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“Jugando en Serio” and other works

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JUGANDO EN SERIO

AND OTHER WORKS

A Thesis

by

SHONEY FLORES

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2009

Major Subject: Creative Writing

JUGANDO EN SERIO

AND OTHER WORKS

A Thesis
by
SHONEY FLORES

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ABSTRACT

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In the critical introduction of this thesis, I explore how the different choices we make as creative writers affect the targeted audience of a work. I focus on the endless battle between genre writing and literary writing, in hopes of there being a style of writing that can utilize the best of both. I write about the issues and themes of the works in this thesis that come close to being nonfiction. Finally, I highlight how stylistic choices in bilingual writing can change or destroy potential audiences. These are aspects that have shaped the creative writing included in this collection. Some of my work utilizes genre elements to achieve their purpose, others rely too heavily on personal experiences, two are in Spanish, and the title work is a hybrid of both languages.

DEDICATION

This thesis collection is dedicated to Alex,
for telling me to go;
to José,
for showing me the way;
and, most of all, to Linda,
for being next to me every step of it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the guidance and support of my committee chair, José Skinner. It takes a lot of patience to deal with a writer like me, and even when I showed him the worst examples of writing, he never lost that patience and he always found the best in the writing.

I thank my committee members, Emmy Pérez, for writing more comments than I had typed words in my drafts; and Dra. Elvia Ardalani, por ayudarme a describir ventanas nuevas en mi escritura.

Thanks to all the Creative Writing MFA faculty at UTPA for constantly fighting against those who say that what we do is less meaningful. I know this will pay off in the end, and I can only hope this work helps me fight with you.

I thank my family—Dad, Mom, my brother, and my sister—to put it simply, for everything.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION. BRIDGING THE GAP.....	viii
The Good, The Great, & The Genre is Ugly.....	x
Death and Nonfiction.....	xvii
Writing en Spanish.....	xxii
WORKS CITED.....	xxviii
CHAPTER I. JUGANDO EN SERIO.....	1
CHAPTER II. LOS PUTOS.....	4
CHAPTER III. ENTRE LA SEXTA Y LA QUINTA.....	19
CHAPTER IV. SLINGS AND ARROWS.....	21
CHAPTER V. WHERE BIN LADEN HAS US.....	34
CHAPTER VI. PARTS.....	48
CHAPTER VII. OTHER PARTS.....	65
CHAPTER VIII. AÚN NOS MUEVE.....	83
CHAPTER IX. WAKE.....	91

CHAPTER X. BELLADONNA.....	99
César.....	99
Carmen.....	102
Ángel.....	106
APPENDIX A. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	113
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.....	114

INTRODUCTION

BRIDGING THE GAP

In sixth grade—still affected by being raised in Mexico the first seven years of my life and therefore no friend to English classes—I dreamt that my best friend at the time and I were left locked in a storage room for textbooks in our gated middle school. In real life, anyone can walk in or out of Fort Ringgold in Rio Grande City, Texas, at any time of the day or night, but for some reason my mind suspended this belief for the sake of the story. In the dream, our teachers and staff came after us as vampires, which we had to fend off with guns we found in the storeroom to survive through the night. I remember the dream because I remember deeming it worth of transfer to the written page.

As most dreams do with every REM, it died before reaching its conclusion in my hibernating mind. I considered giving it an ending, but I decided not to finish it since any ending I came up with wouldn't do the dream justice. I hoped the dream would continue in another, but it never did. Eventually, I ended up losing the few loose pages of wide-ruled notebook paper, never to see them again. Unlike this story, however, which I decided to title “The Ringgold Vampires,” writing stuck around.

Before college, I wrote: 1) a pair of stories inspired by horror video games about all my friends and me coming together and getting trapped in an evil, demon-infested town—and then a fictional Hawaiian island in a slightly more original sequel; 2) a series

of six or seven ghost stories ranging from eight to twenty pages with typical opening lines like: “The four of them decided to skip class that day in a small forest outside the town just to socialize and avoid the boredom of the long, unnecessary classes.” Some of the stories were inspired by what I believed to be real events; 3) a full-fledged novella—dropping the ghostly charades—about a traveling drifter who meets his antagonist twin brother. At 30,000 words, this is the longest single work I’ve completed so far. I’ve started novels, some of which were longer than the novella, but have been discouraged halfway through.

By the time I wrote the ghost stories, I had been reading any Stephen King material I could get my hands on—starting with his short story collections (*Night Shift*, *Skeleton Crew*), and eventually taking on the lengthier works (*Pet Sematary*, *It*). I thought I was being academic for reading these opening lines like, “It was forty miles from Horlicks University in Pittsburgh to Cascade Lake, and although dark comes early to that part of the world in October..., there was still a little light when they got there” (King 278). The Edgars (Lee Masters and Allan Poe) inspired my novella; I even used a quote from *Spoon River Anthology* as an epigraph: “To love is to find your own soul / Through the soul of the beloved one / When the beloved one withdraws itself from your soul / Then you have lost your soul” (Masters 61). However, I’m sure it lost its significance and intention to highlight the theme of the work when I decided to place it between another epigraph by Stephen King and a Guns n’ Roses lyric.

To be better located in the market, I needed to go longer. For a new novel (my first potential creative writing project as a university student), I wanted to research birth

defects caused by DNA linkage, since my protagonist ended up falling in love with his ninth ancestral daughter (too many “greats” to list). I called it *The Ninth*, and the only way for that conflict to possibly happen without letting too many science fiction elements seep in was time travel (cryogenic freezing came to me much later). I wrote a prologue to introduce the situation, had the main character disappear into the future after an attempt on his life, and turned it in to my class.

And then I received the “No Genre” news and rule.

The Good, The Great, & The Genre is Ugly

In the six years I’ve studied creative writing at the university level, the exact definitions and/or qualifications of what constitutes a literary work and a genre work have never been explained to me. I have never read an exact definition of it in a book, and it looks like few scholars want to study the subject. All I received were comparisons as examples: when learning to differentiate between both, my mentor told my literary magazine class that Kiss was genre and Aerosmith was literary; anything John Updike wrote was literary and anything Stephen King writes is genre; just as anything Jerry Bruckheimer produces is genre and anything Cameron Crowe directs is literary; genre is horror, science fiction, romance, fantasy, mystery, suspense, humor; literary is none of those things. Using deductive reasoning, genre writing is about things that could never happen, while literary writing can happen to *you*. Unfortunately, this is not the case either.

Michael Chabon calls genre writing entertainment trading in cliché and product placement in his essay, “Trickster in a Suit of Lights: Thoughts on the Modern Short Story.” Genre fiction “engages regions of the brain far from the centers of discernment

[and] critical thinking... In short, [it] means junk and too much junk is bad for you—bad for your heart, your arteries, your mind, your soul” (Chabon 13). While he’s poking fun at this stereotypical definition that a lot of “literary” writers have of the world of genre writing, I’ve experienced nothing short of that definition as a Creative Writing MFA student.

The interesting thing about genre fiction is how recently the literary establishment started rejecting it. If a reader were to open any old anthology of short fiction, he would most definitely find genre work by Faulkner, Mark Twain, Hawthorne, or one of the several Henry James *ghost* stories. A lot of today’s classic literature is yesterday’s genre that has survived the test of time. *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and Edgar Allan Poe are classic horror examples. Under science fiction, the literary shelves are filled with Orwell, Huxley, and works even as early as Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. While many argue that some of this work still falls under bad literature—as Issac Rosenfeld calls *Animal Farm* “inadequate [and] a failure” (33)—more praise for them exists than negative criticism. These are stories respected literary magazines like *The New Yorker* published sixty years ago and then stamped a clear “No genre work” at the top of their submission guidelines. In 1948, *The New Yorker* published “The Lottery” by Shirley Jackson, who is also known for her novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*. If one sends anything to *The New Yorker* with the word “haunting” in the title, the editors won’t even bother with the first line and automatically place it in their rejection pile. It’s an unfair world for new writers trying to gain respect when someone in the literary establishment has to deem a particular genre work good to be accepted as literary.

I fear the short story runs the risk of extinction because of this rejection. At the time “The Lottery” was published, “short fiction,” meant “any one of the following kinds of stories: the ghost story; the horror story; the detective story; the story of suspense, terror, fantasy, science fiction, or the macabre; the sea, adventure, spy, war, or historical story; the romance story” (Chabon 18). Nowadays, what we are taught by academia is that genre work is “fundamentally, perhaps inherently debased, infantile, commercialized, [and] unworthy of the serious person’s attention” (Chabon 18).

These fantastical stories or science fiction epics are supposed to appeal to children and young readers. Or to adult readers for “entertainment,” as means of escape, or as guilty pleasures. Works of genres imply a set of formulas and with these formulas, limitations and restrictions have to exist, and therefore, Grisham, King, and Rowling can never rise to the “masterful heights of true literature, free (it is to be supposed) of all formulas and templates” (Chabon 20).

However, I can’t think of a literary writer I’ve studied with who wouldn’t want to be anthologized with Poe, Lovecraft, or Henry James. What is it that sets these writers apart from today’s genre writers? Since it’s not the subject matter, is it the language in the writing itself?

In 1997, Joyce Carol Oates—a “literary” fiction writer—introduced Stephen King at a public conference, calling him “a story teller [sic] and an inventor of startling images and metaphors, which linger long in the memory and would even spring from a collective unconscious” (Beahm 29). As a creative writing student, fellow classmates and friends

ridicule Stephen King, calling him a step up from Dr. Seuss who cannot spell the word “cemetery.” At the time for me, it was almost the equivalent of having my god ridiculed by a member of another religion. Before King turned me towards Richard Matheson’s very genre craft, he was my favorite writer of both literary and genre worlds.

It begs the question of whether an unpublished writer holds back on entertaining his audience for the sake of obtaining literary achievement. Is genre mere entertainment and is entertainment genre? As writers, we should strive to have both qualities in our work: great, literary writing that entertains the reader. We read to be enlightened, to change the way we think, or as Kafka wrote, to break the seas frozen inside of our souls. Where does entertainment wrong literature?

If nothing else, Stephen King should receive high credit for being a strong advocate of short fiction—which he continues to promote, not only by writing stories, but by editing them for prestigious anthologies like *The Best American Short Stories (BASS)*. He, too, sees an issue with making literature boring for the sake of being literary. When editing for *BASS*, King writes of those particular stories that are “airless,” as stories that feel “show-offy rather than entertaining, self-important rather than interesting...and—worst of all—written for editors and teachers rather than for readers” (xvi). In 1996, his short story “The Man in the Black Suit” received the O. Henry Award, “beating out a thousand other eligible stories, including the usual bumper crop of fiction literary writers, some of whom were likely self-righteously pissed that [King] had even made an appearance in the book [of prize stories]” (Beahm 31).

I have tried to go back and read some of Stephen King's work, and I hate to say that I see the flaws in writing that I failed to see as a high school student. I look at some of the phrases in *Pet Sematary* such as, "Louis had stored the house keys away neatly (he was a neat and methodical man, was Louis Creed)" (King 6), and I find things wrong with his phrasing and figure out better ways to write them. The writing itself, though it was the same text I read before, changed as I changed. After being more aware of how writing works, his literature doesn't grasp me like it used to as a teenager. This is more evident with his more recent work. I listened to the uncut version of *The Stand* on audiotope and realized the edited version I read in high school worked better with the removed scenes and sections. His recent *Cell* had commercial written all over it, but the themes and motifs present in *Pet Sematary* and *The Green Mile* are more than worthy of being literary.

