonel wrote notes he filed into evidence as death threats from Polo Norte—directed both at Palomino and at himself. A captain filed reports ascertaining that the families of Medardo Ulloa and Lieutenant Colonel Apilino Pelayo were the victims of an assassination attempt by a vicious *sicario* known by the alias ‘Polo Norte.’ While Eulalia and Clemencia sobbed outside the apartment, and Palomino downed half a bottle of *aguardiente*, Lieutenant Colonel Pelayo looked over the evidence, he told Palomino, to make sure that the scene painted a picture of urgency, a dire need for leaving Colombia.

The Colonel’s request was simple. He wanted to take his family and run to Idaho. He wanted his son to have his cousins and his uncle around. He didn’t want to miss their entire childhood. He didn’t want to be in the Colombian National Police, as he said to Palomino in whispers, fighting a war against an enemy so ethereal that it might have been the devil himself. He didn’t want to be in a country where even he, a mighty Lieutenant Colonel, was nobody against the streams of criminals, drug dealers, swindlers and con artists, where he and his policemen were the only ones abiding by the law while everyone else was above it—obeying the rules of money and bullets.

Palomino finished the bottle and threw it on the carpet. He crutched up to Eulalia and looked her up and down. “Pack a suitcase. Tomorrow we go to sleep in the United States.”

“What the hell is going on? You don’t even consult—” she said.

Palomino grasped her shoulder. “You can stay if you want, but Polo Norte found us here, and I’m not going to let him destroy my family. I’m taking Clemencia and Elpidio.”

“You will kill me before you take my children away from me.”

“Are you daring me, Eulalia? Look, Elpidio wants to go.” Palomino pointed to him with the crutch. Elpidio nodded. Palomino grinned. “You can come with us or die here alone. I really don’t care.” A patrolman excused himself, walking in between Eulalia and Palomino.

“What’s going to be so different in the United States? If he found you here, he’ll find you there.”

“No. There’s this thing called political asylum. They’ll change our names and send us to somewhere in the middle of the country. Somewhere where Colombians have never been, like Kansas or South Dakota. That country is so much bigger, so much more anonymous than ours. And in the United States, you can trust the government to protect you.” He was making things up, but he needed to reassure the family. Even as he was saying this, he became bored with his life in Kansas. A part of him wanted to stay, to walk along knowing Polo Norte was right behind him. A part of him wanted to be there to turn around and shoot Polo Norte in the face. But in the United States was safety for the family, anonymity, and the possibility of one day sneaking out to have a chat with Etiwanda. In the United States, Polo Norte wasn’t God.

Palomino sat down. He hadn’t thought that much of Etiwanda lately, and he wanted to scold himself, but no, he couldn’t, because forgetting her was precisely what he’d been trying to do for years. But he felt like he’d betrayed her in the hour of her greatest need, when a deadly hurricane had ravaged her city. Eulalia was staring at him, and she probably knew he was thinking about Etiwanda.

“Start packing. We’re going to the embassy before daybreak,” Palomino said, making sure Clemencia and Elpidio heard him. “And tomorrow we’re going to sleep in the United States.”

Embassy of the United States, Santa Fé de Bogotá, DC, Colombia.

28 August 1992.

Palomino and former Lieutenant Colonel Apilino Pelayo sat side by side with their families crammed and frozen inside the back of the Renault 4 taxi, about to drive its last few meters. Palomino and Apilino passed a flask of Antioquia rum—the only alcohol they could find—back and forth, as the taxi idled under a streetlamp. Palomino petted the steering wheel, thinking of how good this cab had been to him since 1979.

The line in front of the embassy was grotesque, and had spilled around the corner, across Thirteenth Avenue. They had arrived late, at six thirty in the morning, because Apilino's boy had thrown a rabid fit because he didn't want to leave his friends in Colombia. Palomino's family had spent the night at Apilino's apartment because Eulalia didn't want to sleep in the same house with a ghost. Clemencia had walked behind Eulalia in silence, like a shadow, her stare lost in the walls and in the closets, an indistinct whisper leaving her lips every so often. Elpidio seemed happy, as if the looming threat of Polo Norte had given him the desire to live. The families had spent most of the night studying, ironing their versions of the story so that there would be no wrinkles in it when an American heard it. Now they were ready.

“This is not happening, this waiting in line,” Palomino said to Apilino as he handed back the flask, “if we're going to sleep in the United States tonight.”

“What is your plan then?” Apilino said.

“We're going to ram the gates.” Palomino took another drink.

“What is it with you and ramming these gates?” Apilino said.

“I like intensity.” Palomino felt naked because he was unarmed. Every car that passed the embassy in the twilight was Polo Norte. Every revving engine made Palomino duck slightly.