Though I have been taught countless times to stay away from genre writing, I'd be lying if I admit I have learned that lesson. My writing has made a drastic turn these last six years, and I do try to keep the events that happen in my stories as realistically plausible as possible by using whatever literary techniques necessary to accomplish this. Kurt Vonnegut makes his character, Billy Pilgrim, work as a literary figure in *Slaughterhouse-Five* by making the novel metafictional. Vonnegut manipulates fiction and reality by making his first chapter essentially a prologue to the real novel, which the narrator calls "short and jumbled and jangled... and a failure" (19-22). I have found that even with everything I've learned, though, horror elements want to creep back into my writing—physically, if not psychologically.

I'd like to believe that there can exist a middle ground, a form of literary writing that plays with elements of genre but doesn't fall under its restrictions and formulas. I thought "Wake," a short story found in this collection, could achieve this middle ground successfully. It was a response piece to an earlier work we had read the week before in a fiction workshop class, a fellow student's cliché-ridden story dealing with vampires or zombies. I thought I could challenge myself to write a "literary" genre story using a ghost as a psychological entity, and not the kind that appeared in my adolescent short stories turning off televisions and flushing toilets. When the time came to workshop the story, I failed.

The story deals with an older atheist couple having just lost an apparently mentally healthy daughter to suicide. The story opens when the ghost of the girl appears in front of the main character, Macondo, her father. He's already looking at her when the story starts, trying to explain whether she's real or a hallucination. By doing this, I added plausibility to the story. But when his wife sees the ghost later on, they see it as a sign to try to explain the reasoning behind their daughter's death.

Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* was a main influence for writing "Wake," not so much the plot line and characters, but the use of spirits and the writing style. "Wake" is filled with long paragraphs that—while they can't compare to the length of those in Márquez's novel—sometimes go on without stopping until dialogue appears. According to the workshop group, everything in the story worked except the ghost part. Even the science fiction writers in the group agreed with this.

In workshop groups, I tend to be harsher on those that present genre work. In a sense, that makes me a hypocrite because I used to be a genre writer, even if I'm not one anymore. I go back and read the old document files I have saved up and have transferred through three or four different notebook computers, stories of ghosts that can only be seen through a camera lens, insane characters who kill psychologists that can't help them, and my eighth grade friends trying to escape from an island before it blows up. I enjoy what's on those pages and find ways to deconstruct and play around with the text. And I can see how it's all genre writing.

However, had I not been told that I must write literary work to produce good writing and had I not been shown how the true masters of the craft do it, I wouldn't have grown as much as a writer these last six years. To use more comparisons, the same thing can be said about any of the arts. Before deciding you want to paint landscapes for calendars the rest of your life, you should know how to paint with the mind like your predecessors have done. Before Cuarón directed *Harry Potter And the Prisoner of Azkaban*, he proved himself worthy as a director by making real art in *Y tu mamá también*.

I don't like to stick to just one thing when it comes to the craft of writing. I studied nonfiction for two years, and, while it affected my fiction writing, it provided a challenge for me to write nothing but the truth. The first nonfiction piece I wrote dealt with the path I took in quitting high school band. An election took place where I ran for Band President and lost. My teacher said it would be interesting if I won and convinced

me to make that happen. He said nonfiction writers lied all the time to make their memoirs more interesting. I don't think lying worked for mine.

I tried a travel writing course to work on description, because I had just returned from traveling, but mostly because I wanted to do something different. And it's the same idea with the literary versus genre ordeal. I'd like to continue writing them both and, hopefully, unify them in a way that suits my writing style. However, in the end, it's not about whether it's literary or genre. It's just good writing or bad writing.

Death and Nonfiction

Writing "Wake" wasn't my first attempt at writing about death and suicide. Before joining the MFA program at UTPA, I was briefly introduced to creative nonfiction. Though fiction remains my passion, I wrote nothing but nonfiction for two straight years. On December 2006, a friend committed suicide, which sparked many questions about it in my mind. I wrote a personal essay on it, which is found in this collection, under the title "Slings and Arrows." In the essay, the suicide causes the narrator to take precautions and think twice about what he says and does. He questions if there is a life after death and if that afterlife will be good or bad for someone who commits suicide.

The work was inspired mostly by the personal event I experienced, but also by atheist scholars I read at the time that disagreed with my views on immortality. Richard Dawkins described being dead as "being no different from being unborn—[we] shall be just as [we were] in the time of William the Conqueror or the dinosaurs or the trilobites. There's nothing to fear in that" (357). I can't say "Slings and Arrows" escapes didacticism. Though I try to appeal to a wide, nonfiction-reading audience, my narrator

does not shine the best light on atheists and agnostics. My atheist teacher made sure I knew this.

The narrator questions that if atheists like Dawkins have no absolute fear of death, what is it that stops them from committing suicide when they come across a bad period in their lives? Ernest Hemingway best answers this question in his short story, “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.” The main focus of the story is on a man suffering of old age. The narrator meets him in a café and contrasts light and dark to depict the dissimilarity between the old man and all of the young people around him, and he makes the old man deaf to personify his separation with the rest of society. When this three-pager nears its conclusion, Hemingway shows the reader that desperate emptiness of an ending life without the continuance of generations, and the exasperation of the old man’s restless mind unable to find peace.

Hemingway also uses the concept and image of “nothing,” which is exactly what the old man wants to escape from. The older waiter in the café, whom Hemingway often depicts as the voice of the spirit of the old man, asks of the old man what he feared. The narrator writes: “It was not fear or dread. It was nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. . . . Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada y pues nada*” (291).

In a sense, “Wake” is a fictional companion to “Slings and Arrows.” It deals with similar themes and similar issues: the narrators’ inability to comprehend the reasons behind suicide. Since the protagonist in “Wake” is an atheist, he’s more concerned with what caused his daughter to commit the act, while the narrator in “Slings and Arrows,”

who is a strong believer in the afterlife, is more concerned about what will happen after the act. He cares more for the soul since the victim was “the first real character in the book of [his] life that had taken the road to suicide. Most of the other suicides were extras...hanging around in chapters 16 and 17 filling up space, waiting to be cut out.”

The main dilemma involving suicide, just as it involves death, is that living people will never comprehend it unless they go through it themselves. The mind of a person who is suicidal could never be occupied by one who isn't; therefore the enigmatic phenomenon that is suicide escapes an easy explanation. In his novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, Jeffrey Eugenides describes several teenaged boys' emotions reacting to the suicides of five sisters. They keep a collection of objects that belonged to the dead girls, moving them back and forth, vainly attempting to reconstruct their lives and comprehend the complexity of their deaths. In the final outcome, “no matter how [they] put them together, gaps remained, oddly shaped emptinesses mapped by what surrounded them, like countries [they] couldn't name” (246).

The only way I can explain why the theme of death is so persistent throughout my work is that it is the result of the remnants from writing horror as a young writer. Death is present in most of the work in this collection, usually appearing in different ways. In “Parts,” the narrator's boss at work hangs himself with a rusted chain used to lift car engines after he finds out his wife has cheated on him with another man. In “Belladonna,” the second narrator, Carmen, poisons her husband so that she can be together with her true love, Ángel, who happens to be her husband's brother. In “Aún nos mueve,” one of the Spanish works in this collection, the narrator is a schizophrenic

necrophile who sneaks into funeral homes to sleep with corpses. This last story took three different rewrites and a translation to get the majority of its intended audience not to compare it to a typical horror story.

Because death and the fear of it are such a huge part of the horror genre, I have noticed the particular ways I've chosen to handle it in my work. "Belladonna" is not a story about a wife poisoning her husband with belladonna extract. I wrote the story in three different points of view: the husband, the wife, and the husband's brother. Each character is oblivious to the actions of the other two. Therefore, I feel the story is really about not knowing.

The story "Parts" also deals with a suicide and the different effects it has on the protagonist of the story. It works as an anticlimax of the story because it follows a modular design. The scenes are in reverse chronological order, so the story begins with the would-be suicide victim being dead already. As the scenes move backward in time, the reader arrives at the end of the story, which is really the beginning when the character commits suicide.

Though the story is a work of fiction, both "Parts" and its sequel (or prequel), "Other Parts," relied heavily on my own personal experiences to be successfully written. All the characters in both stories are based on people I worked with at an auto parts store, and most of the conversations that take place are real as well. Up to that point, everything is creative nonfiction, which Lee Gutkind defines as "stories, utilizing dialogue, description, characterization, point of view, while at the same time remaining true to the

facts” (xi). “Slings and Arrows” and “Where bin Laden Has Us” are both works of creative nonfiction.

Though inspired by real experiences, a lot of the events that occur in both “Parts” stories are fiction. The character’s suicide never took place in real life, and the form in which the protagonist quits at the beginning of “Parts” was not the way it really happened. I chose to keep—and, hopefully one day, market—these as fiction because from two can come many. As the title suggests, there are many “parts” that are played in those stories, and many others that I have yet to mention, either because they did not make the cut or because the stories I wrote did not deal with those characters specifically. I would like to create a possible series out of these stories, and there is only so much I can do as a writer in terms of keeping all the events real. Fictionalizing them gives me the freedom to play around with the events and make them my own, make them stories *inspired* by real events as opposed to *based* on them. In the end, I will leave it up to the audience to decide whether a particular work in the series is either fiction or nonfiction. As far as having to choose one myself, as the writer, for the entire collection, it would have to be fiction.

David Sedaris, whose work was introduced to me in an undergraduate creative nonfiction class, is a major influence on the way I choose to approach my nonfiction, or fictionalized nonfiction. I like to use humor to tell a story, almost to the point of exaggeration, without taking the whole truth out of it. “Parts” is proof that if I lie, I will make it obvious by having a character’s head come off.

In his article, “This American Lie: A Midget Guitar Teacher, a Macy's Elf, and the Truth about David Sedaris,” Alex Heard investigates Sedaris’s work, trying to out his “nonfiction” in a similar fashion James Frey was proven to have made up *A Million Little Pieces*. Publishers give Sedaris leeway to exaggerate and add humorous elements to his personal essays, but Heard found instances almost similar to my decapitated character in “Parts” standing out as the “fictional” part of the story.

Numerous readers care about this dilemma, and my creative nonfiction teacher is no exception. People feel that by coming out as a liar writer, the power that was initially given to the essay is stripped away. As a writer of both genres, I disagree. Though the French teacher poking Hyeyoon Cho in the eye with a pencil in Sedaris’s essay, “Me Talk Pretty One Day” (172) may not have existed, it doesn’t take anything away from the reality that teachers like that exist in real life, exaggerated or not. For Sedaris—and for me—“it’s all about telling ‘good stories.’ He wouldn’t care a bit if he found out that Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* was written by ‘some guy in Montana who made the whole thing up,’ because the tale he spins is so beautiful” (Heard 2007).

Writing en Spanish

Almost every dying character in Mexican literature drowns. It’s an ongoing pattern of death that I’ve noticed in several stories that have helped shape my writing. In “Chac Mool” by Carlos Fuentes, the protagonist dies while cliff-diving off *La Quebrada* in Acapulco; in Emilio Carballido’s “La caja vacía,” Porfirio dies by drowning while crossing the river, disappearing into the surf and never coming out (43-44); in another story of his, “La desterrada,” the protagonist’s first love dies in the same fashion.

There is a certain depression a reader feels when reading Mexican literature. Juan Rulfo is a master of this. While studying in Xalapa, Veracruz, I researched his work closely and ended up being inspired by his short fiction. The premise of “Talpa” is very similar to my story “Belladonna” in this collection. In “Talpa,” Rulfo writes, “[Natalia and I had] been together many times, but always Tanilo’s shadow separated us; we felt that his scabby hands got between us and took Natalia away so she’d go on taking care of him” (55). There is a similar love triangle in my version of the story.

The grand mixture of Mexican literary characters paint a cold picture of Mexican life: an old woman who revisits the small, beautiful, and cultural town she grew up with only to find it swallowed whole by city life (Carballido 50); an ugly little girl abandoned by her parents and left in the care of an old aunt who resents her (Dueñas 25); an adolescent woman tricked by her dying, perverted uncle into marrying her for his supposed inheritance (Arredondo 108); a man who wraps his slaves in cow skin, wetting it and letting it dry up in the sun so it can squeeze into their bones as punishment for calling him “demonic” (Pitol 164).

I have tried to go back and revisit the work I’ve created and observe how this downbeat Mexican literature has inspired it stylistically. Amparo Dávila is mostly known for her short fiction and the manner in which she makes the unrealistic seem real. Though I may not use ambiguity in a similar context, I use it in a similar fashion in my short story “Los Putos.” The female character in my short story never says anything, and since she is not the narrator, the best way to characterize her would be through her words. Since she doesn’t have any, the reader never knows what she’s thinking or who she is, and I believe

it is this ambiguity that pushes the story forward. In my stories, I try to put my characters in awkward and different situations and work from there.

In “Moisés y Gaspar,” Dávila uses ambiguity to evade writing a horror story. The narrator makes out these two animals, Moisés and Gaspar, to be beasts he has to care for after his brother’s death. These beings slowly ruin his life, and it’s the fact that we don’t really know what they are that makes this story believable (Dávila 103).

Some of my professors think deciding between writing a story in English or Spanish is a political choice. Though politics are obviously present in some of the work in this collection, the choice of language has more to do with aesthetics. I wrote “Aún nos mueve” in an undergraduate creative writing class. I wrote it in English in a fashion that made it come out even more vulgar and disturbing than the subject matter already is. The story deals a necrophile who loses his mind—to say the least—and sneaks into funeral homes to sleep with corpses. In the short story, he ends up sleeping with his dead wife. When I started translating as an MFA graduate student, I decided to translate that piece first. The different language gave it everything it was lacking; it made it less sexual and more sensual, less disgusting and more interesting. “Entre la Sexta y la Quinta” is a short piece that plays with Spanish slang that could never work as well in the English language.

However, choosing to italicize Spanish words in an English text—or vice-versa—is more of a political choice than an aesthetic one. Dagoberto Gilb and Sandra Cisneros, though they have very different viewpoints, are among the Chicano writers that influence my work the most. In *Gritos*, Gilb chooses to use italics in only some of the essays. Whether this is an editorial or authorial choice, I don’t know. “Me Macho, You Jane” has

very little Spanish, but when the language appears, the reader barely notices it when browsing through the text since Gilb blends both languages together well. I believe he loses that cohesion in his travel piece, “Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes: A Pocho Tours Mexico.” The Spanish description alternates with the English words as he writes: “*Venta de pozol masa, abarrotes y verduras, tortitas de chayote*. Wood burning, meat smoking...” (28).

Cisneros’s usage of Spanish words in her short story collection *Woman Hollering Creek* appears as sprinkles throughout the English text. In her story “Never Marry a Mexican,” the reader sees evidence of this when she narrates: “Here, little piece of my *corazón*. . . Come here, *mi cariñito*. Come to *mamita*. Here’s a bit of toast” (82).

I was fortunate enough to teach both books, Gilb’s and Cisneros’s, in an English Composition class as a means to construct ideas for writing. While reading them as a class, I saw how a lot of the students were turned off by the clutter of Spanish words depicted in Gilb’s travel essay, but were intrigued and saw the art in choosing to include a Spanish word to an English phrase as a means to make a sentence flow.

I usually choose to italicize my Spanish words in my writing. It’s not that I want to call attention to them or that I’m letting a *gringo* know it’s time to pull out his Spanish-English *diccionario*. From a grammatical point of view, there are times when not italicizing a non-English word will make the text confusing. A Mexican game show I watched as a kid comes to mind. The contestant was asked to write the English word for *nariz* on the board. When he replied by saying, “*No sé*,” he was asked to write that. Again, not knowing the answer, he said, “*No sé*,” and, again, they told him to write that.

He wrote NO SÉ on the board and won the prize money. It's an exaggerated example, but it's a common occurrence in writing that turns bilingual readers off.

When I wrote the title story for this collection, “Jugando en Serio,” I could not picture half of the text being in a regular type and the other half being in italics. This flash fiction is clearly a “Spanglish” piece, and while many scholars argue that it's a language of its own, none of the words in that text are non-Spanglish words. Ilan Stavans, a scholar known for his studies in the Spanglish language, writes on how though Spanglish is considered “a trap Hispanics fall into on the road to assimilation...thus procrastinating the possibility of...a better future, its creativity astonishes [him]” (3).

While writing “Jugando en Serio,” I noticed how difficult it would be for a monolingual person to read a piece that uses both languages almost fifty-fifty, even if it also falls under the flash fiction category. Susana Chávez-Silverman is another writer known for her work in Spanglish. Her piece, “Killer Crónica,” from her memoir *Killer Crónicas: Bilingual Memories*, is often anthologized in Chicano literature collections. It takes a very close bilingual eye to read: “Al rato tomamos, medio wistfully, para Palermo Viejo, to return to the culinary adventures (or safety?) of that medio-*paquete*, pseudo-multiculti barrio...just blocks from our own” (35). But then, it may not be such an unacademic move to appeal to an audience like that.

The only possible way to bridge the gap between trying to reach a wide audience and diminishing it by making stylistic and content choices with creative writing is to not get labeled as *that* writer. If and when these stories reach wide publication—thus, opening doors for me in the creative writing market—I don't want to be the horror writer,

or the writer who doesn't write horror, or the Spanish writer, or the English writer, or the fiction or nonfiction writer.

These are traps professional writers fall into all the time. They have to write only this kind of story, of that length and in that language. "The Market" places these types of restrictions on writers, and a lot of the time, we place these restrictions on ourselves. As a creative writer, I want to explore as much as I can and not stick with my comfort zone: short, humorous fiction. This is why I create in English and Spanish, fiction and nonfiction, genre and literary, and combinations of all six. Some of the stories or essays I'll write in the future may not appeal to the Spanish-reading audience, *pero a la otra, les dedico una.*

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CHAPTER I

JUGANDO EN SERIO

They took me para México cada fin de semana to remember. Los güercos de enseguida played a different game every time. That Saturday, jugaban con knives en el mero medio de la busiest street in General Treviño, and they weren't de mentiritas either. I heard them cling and clang cada vez que cruzaban paths. I'd get up on the roof of my house para verlos from where they wouldn't see me.

Eran cuates de no más de four years old, and they looked nothing alike. The lighter one with green eyes was Genaro, named after his father, y el negrito, no me acuerdo cómo se llamaba. They wore only their calzoncillos and sat on the middle of the street like they wanted to be run over. Pero cada vez que a car would pass, they would take the knife fight to the banqueta by their house, y luego they would come back y se sentaban otra vez. "Te voy a matar," decía el Genaro. «Te vas a morir» the darker one said back. Cuando se cortaban, they made a staccato ¡ay!, se chupaban la sangre, laughed, and continued the fight como si nada, like it didn't hurt. The darker one decía «no me huele» instead of "duele." Meanwhile, the mother hung clothes on the sogá del patio.

En la tarde jugué el Nintendo. Apá showed up with some fishing gear y me preguntó, for like the thousandth time en mi vida, si quería ir con él. For the thousandth time en mi vida, le dije que no. "Un día," he said otra vez, "cuando me muera, vas a

decir, ‘why didn’t I go fishing with my dad?’” Y con eso, se fue. He sounded funny when he tried to speak English. Kind of like como yo cuando empecé en el otro lado in second grade, cuando se reían de mí when I would spell *apple*. “You said a bad word,” decían; “you said pipí.” Now I knew como hacerme el menso when they asked me to spell that, or *appear*, or the state *Mi hici pipi*.

Los niños de enseguida watched from the window, pescándose de los burglar bars while I passed the fourth level. I pretended que no los vi porque every time I would turn around, me preguntaban si podían entrar y jugar. They knocked on the window unas cuantas veces, tratando to get my attention, pero me hice el sordo. Tocaron más fuerte, and as much as I wanted to sometimes, I never turned to verlos. When I came close to finishing the game, ya mero llegando al dragón, I turned it off y puse otro juego— walking backwards para no voltear.

El domingo, the day we go back to los estados, their mother sat in la banqueta looking out to la calle while the boys jugaban a las guerritas atrás. Pero they didn’t play con invisible matralladoras and grenades like my friends and I did. They used piedras, big ones, the kind you need dos manos para agarrarlas bien. They threw them back and forth, uno al otro. En vez de cortadas, they’d get bruises. The darker one se encontró una caja he could use as a fort and hid inside, and then Genaro convinced him he didn’t know how to use it anyway, y se la quitó. Sometimes rocks would fly over their concrete muro on their side of el callejón into the side of our own wall. Una ya mero y le pegó al carro.

Me bajé del techo, and I grabbed the rock and threw it high back to their side. Oí un thump, y luego empezaron los gritos. The rock had struck el negrito on the head. He

cried como si se estaba muriendo. Tiró las piedras y le corrió contra Genaro, swinging punches at him with both hands. Genaro tried to apologize several times, pero también fought back. I ran inside the house to hide and waited to go back home.

On the way there, I looked out the back window of the car para ver a los niños jugando otra vez. They sat on the banqueta by their madre, lighting matchsticks and throwing them at each other. Genaro did it first, mientras que el negrito, with a big white gauze on his head, lo soplabá en el aire. Then Genaro handed the box to his brother para hacer lo mismo.

We waited casi tres horas en el puente to cross back into the United States. Amá kept on telling me que me acuerde decir lo que siempre digo. “What are you going to say cuando te pregunte el señor?” she asked, sin voltear a verme. I told her otra vez: “I’m an American citizen.” I learned that phrase antes que I even knew lo que significaba. I learned it al mismo tiempo that I learned *yes* y *go* en inglés, when I still didn’t know what anything meant, antes de empezar a hablar perfect English this year in fourth grade.

Before we got home, Apá asked me lo que he always asked me then. “¿Todavía te acuerdas?” he said. “You still remember how to speak Spanish? You haven’t forgotten to speak Spanish?”

A veces, I wouldn’t answer.

CHAPTER II

LOS PUTOS

Rosie's boobs look bigger today. I know it's not my place to look at them. Every other boy in the classroom steadily rises in his seat, taking a peek at the cleavage revealed by the unbuttoned area of her scarlet polo shirt. I guess I can't help myself either. They *do* look enormous. Now I know why we call them melons. La Pasta's been telling people that she's pregnant. I hear him repeat it to someone in U.S. History.

"No, dude, for reals," he says, chewing on dry spaghetti sticks like he always does. "Same thing happened to my sister last year. You know how she was all skinny and stuff? Then remember how she put on all that baby weight and her tits stuck out like mountains?"

I hope Rosie can't hear, being on the other side of the room and everything. Even though these pregnancy rumors are more than likely false—since her belly's as thin as when I first saw it freshman year as she reached for some books in a high locker—she's been getting the whole slut thing for a few months now. A fake pregnancy must be a step up for her.