Every pedestrian that came too close was Polo Norte. There was no return. Today they would go to sleep in the United States.

“We’ll be killed,” Eulalia yelled from the backseat, sitting on Elpidio’s lap. “You’ve gone crazy.”

“I thought you liked crazy, Eulalia,” Palomino said.

“Let’s do it,” Elpidio said.

“We crash through the gates, we get into the embassy ahead of all these idiots and we make our case to the ambassador,” Palomino said. “We have documents. Pictures. We have statements. We have urgency. Death threats from the worst of killers. We all know what we’re to say. Polo Norte could be in that car behind us, ready to kill us. Think about it. What choice do we have?”

“We could go in line like everyone else,” Apilino said. “The way you say, we get into the embassy in handcuffs. What happens if they don’t care about what we have to say?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far,” Palomino said. An executive bus ran past the taxi, making it rock from side to side. “I have one leg. I can’t stand waiting in line.”

“That is an insane idea,” Apilino said, while Eulalia argued and complained to a stoic Clemencia who said nothing. Apilino’s wife petted her child, disinterested in what was going on.

“At least they’ll get them out of Colombia to safety. You and I, we can go to jail. We can die there.”

“I’ll be eaten alive when they find out I was a Lieutenant Colonel in the National Police.”

“*Carajo*. If any of you want to get out, this is the time to do it. I will ram these gates.”

Palomino looked at Eulalia through the mirror. “You know deep down you like this shit,” he said to her.

“Stop talking about it and do it, *papá*,” Elpidio said. “These women don’t know what they want.

Palomino looked back, inspecting everyone’s seatbelts.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*Elpidio—Eddie—has called me papá for the first time ever. He is proud of me, of what I'm doing right now. I look for the pigeon and I don't find it. My foot presses the accelerator pedal, pushing it as far down as it can go. The twelve-year old engine strains but gives me its last best effort, as I swerve across four lanes of traffic: A burgundy Peugeot. A silver Mazda. A Bluebird bus. A Honda motorcycle. These could be the last things I see.*

*"I want everyone's hands up now," I say, the Renault 12 jumping over the median. I feel like my missing leg is tense, cramping, like every muscle fiber in my body is contracting. My teeth are grinning. My pores are open. The gate guards see me, but their rifles don't move in the seconds it takes me to be next to them, to make them run out of the way. They are in shock, not prepared for what they should be prepared for.*

*The crash against the fence doesn't sound like a crash should feel. It is a single, dry hit. The rear of the taxi jumps, as if the car wanted to die doing a cartwheel. No crunching of metal. No shortening of the car. Just a single hit. A windshield that shatters all over mine and Apilino's lap, cutting me while my body heaves forward, held back by the safety belt. The fence doesn't give.*

*No wind in my body, the assault rifles are pointed at me. I see barrels instead of faces, yelling in accented Spanish. "Manos arriba. Manos arriba," one of them says, and I echo the command. I spit glass kernels out of my mouth. I am dragged by two cold hands onto the concrete. The glass pieces that rested against my clothing now hurt, all at once, burying themselves in me. The men search me and I want to say something, but I don't know what it is. Their hands pressing my skin.*

*“I am a Lieutenant Colonel in the National Police. This is an emergency,” Pelayo says, as they search him, as the number of barrels around us multiplies. After they are through we are rushed inside. Inside American territory, and I can almost taste your scent, Etiwanda. I have crossed an imaginary line, but I feel as if Polo Norte cannot reach me here, behind this engulfing black fence.*

*And I see my family. I count them. Elpidio, Clemencia, Eulalia. None of them are limping. They seem to be okay. As the mirrors, the sirens reach my smoking taxi, my only true friend for the past twelve years. One by one, my family is cuffed, herded inside one of the embassy’s grey and looming buildings. I have done this, I think, as the guards lift me by the armpits. This is my life’s labor, and I don’t know whether I should be proud or not.*

Embassy of the United States, Santa Fé de Bogotá, DC, Colombia.

8 September 1992.

Over the next few days, a quiet diplomatic battle erupted between American Embassy officials and the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Shinder would not release the group of seven unless they were jailed. The Colombian Internal Security Agency refused to take them, saying it couldn't guarantee their safety. The names of the group who'd crashed through the American Embassy gates were not released to the public. All the Colombian press reported was that in the group there was a high level government official who feared imminent threats against his family's life.

The 'September Seven,' as the daily newspaper *El Espectador* dubbed them, became the focus of public outrage at the sad state of the Colombian government. Not even its highest Authorities were above the violence. Not even the ones holding the guns and making the laws could escape it. Colombia had descended into anarchy, the headlines pronounced.