Mrs. Pontellier tells us to shut up. She wears her usual long, Indian skirt and hippie beads, walking around barefoot as always and expecting us to actually listen to what she has to say. La Pasta keeps at it, though. His words become drowned noise in the

class's murmurs as he holds out each hand in front of his chest, grabbing his own invisible breasts. Idiot. One more year and I'll be out of here for good. Straight to Dad's garage.

Rosie brushes her light brown hair away from her face and pretends not to hear the talk about her. But I can tell it's slowly starting to get to her, like a piñata a bunch of children are hitting with sticks, only with unpinned grenades inside instead of candy. She and I make eye contact for a little while. Her jaded eyes plead for me to step in and kick their asses, but I don't. It's not that I'm chicken shit or anything of the sort. I've been in plenty of fights before, mostly just verbal or taking turns at shoving each other until one of us gets discouraged, but I did punch a guy in the eye once for calling me a queer in the restroom. I just decide not to tell La Pasta and his friends anything because it's not part of the deal.

Eli sits diagonally behind her, trying to get a clear view of the cleavage and claim it as his. He looks pissed—keeps telling La Pasta to shut up to no avail. I don't think he's pissed because everyone is staring at her chest. He knows she'd never cheat on him. I think he's pissed because she only dresses all sexy what it's Dan's turn to be with Rosie. She immediately turns into a conservative nun when it's Eli's week. Big, bulky sweaters over her uniform—with the getting-cold-in-the-classroom excuse—regular jeans, tennis shoes. As soon as it's Dan's turn again, she's practically nude like she is now. I'd be pissed, too, but I'm just the mediator.

Ten months ago, they came up with the deal. We were shooting hoops that evening in our high school's pavilion. Eli stopped the game and kneeled down on the ball to say, "You know Rosie from school? I think I'm in love with her."

"You stopped the game for this?" I asked. I kicked the ball from under his knees and ran towards the basket alone. Dan stayed kneeling down next to him.

"I love Rosie, too," he said. It got quiet for a while. The ball was losing its bounces as it rolled towards them. All of a sudden, I didn't care about basketball anymore. I expected them to get into some kind of brawl over this, but they both seemed calm about it. It made sense, I guessed. They *were* best friends before they were in love with the same girl. And Rosie, out of all girls. She's pretty and everything—maybe not the prettiest in our class—but she's... I don't know. She's Rosie.

They came up with a system of rules so they could both date her peacefully without getting in the way of each other—and without destroying the friendship, which was the most important thing. Dan would date her for one week and then Eli for the next one. Meanwhile, the one not dating her couldn't have any kind of contact, not even verbal, with her until it was his turn again. They both seemed happy with the plan and asked me to be the man in the middle. I was to make sure there was no rule breaking.

"Seems like a solid plan," I told them. "She just has to say yes first, doesn't she?"

"Pregnant," La Pasta shouts while pointing at her in an accusatory way. He sounded as if he was convinced she was carrying the devil's child. "She... is... pregnant."

Eli looks from her cleavage to me as if asking permission to speak with her. Dan's white. Eli's *raza*. He's one of us. So naturally I'd help him out and let him get away with

it a little. Pet her head. Feel her breasts. But Dan also thought of this race issue while they devised the plan, and he agreed to pay me \$20 a week to make sure no one broke the rules. I'd let Dan get away with it for an extra twenty, but for some reason, he insisted on doing things the proper way.

La Pasta mentions "La Rosie" and keeps on going with the breast talk. Every time a person's been tagged as a slut or a *puto*, they get the title of "La" for females or "El" for males. La Pasta is an exception to this rule. We all just called him Pasta because he's always eating those dumb dry noodles. A couple of months ago, he wanted us to grant him an "El," proudly claiming he'd slept around with a bunch of girls, but all the guys knew the only thing he was doing was the palm of his hand. His little sister got more action than he did, and she turned sixteen last month. So, just to piss him off—and because "pasta" is a feminine noun in Spanish ("El Pasta" just wouldn't sound right)—we all started referring to him as "La Pasta."

I don't picture "slut" when I think of Rosie, though. Even when she nodded after Eli and Dan proclaimed their love for her at the same time and pitched her their idea like a business proposition. I guess I can see why people would think she's a slut, especially now that everyone has caught on with the plan. But every time I look at her, I see a regular person. I mean, isn't it every guy's dream to be with two girls at the same time? It's been mine since I was seven. Doesn't really make us *putos*. So it doesn't really make her a La, either. She's doing the same thing, only in a more formal or official way. It's consensual. Like a contract. At least it was until last week.

I was taking a piss in one of the urinals, catching up with all the graffiti that represented the idiocy of our Rio Grande Valley high school male population. DEREK IS A FAGGET and ROSIE SUX DIX AND HAS DA HI 5 and 4 A GOOD TIME, CALL 911 and IF UR READIN THIS U A QUEAR. Someone actually took the time to just tag FUCK YOU. Someone else took offense to this and wrote UR MOMA with a pencil. First guy came back and wrote NO UR MOMMA.

Eli walked in and set up to release in the urinal next to me. “Have you been letting them sneak around when you know it’s my week to be with her?” He didn’t even look at me. Just stared at the ceiling as he spoke, like we were dealing drugs, pretending not to know each other and that the conversation wasn’t taking place.

“Dude,” I said. “You want to have this conversation *now*?”

“I need to know.”

“No,” I said. “You know how Dan always wants to do things the right way. To keep the friendship alive and everything. He refuses to let one chick ruin things. That’s how it’s always been since the school year started. You know this. So why the hell would he be screwing it up for everyone?”

“Don’t talk to me about that fucker.” He hesitated before the last word, like he didn’t know what to call Dan. Or like he was calling me a fucker. Like he said, “Don’t talk to me about that, fucker.”

“It’s kind of hard not to when you brought it up first.” I zipped up, refusing to touch the lever to flush the toilet. Refusing to touch anything in that fucking restroom. Rust covered everything. Smelled like shit and vomit. Always wondered what it would be

like to wear UV goggles and see how much semen there was. I grabbed a couple of paper towels to turn the faucet on.

“I just feel like she’s been sneaking around with Dan when she’s not supposed to,” he said. “They already live in the same neighborhood. She can practically walk to his house. I can tell she likes him more. I see how she looks at him, how she dresses for him, how she acts when she’s with him. He always takes her to the fancy restaurants he knows I can’t afford. Far away places where I can’t follow them because he can afford the gas in his truck.”

“You’ve been following them?” I asked.

“Even when we have sex,” Eli said, “I don’t know. It’s not the same anymore, not like it used to be. I feel like I’m playing with a hand-me-down toy. It looks new and everything, but you know one of its legs fell off at one point and was super-glued back.” Sometimes I didn’t understand the crap Eli pulled out of his head. “I don’t know. It’s like putting on someone else’s used condom every time I’m with her.”

“Eli, what the hell,” I said. I never thought I also had to be their shrink when I signed up to look after them. Besides, Eli wasn’t paying me shit to make sure Dan wasn’t breaking the rules, and if Dan *was* sneaking off at night to be with Rosie behind both our backs, so what? My job is school surveillance. I know Dan and Eli are my friends. But they’re not my *friends* friends.

“You know, Dan’s been going through the same shit,” I lied. “He came to me the other day, all worried that Rosie loved you more than him.” It seemed to lighten Eli’s

mood a little. “Said she always dressed for you like you cared more about her feelings than her body, and with Dan, it’s just a physical thing.”

I thought I had taken care of things with Eli, but I guess he can’t take it anymore in class. He taps Rosie’s shoulder, making physical contact. She turns and he finally tells her, “I was thinking we’d go to the movies tonight. Could you not change your clothes when you get home?” She doesn’t say anything and turns around to face the other way. Eli looks at me like he doesn’t give a crap about the deal anymore. I consider it letting it slide, but I start to wonder if someone else will tell on him during lunch. Shit, everyone in school knows about their stupid plan.

During lunch, Eli and Dan argue in the cafeteria while Rosie stands quietly off to one side. Both of them look like they’re about to beat the shit out of each other. I know this because they’re at an intimate distance, breathing hard like they’re asthmatic, and their chests are erect. Every time two guys are going to fight at school, their chests rise like roosters in a cockfight. It’s a proven fact. That’s how El Pigeon got his nickname last year.

I walk over to prevent them from killing each other. My allowance would cease to be if one of them chickened out of the plan. I have to protect my investment. They’re off to one corner of the cafeteria where only the people immediately around them can know what’s going on. A few faces turn with curiosity, but most of them just swallow their food—or throw it at someone. I can barely hear them arguing over the noise in the cafeteria drowning all of our thoughts. I try to make out some conversations to hear what the rest of the students are talking about, but it’s all just fucking noise.

“We had agreed to the rules,” Dan says. “No kind of contact with her when it’s not your week, Eli. Now you have to suck it up and wait one more week.”

“You piece of shit,” Eli says looking at me. “You told him?”

“First time I see him since you broke the rule, Eli,” I say. “How the hell could I have told him already?”

“He didn’t tell me,” Dan says. “Rosie didn’t tell me either. You should know I have more than one person looking out for me. I keep my sources intact. Rules are rules, Eli. We both agreed on them when we made them. I get her for another week now. You couldn’t just wait to talk to her after school?”

“You two have been sneaking off behind my back,” Eli says. “I know it. You do that, even when you all know it’s my week to be with her.”

Rosie stays quiet, holding on to Dan’s left hand. Her blank expression suggests she’s not thinking of anything. She’s like a dumb zombie looking for brains in the high school cafeteria—where there aren’t any. I want her to stop this. I want her to say something. Anything.

“Why don’t you prove it?” Dan asks. “Prove that I’ve been sneaking around with her.”

“I feel you around every time I’m with her,” Eli says. “I know you two have been together, fucking around.”

“Well, of course, you feel that way, you dipshit,” Dan says. “She *is* my girlfriend every other week. Why wouldn’t you feel that? You know what, this is crazy. Obviously this whole deal is not working for you, and we’re going to have to think of something

else.” He pulls out his wallet. “How much will it take for you to leave her alone and just let her be with me?”

“Hey, Dan,” I say, “come on. Eli’s just going through a funk right now. He’ll get over it. Just let this one little mishap slide and let him go out with her tonight. Alright? What do you say?” He ignores me. Rosie keeps her head down. “Come on,” I yell at her. “Say something.”

“How much, Eli?” Dan says. “I just ask you to get out of our lives right away. Obviously our friendship didn’t mean anything to you when you decided to betray me by betraying my trust, so now it doesn’t mean anything to me either. You know she likes me more than she likes you. So just take the money and go.”

“You’re offering me money to leave you both alone?” Eli asks. “She’s not some dumb hooker, Dan. She’s a woman. She’s a human being. Why are you treating her like we’re paying for her company? She’s not just a thing, man.”

I had always known nothing good would come out of their stupid plan—except maybe my \$20 a week. I didn’t even know why Rosie had even agreed to this. She had nothing to gain by it. She wasn’t one of the popular girls before the deal, but she wasn’t unpopular either. She looked like she’d succeed. What the hell was she thinking?

“Keep your fucking money,” Eli says.

“Well, then, are you going to back off and leave us alone?” Dan asks. “Or will you be a man and accept your mistake? Suck it up for another week.”

“Keep your fucking slut, too,” Eli says. He turns to look at Rosie. Not at her eyes, though. I think he’s looking at the cleavage again, thinking what he’ll be missing. All

male eyes seem to shift there today, making it kind of hard to make eye contact with the girl. Which blows, because her eyes are pretty. “Just tell me one thing,” Eli says. “I have to know. Promise me that neither of you have been sneaking into each other’s houses at night when it’s my week to be with Rosie. Just promise me that.”