Out of the public eye, there were Authorities—Generals and Colonels involved, calls from Bogotá to Washington interceding in Lieutenant Colonel Pelayo's behalf, requesting he be reunited with the rest of his family in the United States, wishing—for Bogotá's sake—the attention of the press would quietly go away. On the third day of negotiations, a car loaded with explosives drove up to the headquarters of the Colombian National Police and exploded, pulverizing a quarter of the ten-story building in downtown Bogotá and killing the National Police's second in command. The windows rattled inside the Embassy, and Palomino heard the boom, he was sure of it, he told Elpidio, because it sounded like the aftermath of fighter planes soaring over Korea.



The press speculated the bombing was a show of force by the drug traffickers, by the cartels—the same people who were trying to kill the seven—showing that they could strike anyone in Colombia at anytime. Quietly, under pressure from Washington and the overburdened heads of the Colombian Authorities, Ambassador Shinder interviewed the seven one by one, reviewed their evidence, and granted them political asylum in the United States, sending Palomino and his family to Charleston, West Virginia, while he arranged for Lieutenant Colonel Pelayo, his son and his wife to meet their family in Idaho. Their itinerary took them from Bogotá to Miami, from where—after an overnight layover—Palomino and his family would fly to Baltimore and then to Charleston. When Palomino begged Ambassador Shinder to fly him to Houston instead of Miami, the ambassador refused because Palomino couldn't provide him with a reasonable explanation for his request, and how could he give one when he wanted to avoid thinking that he could dream of reaching Etiwanda?

Miami International Airport. Miami, Florida, USA.

10 September, 1992.

From above, Palomino could see Hurricane Andrew had split the city of Miami in two. In the darkness, everything south of Flagler Street seemed to have been leveled, bombed by B-49s. He could even spot soldiers in fatigues and Humvees roaming the main thoroughfares. Palm trees were split. Roofs were gone, deposited meters away. Billboards wrapped around themselves. Poles rested on houses. Palomino felt relieved, only because he knew the Westland 49 Apartments—where Etiwanda lived—were one hundred and three blocks north of Flagler.

Palomino didn't want to look at Miami. He wanted it to be a brief glimpse in his mind. A brief hiatus on his way to safety, to happiness with his family. He wanted to erase the memories

and put it all behind. The search for Etiwanda, hiding from Polo Norte. Now he could be a switchboard operator, a meter reader, a toll booth attendant—anything but a taxi driver. He could know that in the middle of West Virginia Polo Norte would never find him. And he wondered what it would be like. He wondered if the Appalachians looked like the Andes. But then he couldn't resist. Miami at night was rushing past him. As the plane approached the runway, flying over the lit Palmetto Expressway, he looked again through the window at the neon skyline glowing under the clouds. It was a skyline that had grown, risen, matured since he'd left—a skyline he knew was financed mostly by drugs. A skyline that had been his wallpaper during the most turbulent and violent years of his life. A skyline full of regrets, wasted time, and longing for Etiwanda.

He felt it again, stirring up in his stomach. The same feeling was there, strong as ever, after thirty years. Twelve years of boredom in Colombia hadn't killed it. It wasn't the in-flight whisky either. He didn't even feel the tingling joy of too many drinks. He was sober, and he didn't want to be. The wheels of the 747 touched down on the runway. The tires screeched and smoked. The airplane roared. The brakes popped out of the airframe, and Palomino's world slowed.

He became conscious of his breathing and began to take it all in. He was in America once more. This time for good. This time to stay. He had official papers in his pocket, papers that said that Medardo Ulloa, Eulalia Ulloa, Elpidio Ulloa and Clemencia Urrutia were legal residents of the United States. None of them would be deported. This time was different. This time he wasn't scared of the authorities. This time he wasn't here to hurt anyone or cheat anyone.

As the airplane taxied and he saw the terminal, the same terminal he'd seen in daylight twenty years earlier when he'd been young and foolish, thinking he would actually be able to

find Etiwanda and that when he found her she would love him—at that moment he was hit with an ocean of memories. The fifties came alive, and he glared at Clemencia as if she was an extraterrestrial being, the way her breasts—looking like ripe avocados—broke from the outline of her body, the way they broke the monotony of airplane seating. And he saw Etiwanda in her place—gardenia in her ear—sitting by the aisle, as stoic as she was, as unmoved as Clemencia was at being in a new country for the first time. She looked like she was dead, made up, and her seat looked like a casket.

Palomino wished to have a conversation with her, to tell her ‘I’m sorry. I can’t long after you anymore. I have a family to keep safe,’ but he knew she wasn’t really there as much as his eyes told him she was—just like he knew he was missing a leg though he could feel its presence. He looked away and rubbed his eyes until everything became blurry, until he could recognize Clemencia as Clemencia, though out of focus. When his vision recuperated, he turned back and saw Elpidio’s head almost sticking out of the airplane. Elpidio was trying to see as much of the United States as he could, and Palomino hoped that the fantasy wouldn’t shatter, that America wouldn’t disappoint him, that the soil beneath would solve all of Elpidio’s insecurities and problems the way he, his father, couldn’t.

He’d been a horrible father, dragging his son to the United States only so that he could satisfy his craving for seeing Etiwanda—even if only for a little bit. He’d uprooted his family just so that he could carry on ruining his life. No, he’d been a good father. He’d gotten Elpidio out of Colombia, out of harm’s way, out of Polo Norte’s reach. He was doing the right things for the right reasons. Coming to the States had nothing to do with his foolish obsession with Etiwanda. Maybe in the future, after he’d settled in West Virginia, he would find a way to visit—with no desire to have her, to love her, just to sit down, to enjoy a good salsa once more and to

talk, to tell her ‘You wouldn’t believe this foolish crush I had on you for the longest time...how funny,’ he would say. Coming to the States had nothing to do with Etiwanda.

*Descarga en Miniatura*

*The immigration officer stamps my Colombian passport and I am safe. The terror of the seventies is gone from Miami. This is now a civilized city, sobered by a hurricane. These immigration officers are new. These Metro-Dade cops are new. If they only knew who I was, what I am capable of. Medardo Ulloa clears customs and immigration, while the man who managed to kill undeterred for a decade in Miami whisks by them. I am last in my group of four. The terminal is almost empty, lit by flickering fluorescent lights. I can almost feel the heat leaking through the windows, through the walls, surrounding me. I move past the gates, finally a free man in the United States. This is as quiet as I have ever seen Miami. Elpidio is excited, telling Eulalia what everything is, what the signs above the concourse mean, how to pronounce 'Burger King,' and he's getting it all wrong, but why tell him if he's happy? We are to walk to the on-airport hotel and check in for the night. As we maneuver through terminal D, Clemencia swooning, dead while alive, I empathize with her, because I've lived most of my life as if I was dead, and it's all your fault.*

*We stop by Burger King to get burgers and fries. I can tell Elpidio is disappointed by the number of people who speak Spanish. Elpidio examines the dollars the embassy gave us, feels them rubbing against his face as the grease from the fries glistens at the corner of his mouth. I blame this all on your memory, Etiwanda. I blame you for the battle raging inside me right now, because I know Hialeah is a thirty-minute taxi ride away, and I finally have your address, something tangible. I could reach you if I wanted to, but I don't. Not right now. I've not forgotten your address. I've burned the letter, but it is engraved in my brain, your handwriting. Westland 49 Apartments #571.*

*But you are not why I am here. I am supposed to walk across four terminals to the Miami Airport Hotel in Terminal E and come right back, as American residents, to travel to Baltimore and then to Charleston, where we will all be safe from Polo Norte, where Elpidio will eat, breathe and shit American.*

*No. I stop walking. Eulalia, Clemencia and Elpidio keep walking for a few meters, until Elpidio stops and turns back, a half-eaten Whopper in his hand. “Is your arm tired?” he says.*

*“No.” I stand in the middle of the terminal, and let go of my black bag, letting it hit the carpet.*

*I don’t even believe my own lies. All of this. It’s all been for you. I—we—are not here to get away from Polo Norte. This has nothing to do with anything other than my own fucking stupid obsession with you—you—who’ve done nothing to deserve it. I’ve ripped my family from everything I know just to be near you, I realize, and I’ve been lying to myself all along, because it is stupid. Because it is foolish to think that I would make you happy when I make Eulalia miserable. Because it is foolish to think that you are somehow the key to my happiness, because Etiwanda, I am, and will always be, a miserable person, but I cannot help it, because I am not the master of myself, of my emotions, and this stupid spell you’ve cast on me has ruined me.*

*But I cannot help it. I am not the master of my emotions. You are. And the three people in front of me—their burgers getting cold as they wait for me—have suffered because of it. I have killed a man Clemencia loves. I have brought them here because my life is miserable without the ghost of you, without the need, without the longing. Because the past twelve years of lying to myself, of trying to live without hurting for you—these years have been torture. I turn away from them and start creeping toward the heat of the street, toward you, passing the black and white*

*departure screens, trying to rush out of the range of Eulalia's insults, my way blocked by crossing travelers dragging bags and suitcases.*

*"Triplehijueputa, malparido, gonorrhea," she calls me, and it is justified, and I know she knows you are here in Miami, and she can tell how much of a fake, how much of an asshole I am, how unable I am to cling to the little that the world has given me, reaching for you—for the impossible. But I cannot turn down the one chance I have of reaching you, of attaining the moment I've dreamed of for decades. This is my chance to fulfill my destiny.*