Dan stays quiet for a while, like he’s thinking about what to say. I don’t see how he can in all this fucking noise. I get the feeling that at least half are murmurs about us—about Eli, Dan, and Rosie at least. Up on the third level, an enchilada and milk carton fight kicks off. Some of the attention shifts that way. In the second table from us, I see La Pasta chewing on some more raw noodles. He hasn’t even touched the spaghetti on his plate.

“I promise,” Dan says, “that we haven’t been sneaking off at night to be with each other. When it’s your week.” They both stay quiet, staring into each other’s eyes. The chests seem to have gone back down. I don’t anticipate the fight anymore.

Eli starts to walk away, looking more defeated than I’ve ever seen him. Rosie looks like she’s going to say something to him, but she doesn’t. Even when she’s not bound by the deal anymore. Dan leans over to kiss her on the lips. I half-expect her to look like she’s free, like it’s all over. But her expression doesn’t change.

“Here,” Dan says to me, handing me a \$50 bill. “Consider this your severance pay.” He laughs. “I guess you’re fired.”

The school bell rings. I don’t even get to eat anything.

English used to be my favorite class to go to. Not for the books. Don't give a shit about them. English was the only class where I didn't have to keep an eye on Dan or Eli. It's just Rosie and me. I could actually pay attention if I wanted to.

We don't have assigned seats, but I always sit next to her. I don't mean to make her nervous or anything; I just don't really know anyone else in the class. They put the both of us in the smart English class because I guess there was no more room in the regular Englishes when the school year started.

Rosie shifts in her seat, causing me to look in her direction. I notice her breasts again. I cover my eyes with my left hand as if shielding them from the light so she won't be able to tell. A small tear of sweat rolls down her neck and into her bosom area. Who knows? Maybe it's a real tear. The classroom feels hotter, though. She alters her focus from the teacher to me and I close my eyes, pretending I'm sleeping under my pillowy hands. Behind my eyelids, I see us together. I see us lying next to each other on a comfortable bed, while a night, Mexican mountain breeze comes in from an open window. She gets cold and I keep her warm. I keep her hot. I imagine us together, and I like that.

When she looks away again, my eyes return to her boobs, then the rest of her body. She's actually not bad at all. I can tell why Dan and Eli are crazy over her, and why Eli wants to off himself—or Dan—when it wasn't his week. She's gorgeous. Everything about her is. Her legs. Her figure. The piece of her stomach that shows right above her waist. And, pregnant or not, her boobs *are* getting bigger. What more can a guy ask for in a girl?

“Rosie,” I whisper to her. She turns like she had been expecting me to say something. “Let’s get out of here.” She gets confused. Even I’m confused. “I mean, let’s leave. You and me. Forget Eli and Dan. They don’t really love you. They’re just obsessed with this stupid plan. I have some money saved up from work and what that idiot Dan has given me. We can go live in Mexico. Away from all this crap. My uncle runs a shop in Veracruz. I can fix cars and get you anything you want. Come away with me.”

She smiles. My hope, among other things, goes up. Somehow I know she’s going to say yes. She must be sick and tired of doing the whole Eli-Dan thing for almost ten months. She has to be. The fights. The awkwardness. I bet she fucking hates it by now. I want to get her away from all that.

She shakes her head instead, still smiling, and goes back to listening. Rosie. I’ll never know what she’s thinking. I can only guess. But I’d be wrong. Somewhere on the other side of the room, I hear someone whisper, “Fucking slut.”

I’m sure he means Rosie.

CHAPTER III

ENTRE LA SEXTA Y LA QUINTA

No sé por qué decidí tomar el callejón entre la Sexta y la Quinta aquel día. Para dejármela fácil, traté de convencerme de que el tráfico estaba pesadísimo y hubiera sido imposible subirme a la carretera sin la garantía y la seguridad de un semáforo. Pero, ¿pa' qué me hago el menso? En cualquier otra ocasión en el pasado, me metería a la casa en frente de la de Gloria, le daría de reversa a la troca, y me iría unas dos cuadras para llegar a la calle con el semáforo al final. Aún así decidí irme entra la Sexta y la Quinta.

Casi toda la gente de ahí en la colonia no lo usa como callejón. Es más como uno de esos garajes para que se estacionen chingos de carros, pero de un piso. Un camino de 30 metros para las seis o siete casas de cada lado—más estrecho que el Alexis Anorexis. Ni dos carros pueden irse lado a lado sin que uno destruya los claveles y bugambileas buscando un poco de sol en el otro lado del límite entre calle pública y propiedad privada.

A lo mejor me fui por el callejón porque sentí que tenía prisa. La hermana de Gloria me pidió de favor llevarla a la financiera por otro préstamo, y quería acabar con eso en dos patadas para ir a cenar con Gloria. No tenía el tiempo de voltear la camioneta e irme a la calle con el semáforo, y realmente no tenía ganas de manejar un kilómetro en la dirección contraria sobre piedras gruesas en camino terroso y arriesgar que se me

ponchara una llanta. Pero ese caminito no es nada comparado con el pinche bache en la mera entrada del callejón.

Meses antes, después de una inundación que dejó a toda la colonia con albercas pa' los güercos, los que trabajan en la ciudad hicieron el pozo para encontrar la alcantarilla y sacarle el agua. Y luego no sé por qué decidieron dejarlo así—yo pienso que para que no se preocupen en tener que buscarla de nuevo a la otra que llueva.

Pero de todos modos me apendejé y me fui por el callejón, evitando el pozo a China y los dos gran danés monstruosos que siempre andan por ahí. Los dueños de los perros son unos yonquis narcotraficantes que viven en el otro lado de la barda de seis metros en el patio de Gloria. Apuesto que les dan lo mismo de comer que a sus caballos y a veces les dan cualquier cosa que anden fumando también. En el callejón pasé por la casa del vecino de Gloria; estaba sentado en la misma silla, tomando la misma bironga, y viendo pa' fuera como siempre. ¡Qué vida! Luego pasé por la casa del viejo que nos cortaba la yarda hasta que la hierba de dos meses le chingó el cortacésped y nunca quiso regresar.

Al terminar el callejón, donde la Quinta te saluda con una barda de bloques, prendí la flecha derecha e hice alto. Me acerqué más hacia la calle para poder ver porque había una Ford azul estacionada en la mera esquina. Cuando apareció el carro verde en el medio de la Quinta, no sé por que le pisé al gas con toda la chancla, del mismo modo que debería de pisarle al freno cuando un perro se te atraviesa. Fue instintivo, en el sentido que mi mente no jugó un papel en la estrategia de evitar el accidente, tal como apostar

todo el dinero en un juego mierdero de póquer para ver si se les suben los huevos a los demás.

Oí a la hermana de Gloria gritar «Párate!», pero no en el sentido que se traducía a “Para la pinche troca!” Fue más como un “¿Por qué no te estás parando?” A la larga, paré la troca y me di cuenta de lo que había pasado. Lo chistoso era que ni sentí que mi camioneta le pegó al carro. No oí el choque ni el ruido del lado de su carro arañarse con el frente de la mía. Aún cuando me bajé, salí pensando que no había pasado nada, pero me bajé como quiera, por si las moscas.

Un señor viejo—como de cuarenta o cincuenta—se bajó y me miró a mí antes que al carro con una mirada que me decía “na’ más esto me faltaba”. Como normalmente le pasa a una persona de mi edad en su primer accidente, se me paró el corazón. Vi su carro. Una abolladura chica en la puerta de atrás y un pedazo de plástico quebrado en el mismo lugar; y mi puta Nissan Frontier, una pinche mancha verde en la defensa del tamaño de una cucaracha recién nacida. Ni abolladuras, ni raspaduras, y la pinche cuñada desafortunadamente todavía viva. La mancha en la defensa hasta pudo haber sido mierda vieja de pájaro. Dios sabe que lavo la troca tres veces, a lo mejor cuatro, al año. Es que siempre llueve na’ más lavándola.

—Vale más que tengas seguro, mi’jo.

Fue todo lo que me dijo el hombre. Metió la mano al coche y sacó su celular para llamar al 911 y reportar la catástrofe. La dueña de la troca azul que estorbaba mi visión, una vieja con churros en el pelo y bata de dormir, salió de su casa para calmar su curiosidad. Luego estacionó la troca en su cochera para tener mejor panorama del

accidente. Oí las sirenas viniendo más allá de la Quinta. Podía jurar que alguien se había muerto.

La tira no dijo mucho. Sólo veía de mi troca al carro y otra vez a la troca, mientras que nos preguntaba por las licencias, sobándose el bigote y la barba debajo de sus lentes de sol. Volteó a verme a mí primero. Claro.

—Sabías que se requiere por ley hacer alto en cada...

Dejó de hablar cuando se dio cuenta que otra cosa que le faltaba al callejón era una señal de alto. Los trabajadores habrán de haber dicho «Que se chingue» cuando acabaron de pavimentarlo. Aunque tampoco había lugar dónde ponerlo; ¿en el medio del callejón? A lo mejor sí hubo señales de alto entre la Sexta y la Quinta hace mucho, en aquellos tiempos, cuando la vieja con los churros era más joven y menos horrible. En los tiempos cuando el callejón todavía era la tierra dormida debajo del chapopote, y los vecinos se quejaban por las piedras que quebraban sus ventanas, porque los yonquis estúpidos le sumían la pata a sus trocas nuevas. Tal vez en ese tiempo había señales de alto entre la Sexta y la Quinta, y hasta al día que los tenga otra vez, la ley se aplica en forma de la chota diciendo: —Pues, debe haber un alto ahí—.

No me multó porque realmente no había razón para darme uno, pero sí puso en el reporte que el accidente fue mi culpa. Hasta tuvo chance de ser pintor y dibujó un diagrama de cómo pasó todo, pero se le olvidó poner la troca de La Churros, que es igual que pintar “La última cena” sin Diosito, y me subió el seguro. Ni traté de defenderme, contarle que sí hice alto y que había una troca atravesada. Por la diferencia de edad, le iría mejor a un negro contra un blanco en la década de los cincuenta.

Cuando se fue el perro en su carro con las sirenas todavía prendidas, el otro señor se subió al auto y lo estacionó en frente de su casa, dos metros a mi izquierda. No me acuerdo si el policía le dijo algo. Fue hace mucho. Pero hubiera valido madre como quiera. Él no tenía diecisiete.

CHAPTER IV

SLINGS AND ARROWS

Five years before Daisy turned a loaded gun on her chest and pulled the trigger, one of her friends tried to hook us up on a three-way call. I had been feeling somewhat devastated at the time since my first and only successful relationship thus far had moved from living five miles away to six hundred after what the second of the best two months of my sixteen-year-old life. As lost and depressed as I felt then, the thought of swallowing a shotgun barrel never went through my mind. Self-inflicted pain might have, and though I felt crazy enough to grab a razor blade and take it for a spin down the vein lane of my chubby left arm, I wasn't nuts.

I guessed it was the perfect opportunity for Yareli (the cupid mastermind of the ménage à trois) to get me romantically involved with Daisy. With my girlfriend, Lucy, being abducted by her mother and taken to a place five minutes from Oklahoma as opposed to five minutes from Mexico, and Yareli hating her, Yareli must've thought I felt vulnerable enough to get me with a girl so depressed she only had five more years to live.

"How's Lucy?" Daisy asked during the call. Four years later, just a few months before her suicide, she would tell Lucy: "I almost went out with Shoney once, but that was *months* before you guys met."