*"Don't chase after that ungrateful son of a bitch. Don't chase him," she tells Elpidio. "You've always been crazy," she says to me. "You're throwing your life away."*

*And I don't want to look back, because I have hurt them, being with them and thinking of you, and I have to let them go—for their own sake—because you have made me unfit for being with anyone other than you. And even this is a lie, because I am not walking away from them to protect them. I am not ignoring Elpidio's calls because of them. I want to turn back, because finally I have built something with Elpidio, but I can't, because the nothing I have with you is more important, because this is my destiny.*

*"Elpidio, don't chase him."*

*Even now I am being selfish, and I can't admit it to myself. I am ignoring them, I am letting them go simply because of you, because you—longing—are the only constant in my life, and I cannot live, I would rather die. I can't look. As the electric doors roll open, and I am hit with the full blast of Miami's humidity, I see my son's reflection in the glass. He is standing squarely, looking me down as if he was a dog—ready to fight me, to drag me down, biting and squeezing my throat. Elpidio flings a burger my way. It hits the back of my neck. I feel the ketchup or the mustard cold against my neck. What do I say to him, the product of my own loins,*

*the puzzle who has loved me and hated me, who has put up with me, my moods, my frustration, my loneliness? What do I say to him, who is so much like me, who will one day understand?*

*Do I turn around and say ‘Forgive me?’ Do I say ‘I still love you, but I am a horrible father, you know it. You’ll be better off without me?’ Do I say ‘You lead your own life. Follow your dreams in this land of possibilities. Give yourself to this country and forget about Colombia, about the past—do what I cannot do. Don’t make my mistakes. Don’t chase after ghosts. Don’t cease to follow your dreams’?*

*Is this what I say? No. I say nothing. I keep walking, crossing over the bus lane into the heat. I sweat. I raise my arm and stick it out in the humidity until a yellow taxi stops in front of me, and through the cab’s tinted window I look back and my family is gone. Gone, and I draw in my head the last picture I saw of them, their anger, their disappointment. They’ll be better off in West Virginia. I think I see the pigeon fluttering under the tunnel, out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t. It is a giant egret—much larger than a pigeon—lost, far from its home in the Everglades.*

*I open the door to the cab. “Westland 49 Apartments. Across from the Westland Mall,” I say. I’ve been wishing to say this aloud without knowing it. I am coming to you. Finally.*



*Descarga en Miniatura*

*A silver door with a five and a seven inscribed on it. The one is missing, but the shadow is still there. A hallway without lighting. This is where you live. And the funny thing is that the whole ride to you I longed for them—for those I have just left.*

*Like this was a service call from a repair man, I crutch to the door, and I know how unkempt I am. I know I smell like mustard and pickles. I know how my beard is out of control. I know my clothing is two decades old, and doesn't fit the stomach that has grown out of my unchanging frame, but I am here. Next to the door, a mailbox with the last name "Loco," and I don't like what I see, the implications of it.*

*What I don't want to think about. At least I know—I think I know—this is your apartment. Three solid knocks on the door. Like I'm patient. Knock. Like my entire life didn't depend on it. Knock. Like my existence didn't cling to you answering the door to those knocks. Knock. The third knock pushes the door in. It is open. I grasp my crutch. I stop. I listen. I smell. No noise. I want to call your name, but this is not the first thing I want you to hear. I want to say 'I have loved you' when you recognize me. The smell gives nothing away. This entire building smells like croquetas and pernil. I can't smell you. I can't see you.*

*I stand by the cracked door, because I have longed for this moment and I have feared it. I cannot bring myself to open this door, to see what is behind the light filtering through the opening. Through the three hinges. I think I'm going to walk inside, and I will see you with your husband Dick Loco—of all fucking people—and my entire life will have been a waste. I've been waiting for this. I've been not living all my life, and I can't do it.*

*I must.*

*I can.*

*I must.*

*I push the door open. The picture of the room forms. A hanging black and white picture of Havana. A shrine to San Lázaro. An open window. Stained curtains flying in the breeze. A couch. You're sitting on it. As slim and dried as you were on Heaven's Outpost. Facing me. This is what I've longed for, and I don't know what to do. Your eyes are wide, the same eyes from Spanish Harlem, the same eyes of that beautiful girl I fell in love with, but they are open, wide. I am about to say, 'I have loved you' when I see it.*

*A red-breasted pigeon lands on the windowsill.*

*Your mouth is gagged. I see it in your eyes. It is terror.*

*A gunshot thunders.*

*It fills the room, and that is all your eyes tell me—after thirty years. Your face explodes into a red mist that sprays the entire couch. Your legs remain in place, though slightly tilted. The green flower-pattern skirt rides up an inch. Your upper body slumps over to its side, to rest on the blood splatter, and I whisper to myself, "I have loved you."*

*The door swings open, and a fist rams my face, knocks me onto the hallway, breaks my jaw. The pain radiates to my spine, to the leg that's not there. A hand grabs me, clenches my neck and drags me inside. I turn. I turn to see, and it's Polo Norte, older, balder, hunched over. In Miami, when he should have been in Colombia. He says, "For you, Palomino Mondragón, the worst of endings." He kicks away the crutch.*

*"How?" I ask him, though I'm not sure any sound comes out.*

*"You didn't think I would forget." He drags me to the couch, my abdomen, my trunk smearing your blood, and he ties my wrists to yours. "Now you two can be together forever." He throws us both on the floor and I try to shrimp out of his grasp, but every time I move you move,*

*and your body becomes more mangled. It loses its shape, so I stop, because you're already dead. I'm already dead. I stop resisting.*

*He takes us to the bathroom, drag by slow drag, because he too has grown old, and he is tired. He is sweating over us. I am not fighting. It is pointless.*

*"Do you ever wonder why they call me Polo Norte?" he says, our heads—mine—resting against the bathroom tile, a pink streak already drawing on it. He pinches my shoulder again, and gets me up far enough so I can look into the bathtub.*

*The tub is full of ice and water. Etiwanda, my love for you has been our demise.*

*He stands up, puts his palms on his back and sighs. His jeans are falling off his butt. A .357 revolver sticking out the beltline above his crotch.*

*He backhands me. His nails. His fingers sting. I feel blood coming out of my nose. I feel the burning of scratches on my face.*

*He squats and grabs you underneath the shoulders. He slumps you over the threshold and your faceless body submerges into the tub, into the ice, the red swirling like expanding smoke inside the water, until everything is pink. Slowly the essence of you leaves us, all over this apartment, and I lean against the edge of the tub, getting wet.*

*"You want to know how I got you?"*

*I don't say anything. I don't look at him. I stare at you, disappearing, submerging in the darkening water.*

*"You've been running from me, when I've been right behind you the whole time. It took you a long time to get here, but papá, I know you. I knew you wouldn't resist. Your wife. Eulalia. You know she's been keeping in touch with me the past twelve years? She believed in you, sabes? She really thought you would forget about your Etiwanda, but I knew you wouldn't, and I think*

*she knew it too. I told her 'The day he leaves you, you tell me,' and I get this call today...I've probably been waiting for this day as long as you have."*

*I stare into the back of your head and try to picture your eyes again, and this hurts more than my pulverized leg ever did, but I've never had you, and this is how I've lived my life, imagining your eyes but never seeing them.*

*"You want to know why?" he says. "Because Polo Norte keeps nothing. He fulfills all his promises. It's just the way Polo Norte operates." He taps me on the shoulder and is about to hand me his revolver. He takes it back and unloads it, taking all the bullets but one, flushing the rounds down the toilet. He puts the revolver in my hands.*

*"One bullet. I'm going to walk away now. You can shoot me in the back if you want. If I was you, I would," he says. "Or you can get yourself out of your fucked up existence. If I was you, I would do that too. But whatever you do, do it quickly. The police will be here any minute, and they're going to take the gun away." And he is right. I have nothing, nothing left. "Oh. And your friends in Idaho are next."*

*I grab the revolver and it feels heavy in my hand, the last bit of power I have in this world, and I try to turn to aim at him, but when I move you move, and more red erupts out of you, spreads through the water with violence. And I don't want to do that to you. I want to preserve what remains.*

*Polo Norte limps out of the room and I watch him leave, the door closing behind him, not shutting. He knows I won't kill him. He knows I have nothing left to live for. He knows me too well, better than anyone ever has. I turn back to you, to see you face down in that swamp, in that tub, in that shrine. My hands tied to yours, outstretched, and I turn the barrel of the revolver to face me, because there is no point in going on when there is no point. And I see this shrine to*

*you, and I see you like you're the Virgin of Guadalupe, and I see the red ice cubes as red roses floating around your body, and I climb into the tub. Some ice, some water spills. The wake calms. My pants, my shirt soaks, sticks to my skin, and I get close to your cold body, and frigid envelops me. I sense all feeling leaving my body, as I stare into the barrel of a wet, dripping revolver. I submerge down to my neck. We freeze together in this icy shrine. The red-breasted pigeon bursts into the bathroom through the cracked door and flutters and flutters, crashing its head against the fogged window—its feathers landing on us. My only wish now is to have a camera, to mount it on a tripod—on the tallest setting—in the far corner of the room, next to that relentless pigeon, and aim the lens down on the bathtub, angled diagonally to capture all of us, both our feet and our heads—to capture this scene in its entirety—and I shiver.*