“She’s okay.” I tried to keep my replies as short as possible. I’ve never been known to prolong a conversation I don’t feel like being part of, and the easiest way to keep them bored is to keep it short.

“Are you sad because she moved away?” Yareli asked like a bully would ask a smaller kid if he wants to run home to his mommy. I never understood why she talked to me as if we were friends, or even siblings. My mother and hers knew each other from church (which explained how she obtained my number) and though her mother would take her along, I haven’t attended church since they passed the collection basket around a fourth time and built the priest’s house several feet away from the church with a satellite dish sticking out of its roof.

I didn’t say anything and let that serene, awkward silence flow through the telephone lines until Yareli changed the subject by talking directly to Daisy about some guy in her classroom that didn’t know how to answer a question that day. She ended the anecdote by calling him stupid.

“Or it could be that he was just ignorant,” Daisy said.

“Stupid *is* ignorant, idiot.”

Daisy argued that stupid meant someone who was slow-minded and senselessly foolish while ignorance was simply not knowing something—like their hope of me being ignorant about what they were trying to pull off, which, in turn, would also work with stupid. As much as I wanted to call Yareli stupid *and* ignorant, I refused to be a part of or even try to mediate their debate. Eventually, she put her phone down for a couple of

minutes to go look for a dictionary, leaving Daisy and me alone on the line. Neither of us said a word.

“They’re pretty much the same thing,” Yareli said.

“Look up ‘retard’ and see if your name pops up,” I said.

Daisy laughed while Yareli tried to brush the comment off by changing the topic again and finally getting to the point of the conversation. She knew I listened to mostly rock music. In high school, I think everyone knows what type of music everyone listens to by simple clothing classifications. The guys whose shirts end by their knees to complement where their shorts begin and are covered in tattoos—despite the fact that they’re not old enough to get them—listen to mostly hip hop and variations thereof. The same thing can be concluded about the girls whose shirts don’t come close to reaching their waists. Throw in some Tejano music, where the message of the lyrics and the time signature of the songs never change, and you have a perfect match because of the region. The people with long-sleeve shirts and jeans, boots and a cowboy hat, is a dead given. Society can easily presume that the people who don’t believe in any other color of makeup or clothing except black—and in my case, the people who socialize with them—are evil and listen to rock music. These are also the easiest to spot since they tend to wear shirts with the names of their favorite bands imprinted on them.

“So,” Yareli addressed me again. “You know, Daisy *loves* to listen to Slipknot.” I guessed she assumed I loved the death metal band, so if one likes a particular rock band, then they must love *all* rock bands regardless of their style. For the record, I didn’t love the band. I liked a few of their songs, but I also liked to try to relate to lyrics I am able

listen to without having to refer to the booklet in the CD or the internet used to steal the songs they go with. There shouldn't be a reason to scream if the words you choose can shout for themselves.

“But I thought you liked rock music,” Yareli said after realizing I didn't share a love of Slipknot with Daisy.

“You like religion,” I said, “does that mean you're a Buddhist?”

I didn't hear from or about Daisy until a year after that. Lucy was living five miles away from me again, and she had been shooting a talent show—which included Daisy singing “Doll Parts” by Hole very softly while playing her acoustic guitar—for the school broadcast channel. I could barely hear Daisy singing on the video since she was being booed by a large crowd of Mexican high school students who more than likely felt the guitar should be used for a different kind of music.

I never liked Daisy. I didn't *dislike* her. I just didn't like her. She was a very neutral person living in my brain. I couldn't find reasons to like her just as I couldn't find reasons to hate her. Most of my memories of her, though, weren't so great.

I didn't think Lucy thought very much of her, as I assume any girl who claims to be your friend and consents her matchmaking with your boyfriend can't be really thought the world of. Lucy also shared a best friend with Daisy, Violet, who was also our roommate the year before the suicide. I don't think “best friend” would be a proper title to give the relationship Violet had with Daisy, though. If a word for a pair of girls who are more than soul mates and less than lesbian girlfriends would ever exist, it would exist

for them. Therefore, Daisy would show up unexpected from time to time—stay for a couple of days, run to Lucy’s computer to catch up with her friends, and get it infected with viruses.

Daisy got married one day (never knew why) and moved to Alaska for a while. At around this time, Lucy had let go of video cameras to pick up regular ones and each photograph she took surpassed the one that came before it in artistry. Violet was one of her favorite subjects to shoot, and after every other session, Violet posted the photographs of her on the internet. States away, Daisy started posting similar pictures of her, mimicking Lucy’s style. I never asked why or what the point of it all was; I sat back and let stupidity take its course. Lucy shot photographs of Violet’s shadow dancing, and then Daisy posted pictures of her shadows dancing in her room. Lucy shot photographs of Violet displaying a bird Daisy had carved on her back with a knife, and eventually Daisy took pictures of her back, displaying a close replica of a bird Violet had carved on hers.

That’s how close those two were. I thought writing our names in cement before it dried on a sidewalk used to be enough to proclaim a never-ending bond through time between two great friends. Sharing a marijuana joint, a heroin needle, or pricking index fingers and letting them touch like in *My Girl*. At what point was that kind of pain a necessity to prove a lifelong friendship? The first time I saw the photographs, I thought someone had drawn the birds. It may be that I’m close-minded or that I’m lost in my own dark ignorance, but I don’t think I’ll ever understand how a person cuts herself or even less how friends take turns at voluntarily carving each other. Get a freaking tattoo.

I'm not as great as I would like to be. If my heart would stop this instant, whether it is punctured with a bullet or simply a much expected cardiac arrest, I really have no idea what would happen to me next. I know I could have searched for a reason to dislike Daisy as easily as I come across reasons—both fictional and non—to hate others. I could have hated her for forever messing up a computer which I'll eventually have to replace, for attempting to plagiarize what Lucy and I considered to be her artwork, or even for putting a gun against her chest and tainting the lives of the people that loved her, especially Violet's, whose life (and backside) was but a mere reflection of Daisy's. I just figured hating her wouldn't miraculously find cures for the viruses slowing Lucy's computer down.

The question of her soul's next destination didn't dawn on me until Lucy and I pulled up at the funeral home, turned off the car radio, and waited in the car for more friends to arrive. At that time, we still didn't know the details of Daisy's suicide: why she did it, where she did it, or what body part the gun pointed to. We assumed that it had been a shot to the head. Me, because that's what Lucy told me, and Lucy, because Daisy had been saying for years: "If I ever commit suicide, I'd shoot myself in the head. Best way to go." Not the best dinner topic, but sometimes I had to work with what I got.

I had dealt with people dying before. My dad's mother died of muscular dystrophy when I was three and the only thing I remember from her funeral was me wondering why I wasn't crying. Mom's father had a stroke and croaked when I was six. That was also the day my cousin found a knife buried in our backyard, and while he

meant to discard it to the other side of the fence—safe out of our reach—he miscalculated the height and it flew straight at my neck. Luckily, it was a butter knife.

I've been to several other funerals. I've walked up to many different open caskets: gray ones, black ones, golden ones, the ones with the glass case mounted over the body so it can look like you're window-grieving. I've seen cheerless mothers up front crying for their lost, and cheerful fathers out back lost in their drinking. I've seen a whole five seasons of *Six Feet Under* to give me a pretty good understanding of the concept of death and how to cope with it. Daisy's funeral, however, didn't feel the same.

She was the first real character in the book of my life that had taken the road to suicide. Most of the other suicides were extras—secondary school students cut for love, shot for drugs, or hanged for mommy and daddy issues—hanging around in chapters 16 and 17, filling up space, waiting to be cut out at the editor's request. People you see in the halls on your way to class, or are actually *in* your class and never answer questions. Not because they're quiet or shy, but because they really don't have the answers. They are people any average Christian would think, upon hearing the news of their suicides, *I think they are going to hell*, because they really don't matter or affect your life in any way.

"If she killed herself," I told Lucy as we waited in the car, "do you really think she's going to a good place?" I kept trying to change the topic of our conversation, but eventually we ended up talking about the same thing. How couldn't we? It got to a point where I didn't really know what else to say without making an ass out of myself. I felt like I was walking blindfolded through a minefield, trying not to say the wrong thing. When a mine would go off, it took the form of Lucy saying:

“Don’t say that.”

The fact that they shared a best friend had brought Lucy somewhat closer to Daisy, and what had been avoiding her when she would visit by hiding in the bedroom had turned to toleration, conversations about photography, and the start of a small, but late, friendship.

“I mean, I know we have no right to judge and are really no one to say where a spirit should or should not go in the afterlife.” I pause for a moment. “But we also have no right to say who should or shouldn’t die, and look at how well that seems to be working for our justice system.”

“Don’t say *that*.”

Inside the funeral home, I refused to walk up to the casket. Though I kept picturing her body lying dormant as if she were sleeping, only not breathing, with a bullet hole resting over a white satin pillow (since we thought that’s where the hole was), it wasn’t that I wasn’t afraid to walk up to it. It wasn’t that I was unprepared to accept the fact that Daisy was dead, either; I knew it was her in there and, sadly, I wasn’t surprised. I just didn’t feel like kneeling a few inches away from her.

Violet had already been sitting a few benches across from Lucy and me, wrapped in black and surrounded by four or five people trying to make her stop crying. She looked like a modern-day Virgin Mary, and there was a large statue of a crucified Jesus mounted over the altar, so the comparison seemed more than appropriate. I had seen her so many times, spent a great deal of hours with her, read to her, and even then it took me almost half an hour to recognize who she was, buried underneath her hands.

Daisy's mother spoke with the minister by the coffin. She wept, but stayed calm enough to be able to have a conversation. I wondered when the church passed the bill to amend the law against servicing suicide funerals, or what was going through the back of the minister's mind while he spoke with Daisy's mother. Was he thinking, *I wish I could tell you that there is no salvation for your daughter, but I'll still do my very best?* I wasn't trying to condemn Daisy in any way; I also wasn't trying to be one of those uptight Catholic people angered by how things just aren't like they used to be. These were just places my mind trailed off to during a wake I sat alone in while my girlfriend was several feet away with her hand on Violet's shoulder.

The wake was very silent, with the exception of a few infants that cried more than most of the people there to remind them that even in death, life unfortunately starts all over again. I was able to hear some of the conversation Daisy's mom held with the minister—made out most of the words and filled in the rest. I don't think I'll ever forget the minister's method to calm the mother down: "It's just something the Catholic Church says to scare people into not doing it."

Why would the Catholic Church want to scare people into not committing suicide? To recruit more Catholics by means of fear? I grew up a Catholic because that's how my mother raised me, and I don't remember her ever scaring me into not killing myself. Even when I showered her with childhood questions about the act of suicide, she told me the same thing I've believed since before I left the church and could make up my own mind about things: "*I believe* nothing good can come out of suicide." In a simple,

non-Christian way of putting it, there is a force trying to stop even an unhappy Atheist from doing so. If there isn't, then what's the point of living?

“Find one passage in the Bible that condemns suicide as a mortal sin,” a friend and closer friend of Daisy's wrote to me once. “Go ahead, I'll wait. You won't find one. And if you quote me ‘Thou shalt not kill,’ I'm going to punch you in the stomach.” Actually, that fifth (or sixth) commandment would have been the first thing I would have said. I feel that if there was ever a need to make the commandments more specific, he would have added “thy neighbor” at the end of that one, too.

But I could never picture Daisy in any of Dante's layers or regions. Maybe people made themselves believe suicide was okay to avoid having to picture something like that. Sitting at the wake, I hoped to God there was no afterlife at all because no one deserved to suffer any more than they suffered in life.