## WRITING LIFE ESSAY

One night several months ago, I was speaking about ethnic writing and labels to my friend, a fellow writer of Colombian descent. Note that I don't refer to him as a Colombian-American writer because I don't think he'd approve of the label. I was trying to explain to him that for the foreseeable future I couldn't see myself writing about anything other than being a Colombian in America and being a Colombian-American. While my fiction deals with US immigration laws, acculturation, translation and the endless violence in Colombia, my friend writes about the humdrum of suburban life, vampires and dreams—normal things. While my characters' names feature Spanish grammatical features like tildes and eñes that must be typed by pressing the Alt key plus a three-number code, his characters' names are everyday Anglophone names that flow off the American tongue and the English-language keyboard.

"I think it's limiting," he said, "when there are so many other things you could write about."

Somewhere in that conversation he talked about normal writers, and what it was that normal writers wrote about. I don't quite remember how the conversation ended, only that I was hungry and tired.

Months later, lying down in my bathtub I was playing the conversation in my head and shot up from the lukewarm water. "Fuck," I said out loud. Still dripping water, I thought about the ridiculous notion that there is such a thing as a normal writer.

First off, writers are not normal people. I know plenty of them. Second, how many white American writers write about being a Colombian immigrant in the United States? Aside from the work of Colombian-American writers, how many fiction protagonists are Colombian immigrants

trying to make it in the United States? We're not counting mustachioed evil drug lords in Tom Clancy thrillers.

None.

I've never understood how my writing could cease to be normal when I write about my life experience—when I write about *my* normal. Why should I accept the dominant American culture's idea of normality when as a Colombian-American I'm half an outsider to that culture? Why should I be normal, when I can—at the same time—feel at home in both of my cultures and feel like I belong to none, when I can float between being an American and being a Colombiano in the same sentence? Why?

Maybe I'm not a normal writer in the way my friend defines normal, but that's fine with me. I've finally accepted it. I exist in that middle ground, that Rio Grande (or Río Bravo) that lies between my friend's American normality and my mother's Colombian normality. Standing in that fleeting and unsteady cultural median—turning my head from side to side to look through the speeding cars at the tugging poles of my identity, unsure of which way to cross—standing there, having that unique and fleeting perspective, is exactly what propels me to write. My writing is a product of who I am. It took me many years and much thinking to arrive at this seemingly obvious conclusion.

When I joined the military, I came into contact with many Soldiers who had never met or interacted with Hispanic people, let alone anyone of Colombian descent. To them, I was a Colombian. Regardless of the fact that an American flag was sewn on my uniform's right shoulder, I was a Colombian. Not a Colombian-American, but simply a Colombian. I was a Colombian because I didn't look like them, because my accent wasn't like theirs, because from time to time I mispronounced a word like "aunt" despite the fact that I studied English in college.

A coworker even asked me once if I had majored in English because I didn't speak it. I was seen as an outsider because I had grown up eating *ajiaco* instead of casseroles. Despite of the fact that I was serving the United States alongside them and I was risking my life for the American flag, I was a foreigner to many of my fellow American Soldiers.

I recently took a long-needed trip back to Colombia, to reconnect with my roots, to feel like a Colombian and like a member of my clan again, to go back to the place where I was born—to the place where I belonged. My cousin Mauricio—who calls me his brother-cousin—picks me up from the airport and tells me “You look like an American.”

“What’s so American about me?” I say. “These clothes were purchased here in Colombia. My father sent them to me last year.”

“I don’t know. It’s the way you walk, I think. Your build.”

And I don’t know what to say to that. My seventy-year-old uncle Alfonso tells me “You’re practically an American now, aren’t you?” And I nod, telling him I’ve lived in the States longer than in Colombia, that he can call me an American if he wants. During this trip, I realized my Spanish had suffered from old age over the years. When trying to have deep conversations about growing up with my best childhood friend, Andrés Felipe, I keep forgetting words and having to inflect the end of my sentences, as if I was asking questions, to make sure I was conjugating words properly—and I often wasn’t.

I also realized during this trip how far I had drifted from my Colombian family, how being separated by the Caribbean Sea had made us all into different people who had different expectations from life, who dressed differently and had developed different tastes. It is not that I don’t value family. It is that I focused on the half of the family who lived in North America and



neglected the half that lived in Colombia. I became closer with relatives in Canada, who lived farther from Miami than I lived from Colombia.

Both my fellow Soldiers and my family members are right. And they are wrong at the same time. Having migrated to the States in 1993, I formed my childhood identity in Colombia, and my adult identity in the United States. While this split upbringing may make it difficult for me to fit into the traditional Colombian and traditional American cultural molds, it allows me to float freely between the two, to be both an outsider and an insider to both cultures, and to be able to look at them equally, without placing one over the other. Having this unique perspective is the reason I write.

My split identity is the product of a large-scale migration that has been taking place for a quarter of a century. Since the 1980s, Colombian families have chosen to flee an endless civil war, a violent drug-trafficking industry, rampant lawlessness, and the deplorable economic conditions of the Andean country. While Colombian exiles have settled all over the world, their primary destination has been the United States, with most migrants settling in the Miami and New York metropolitan areas. I am at the same time a Colombian exile and the child of a Colombian exile. I have lived in both New York and Miami.

I know that eventually the situation will improve in Colombia, or it will worsen in the United States, and that this large-scale migration will slow and eventually stop. The children of Colombian émigrés will become more and more American with each generation, while Colombians in Colombia will remain Colombian. There will be fewer and fewer people sharing this split identity, the fleeting product of an active migration. This is why I write, because I am aware that my split identity gives me a perspective that is blooming but will eventually wither, a

perspective that can examine the relationship between my two cultures and the effects of migration on both.

Having a split identity—learning from early on to look at matters and issues through different and often opposite perspectives—has spilled over many aspects of my life. I feel the most comfortable in the most uncomfortable of places—being stuck in the middle. I seldom fit the molds that society has set for me. I can neither call myself a Liberal nor a Conservative. I am too religious for my Atheist friends and too secular for my Catholic family. This perspective—of being stuck in the middle, of not being Puritanical—the ability to be uncomfortable conforming is a strength for a writer. This perspective helps me write about issues as both an insider and an outsider.

In *Cuban Jam Sessions in Miniature*, the protagonist Palomino suffers from this split identity, idealizing and loathing both Colombia and America, aware of the promises and the letdowns of migration, yearning to be and not to be in love with Etiwanda, all at the same time. Being a loner and having spent significant amounts of time in both Colombia and the United States gives Palomino the opportunity to look at both places as an insider and as an outsider, to always yearn for what isn't there, for what he does not have. Palomino's story is the story of a migrant, of someone who is hopelessly misguided in his quest to find his place, someone who cannot bring himself to accept who he is. Every time he returns to Colombia or to the United States, Palomino finds that everything has changed, that things are not as he remembers them. Palomino's story is not only a story of American migration but also one of reverse migration, a story that seeks to challenge the traditional and Puritanical sense of identity.

While I care deeply about identity, Palomino doesn't. While I set out to write a story of Colombian migration, Palomino did the things he wanted to do, and he cared about the things he

wanted to care about. Palomino's story originally attempted to look at the history and the nature of Colombian-American identity, but Palomino's character decided to care more about the very nature of love, of violence, of longing, to care about the effects of physical and emotional handicaps as well as the effects of societal expectations. But more importantly, Palomino explores what it means to be alive in this world, what it means to feel alive. It is my hope that in this way, Palomino transcends being simply an immigrant character telling an immigrant story. It is my hope that Americans, Colombians, Colombian-Americans and every other ethnic group can relate to him as a human being in his struggle to fulfill and transcend his dreams while feeling alive.

Like any bi-cultural child, my writing was heavily influenced by both of my parent cultures. A writer being a product of his or her experiences and his or her imagination—informed by everything that writer has read—I write these words feeling like the child of many literary traditions. On the Colombian side, I cannot help but gravitate toward the magical realism of my literary idol, Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez, as well as that of Alvaro Mutis and Eduardo Caballero Calderón. On my American side, I was influenced by contemporary authors like Jonathan Franzen, Dan Delillo, and Richard Russo as well as by the self-aware writings of post-modern authors such as Dave Eggers, Chuck Palahniuk, and David Foster Wallace.

However, I as a writer am more than simply the sum of my two cultures. I would not write today were it not for the ground broken by the literary tradition of Latino/a writers writing in English about their American experiences. While there are very few published Colombian-American writers, there are many Cuban-American, Nuyorican, Chicano and Dominican-American authors who have that deal with the problems of split identities and paved this road for me to drive on. Reading the works of the Latino/a US literary tradition—the tradition I believe

myself to be a part of—such as the works of Junot Díaz, Piri Thomas, Roberto Fernandez and Sandra Cisneros—amongst many others—gave me the strength and encouragement to be comfortable being stuck in the middle and to write about my split identity—to feel comfortable in that uncomfortable middle ground and to be happy not being a “normal” writer.

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44. Hansen, Ron, *Mariette in Ecstasy*
45. Katarain Vélez, José Vicente, *Quienes nos Tienen Jodidos* (Those who've Screwed Us)
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