My mother told me Lucy and I were a match made in heaven, and since that match has been lit for over six years, I didn't think she was very far off from her beliefs. She told me once that the summer before I met Lucy, she had spoken with God and asked him to send me angel. At around that same time, Lucy had several problems to deal with at home, and she, too, turned to God and, though she had never asked him for anything before, she asked him for someone to guide her and help her.

When the prayers were answered—or for the non-believer, when Lucy and I coincidentally met by accident and coincidentally became involved—I had to be there for Lucy, vocally if not physically. With her, I learned the term *bipolar* meant. I was with her

while her parents settled their divorce; while her mother really thought I, or anyone else who read Stephen King for that matter, was Satan in the flesh; and while we got through these and more problems whose outcomes were not so different from Violet and Daisy using each other as tree bark on a romantic date—but certainly not *that* bad or artistic with Lucy.

Which is why I was surprised when Lucy called me at work on an early December evening to tell me the news of Daisy's suicide and opened with: "Guess what."

I didn't expect her to be in a good mood about it—not in an "Ah, revenge is sweet" kind of way; I just expected her to be just completely unaffected by what had happened. The news didn't hit *me* across the chest either, with the exception of a shock to the brain that signaled, "Oh, shit," but that was to be expected even by me. But Lucy was fine for the first few days. She cried during the wake, but mostly for what Violet must've been going through. She didn't cry during the burial. She laughed about other things with me and two other friends the night she told me about the suicide. And I know she had various differences with Daisy, but she tried to get along with her and by the end had already established some kind of friendship.

Then, a couple of days after the burial, it sunk in.

Nothing I did or said during the following couple of weeks could do anything to change how she felt or her state of mind. She stayed indoors and didn't feel like doing anything. I felt ignorant and useless to her as if I were living six hundred miles away from her all over again. I tried making sense out of the situation. Should death change the way you feel about a person?

Daisy was the same neutral character that she played when she lived. It would have been stupid to try to make myself believe that she was my friend—or better yet, to try to befriend her after her death. If my father was a violent alcoholic who came home every night to take a beating on me and/or my mother and eventually died, regardless of method, would that make him a different person?

While Lucy mourned, I wondered what would have happened if time had been playing a different game during the call with Yareli and Daisy had I not been with Lucy. Though it would have probably not taken place since I later realized that one of the reasons behind the attempted match-making by Yareli was her spite towards Lucy. Nevertheless, I wondered if the conversation would have taken place anyway and my lonely, hormonal high school persona would have been excited at the fact that there really existed a she-rocker in Starr County.

If I did so much for Lucy in our first six years, could a healthy relationship with Daisy have possibly prevented her from committing suicide? Would it have been Lucy instead of Daisy in the casket? Thinking it through, I don't think it would have lasted between Daisy and me, but it's common to get all these what-ifs flowing through your head when someone you know has died 21 years young. Maybe my Catholic mother would have scared her into not doing it.

When Lucy and I learned that the gun had actually been pointing to her chest, I heard that Daisy had attempted suicide a couple of weeks prior to the successful one. I asked Lucy if people should be arrested for attempted murder if they tried to commit suicide and were unsuccessful. She told me not to say that, even though we were alone.

The first time, Daisy had used blades and almost bled to death in a bathtub. According to Violet, Daisy was released early from the hospital and the doctor prescribed her pills that should not have been taken together, which could explain why the gun was aiming at her chest and not the head like she would have wanted.

No one knows what her state of mind was like the moment before she squeezed the trigger. Like trying to believe that I could have done something to save her—or trying to figure out if she acted out of stupidity or out of ignorance—I think it's smarter to forget it and let Daisy rest in peace.

Even if she isn't.

CHAPTER V

WHERE BIN LADEN HAS US

I step into the back of a line of about a thousand people without a jacket on and the December wind starts blowing from the north. It's seven o'clock in the morning; I face west in an open field and in front of an old lady arguing with her husband about something less important than me freezing. I had walked outside my parents' house an hour before to test the morning weather to decide if I should wear a jacket, a sweater, or neither. It was hot and humid—typical Rio Grande Valley weather. Dad has a jacket on, but he always wears one, even when it's eighty-five degrees. He had said it would be cold later; I didn't listen. We got in my car and drove a couple of miles to Rio Grande City High School to apply for our passports. Found a parking spot over an old baseball field and got in line.

“Let's not block the street,” a security guard says. He guides us like sheep, moving the back of the line to form a human L to avoid blocking the traffic. The old people behind me had taken advantage of this situation and quickly cut in front of me. Good for them. Now they only have 999 people in front of them. I face the wind.

“Look where bin Laden has us,” Dad says in Spanish and starts laughing. It’s my first time getting a passport. I’ve never really needed one. I don’t travel much. The only times I leave the state is to visit family in north Mexico.

I was raised in Mexico for the first seven years of my life in a very small town in Nuevo León called General Treviño. I visit our house there from time to time; my parents go almost every weekend. So there’s no easy way out except to get the now required passport to come back. That’s the bad part about having another house in Mexico: you have to go let it know you still care about it, even if its walls are cracking and chipping away from the heat. Until today, when Dad and I decided to wait in a line that can easily compete with *American Idol* audition lines, he and I just had to say, “Yes,” when asked if we were American citizens at the bridge. And we are. I have my ID to prove it. Now terrorists have them, too, I guess.

I consider leaving the line and going home, thinking we had brought it upon ourselves by waiting until the last minute to apply for the passport before the deadline next month, January 2008. Several post office employees are set up in the high school gym, taking applications all day. Dad and I had decided to take the opportunity, and so did a lot of people. I should’ve been born in Mexico.

I consider sleeping until noon, under warm covers, but then there’s Dad to think about. I can’t leave him alone in the line for God knows how long. I call my mom and ask her if she can bring me my sweater, the red one in the guest room. She says she’d get ready for church and then come drop it off. I wait, shivering, while Dad walks away to

talk to one of his friends several people ahead of us, leaving me alone with a book I had been carrying with me.

“Donde nos tiene bin Laden,” I hear him say to his friend; the rest of the conversation is muted by the hum of the wind. I see George, my old best friend from high school, with his sister and someone else a few more bodies ahead of Dad. I hadn’t seen him in a long time. I always hadn’t seen him in a long time. He sees me eventually, standing alone, and starts to come. It feels like he’s introducing himself all over again.

“How goes school?” he asks. I wonder if he means anything negative by that. He graduated from UT Austin with a degree in Business Administration at the same time I had graduated locally from UT - Pan American with a degree in English. He started working as a loan officer in a bank, while I started working on my masters. “You’re still working on your... what was it? Masters, right?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I actually just started working on it. This was my first semester.”

“So, how did that go for you? Get any writing done?”

I’m sure he cares as much for my writing now as he had for the amateur horror stories I wrote back when we were still friends in high school: not in the least. But for the sake of conversation, I tell him schoolwork had only allowed me to produce a single personal essay on a friend’s suicide a year earlier. “Even then,” I tell him, “I wrote it more for my nonfiction course than for myself.” I mention that the novella I translated for my literary translation course also dealt with suicide, and to top it all off, my research paper for my Hemingway class was on the Hemingway curse. “You know, where several people in his family killed themselves.”

“That’s messed up, man,” he says, looking like he’s not paying attention. He looks down at the book I’m holding. “What’s that?” I flip it over so the front cover faces him: *The Virgin Suicides* by Eugenides. “What the shit, man?” He laughs and then walks back to his spot, zipping up his leather jacket as the temperature drops a little more.

I see my mom pull up on the side of the full parking lot next to us. The line moves at about fifteen feet per hour. Even though I’m left alone, I’m sure the people around me won’t mind if I step out of the line to grab my sweater.

“Where’s your dad?” my mom asks. She looks surprised to see so many people ahead of us, slightly disappointed in us for procrastinating, but most of all, I think she looks happy it’s not her. As if she’s thanking God for allowing her to be a legal resident in the United States and a citizen in Mexico. She doesn’t have to get a passport.

“He’s over there,” I say, “talking to some guy.”

“He left you alone?”

“It’s okay. I got my book, anyway.”

I put on the red sweater and take my spot back; the people around me don’t even notice. It doesn’t matter to them, not when they’re this far back, anyway. The only thing that matters to all of us is taking cover from the wind. The main building is several feet away from us. It’s sure to provide some cover. We should be arriving there in two hours.

Dad comes back, asking if my mom had stopped by already. “Did she bring any food?” he asks in Spanish. I shake my head. “*Donde nos tiene bin Laden,*” he says after a smoky sigh.

*

My father is almost sixty. He tends to say the same things more than once and it's not only his jokes. If he thinks the phrase sounds clever, he'll repeat it as long as the subject still exists. A couple of months before this minimal adventure, he and our neighbor asked me to drive them to the next town and pick up a couple of skinned goats for a birthday party. I can never say no to Dad, so I drove them both, Miller Lites in their hands. On the way over, Dad made some comment about how I don't drink.

"And your friends don't laugh at you for that?" the neighbor asked me.

"Yeah, they do," I said, "but whoever laughs last, laughs best."

Dad loved that moment and retold the story until it got old. Wasn't even my own cliché. It's the same story with bin Laden. He must've loved something about it—the way it sounds, what it means—because he keeps saying it all day to me, to his friend every time he walks over to him, to a random stranger in the line to make conversation, and later to George when he comes back to talk again. The difference between that phrase and all his other ones is that this one makes sense. It's not getting old. It rings truer every time he says it.

Look where bin Laden has us.

His next line is just as popular in his head: "If only people would show up like this to vote." He says this when we're just a few feet away from the main building of the high school, where its outer walls will shield us from the wind. Three hours have passed since we arrived. It's still cold. Still cloudy. The people behind me sound like they're praying for the sunlight to pierce through the clouds. Some lady in the back of the line faints. I think she's faking to get out of the line, but an ambulance picks her up anyway.

Though it's in our nature, especially in South Texas, to rubberneck into others' accidents and incidents, none of us care to leave our spots.

The couple in front of me, the old ones who cut line before, start arguing.

"No, I won't give you the phone," the woman says, "because you'll leave me." He demands the phone again. She reaches into her pocket with her wrinkled hand, looking defeated. He snatches it away and leaves. Five minutes pass, I guess, and then she follows him. Neither of them come back, and I'm two people closer to applying for my passport.

A couple of yards away from the wind *shield*, the sun starts coming in and out of the clouds like it's teasing us. Some of the couple of hundred people behind me start cheering every time it does as if curtains are opening for God during those moments of temporary warmth. A man and a woman come around the line, asking everyone if we want to buy a bowl of *menudo* from them for five dollars.

"*No, gracias,*" I say to them.

"Well, if you change your mind," the man says, "we have a pot, nice and hot, in that red van over there." He points to it and then asks the next group of people.

People provide various shows for us, unintentionally, and when the only person I can talk to keeps disappearing, I can only observe these strangers for pure entertainment. I notice a woman yelling at her kid in the middle of the field I had been waiting on three hours before. The kid hadn't been doing anything, just running around with other bored children, throwing paper airplanes at each other's faces for fun. And yet she gets after

him, almost to the verge of striking him. She looks up, embarrassed. Hundreds of people watch with me.

The children come up with the best material, like reality television combined with sports. A chubby eight-year-old finds a frog on the field. “Look, Mom, a frog,” he tells a luckier person way in front of me. I can’t see her, but I hear her shout at him to leave it alone. But he and a couple of other kids start kicking it back and forth, seeing who gets hit by it first and comes down with warts. After a while, the chubby kid walks away, leaving the other kids still involved in the game. Then he comes back. With half a cinder block in his hands.

He tells the other kids to get out of the way, holds the block above his head, and lets it go. Over the murmur of the crowd around me, I hear the block thump. The children chant a long “Oh!” and start laughing and pointing at the dead frog. They separate after that, in search of another game.

As more children start joining, they start playing a disorganized version of soccer with an empty Gatorade bottle. Americanized as they are, they immediately become bored and move on to football with a half-full Pepsi bottle. A tall kid, who acts like the leader of both teams or the owner of the field, looks like my friend Blas. A lot of people do. He has tinted glasses turned dark from the glare of the sun—which showed up too late—and wears a green American Eagle sweater. In my head, I christen him Quarterback.

He claps his hands after every single play. Even the bad ones. Almost as if he’s trying to keep his team motivated to focus and perform better because Pepsi football is

life, man. They even get in a huddle for an extended period of time. The plays never get better, though.

I can tell the other kids look up to Quarterback—other than physically because he’s taller. He’s the baddest kid in the bunch. Could probably take them all on at the same time if he wanted to. Towards the end of the game, when the opposing team has the bottle, Quarterback pulls out a Coke one from his sweater and says that’s the real ball. He calls it an interception, and no one argues with him. They just start running after him.

“What’s the score?” Dad asks, coming back again from talking to his friend. I start wondering why he and I don’t talk so much.

“I don’t know.”

“Pretty hungry,” he says. “I’m going to get the paper and a taco. Want one?”

“No. I’m okay,” I say. “I’ll take a sandwich if you find one, though. And a Diet Coke.”

He’s gone for almost three hours. Several high school girls show up at around noon to raise funds for whatever clubs they’re in. They roll around a trolley full of snacks—Cornuts, Cheetohs, pickles, Twizzlers—selling them to people who have no other choice but to stay put. The people who sold *menudo* in the morning return to sell chicken plates, also for five dollars. Again, I tell them no.

By one o’clock, I’m about eighty—no, a hundred feet away from the gym when Dad shows up with my sandwich and drink. I tell him to hold our spot while I walk to the restroom in the gym, passing by two high school girls on my way there.

“Let’s walk funny to see if people look at us weird,” one of them says and they start skipping. I look at them weird. The people near the front of the line look at me as if I’m planning to cut in front of them. A couple of them actually start shouting crescendoing hey’s—with or without the “h.” Most of them have obviously been in line longer than me, but I’m certain a lot of them have been let in by their friends and family at some point.

To my disappointment, the line continues inside the lobby of the gym. Three full rows worth of line, and then more inside the basketball court as I peek through the small window of one of the doors.

“Ey,” the security guard in the lobby says (without the “h”), “where you going?”

“Bathroom.”

“Well, it’s over there.”

I walk back, finding Dad sitting on the ground and reading the newspaper. I sit next to him, eat my sandwich, and read another chapter. The waiting continues, half-anticipating Dad to say his bin Laden line one more time. Instead he asks for the time.

“It’s two.”

He sighs, though I don’t know what reason he has to be frustrated. I’m sure he went home for the last three hours to read the first half of the paper. To lie on his favorite couch in the living room while I tried to make conversation with the people behind me to pass some time. They left before Dad came back. I wanted to go home, too.

“How necessary do you think all of this is?” I ask Dad. “I mean, a few months from now, when every single traveler has their passports with them, do you really think the government will catch more terrorists?”

“Sure,” he says. “People fake ID’s all the time.”

“But I’m sure the technology exists to fake passports, too. So how will it help in the end?” We think about it in silence for a while. He gives up sometimes and picks up the paper. I pick up my book. Perhaps there’s more to this new passport law. I don’t really need one. I can easily decide not to travel out of the country if I wanted to. Fifty states are plenty to see in one lifetime.

“All I know is,” Dad says, “the government’s going to make a killing with these passport applications.”

My older sister, Ana, the only other American citizen in our family joins us at around 2:30, cutting in front of all the other people waiting after me. Some of them look mad, but by then, they really don’t care anymore and they don’t have the strength to put up a fight. Ana and I talk about nothing for a while.

By the time we get to the front of the gym, the people around us start saying they’re closing the door at 3:00. We have fifteen minutes, ten feet between us and the doors, and still, we’re scared not to make it. A woman walks outside the gym holding several white slips.

“If you don’t get a chance to apply for your passport today,” she announces, “we will be in Roma High School next Saturday, starting at eight in the morning. Make sure

you get one of these slips because you won't be able to get in without one." She repeats the same thing in Spanish. People behind me start walking towards her like she's holding meal tickets in a concentration camp. They all had been waiting for nothing.

We make it inside the gym in time, and wait another hour before actually getting to the basketball court area. The security guard by that door tells us there are three different routes to choose from: the money order line, the picture line, and the passport line. We don't need the money orders, so we go straight to the pictures.

A bald man at that station with a Polaroid-like camera tells us to take a seat in front of a white screen. The camera has two stickers; one of them reads LOOK HERE and the other SMILE. I smile. "Don't smile," he says. I frown and he takes the picture from fifteen feet away. In my zoomed-in photo, I look like a fat *cholo* fresh out of prison—like a crappy picture of a wanted murderer the local news channels flash so people who might know my whereabouts can call the police.

In the passport line, black tarp covers the floor to prevent us from scratching the court with our feet. My own are killing me already. There's no place to sit. Dried mud, Cornuts, pickle juice, and wrappers decorate the entire tarp. Halfway through the line, we eventually catch up with George. Dad tells him, his little sister, and their cousin his bin Laden line again. They don't react.

I overhear the cousin complain about being born in Mexico, then getting a citizenship in the U.S., only to be forced to get a passport now. Most people in line aren't even from Mexico. We all have several different reasons to visit the country. We travel down there to refill prescriptions—not just for the price, but because the medicine there is

more effective. American medicine helps only for a little bit so you can then buy more. No wonder the economy is wonderful here.

I'm certain a lot of the people in line visit family there—go to their funerals when one of them dies, their weddings when one of them marries, their quinceañeras when one of them is old enough to marry. A lot of teenagers in line need their passports for entertainment. Get drunk. Get laid. I took my seven-year-old-nephew to a store in General Treviño once and asked him what he wanted. He wanted a Clamato. “*Con vino?*” the clerk asked. I shook my head. We go to have lunch. We go to have dinner. We're so close to Mexico, it's like the same country.

“What did you write in for the country you'll be traveling to in the application?”

George asks.

“Mexico.”

“Shit, man,” he says. “They say it takes them longer to process your application if you say you're going to be traveling there. I put Spain on mine. If you don't put Mexico, you get your passport in like two weeks.”

“I also put Spain on mine,” his little sister says.

“That doesn't make any sense,” I say. “Would we be more in a hurry to get to Spain than to get to Mexico?”

They don't say anything.

“Well, I guess I won't get mine until next month or something,” I tell them. I guess it doesn't matter. We go our separate ways again. He and his sister go to one side of the passport tables. Dad goes to the one closest to the door we came in through. I think

five minutes pass. The employee at the front of the line sends me to one of the middle tables. When I sit down, the woman takes my documents.

“I’m going to give you an oath,” the woman tells me after reviewing my application. “Do you want it in English or Spanish?” I can barely hear her over the sounds of the people still behind me and her coworkers saying the same thing to other applicants.

“It doesn’t matter, really,” I say.

“English or Spanish, sir?”

“French,” I think I say.

She recites the oath in English, which I don’t understand anyway. Something about the constitution, some foreign talk, and bearing arms. I just look at her, right hand in the air, trying to make out the words by reading her fat lips. She asks me to assure all my information is correct, and it’s all over in one minute. It’s all it takes.

When I walk outside the gym, the line has disappeared. The sun is setting right in my eyesight. I call Dad to see where he’s disappeared to now. He pulls up with the car in front of the gym before the line starts to ring. Inside the car, the clock on the radio reads 6:45.

“*Donde nos tiene bin Laden,*” Dad says once more.

The next day, he tells me they extended the passport deadline until July. “At least we applied already,” I say, but inside, I want to kill the government.

The first time I use my passport, I’m waiting in another line, coming back into the U.S. from having lunch in Mexico. The lines at the bridges take longer now that we have

passports. I don't know why. I had assumed things would be quicker now that we can't fake our identities. Now that they can just scan the stupid thing, see you're not a terrorist, and move on.

"Well," I tell the customs officer after looking at the clock, "I guess it's more like a dinner now than it was a lunch." The fact that I had skipped breakfast and lunch is reason enough for me to call that meal lunch the first time.

"You had a five o'clock lunch?" he asks, as if I'm too Mexican to tell the difference between both meals.

"I corrected myself," I say.

Even with my passport, I get asked more questions than when I used to just say, "Yes, I'm an American citizen." They ask what I'm bringing back from Mexico like they expect me to say guns when it's really leftovers. They want to know what my business in Mexico was like they expect me to say that I'm buying those guns when it's really buying a meal. They demand to know where we're headed like they expect us to answer our uncle's pawn shop when we really mean to say, "I'm here, already." They tell us to get out of the car and pop the trunk. They want to find drugs, a bomb, anything that'll make their jobs matter. But all they find is the stupid spare tire. They ask this, and a bunch of other things, and the rest of us wait in line.

I think I get treated this way for the way I look in my picture. I should've smiled.

CHAPTER VI

PARTS

I quit my fucking job today. That's the way I said it, too. I left the phone in the hub office ringing while the calls kept coming from other workers in green shirts, from other auto parts stores, from other towns, double-checking if we had a certain starter or shaft for them to sell and make a little extra commission. Shoe Guy knew there was a problem with me when I walked past him in the warehouse. He stopped scanning the merchandise. He stopped scanning all the time—to sell some shoes, take a payment from a coworker, wipe sweat off his cunt face, or hold a cherry pie up to his lips and lick it like a pussy (always in front of someone else)—but that time he stopped scanning to see what the problem was, to know what it was because we always wanted to know.

“Phone's ringing,” he said.

I told him it was probably his mother.

Eddie stocked up Borg Warner switches in the aisles. His favorite. Small, and an entire hour could pass by before he got through with them. Another employee, some new guy from the front counter, took a switch from the shelf to sell. I pushed the green double doors open and felt the rush of cool air hit my face as I stepped into the front of the store. I swore I'd hyperventilate. It was like leaving hell for Canada, like drinking ice water when it feels so good it hurts as it fucks with your chest.

The boss was on the phone in his office—making more problems go away, shutting up another pissed off customer who probably witnessed Eddie dry hump another coworker in his unnaked ass. When it happened with Eddie, he'd usually get away with just a spanking. My dead supervisor, Ben, tried it once and lost his position. Took him a year and half and another regional manager's dick to get that position back. Everyone got pissed, but no one complained.

The boss made an asshole sign with his hand to let me know to wait a while. I sat on the nearest chair, by the computer where some of the guys would sneak to during a break—or some other old time while on the clock—to play Minesweeper. I tried turning one of them to Solitaire once—even the piece of shit Spider one anyone can beat—but it was always easier for them to click on a bunch of squares until they got a sad face.

I looked at the boss's shirt, noticing the MANAGER patch and then his embroidered name and wondered how many different words I could come up with using the first few letters of it. Rambo. Ramification. Rambunctious. I imagined the guys thinking that was pretty gay of me, but if it was faggity, it was incest, too, so fuck them.

“What's up, bro'?” he said, pressing his hand to the speaker.

“I fucking quit,” I said.

“Shut the fuck up and get back to work.” He returned to the call. I remained seated, not really listening to what he said. Rammstein. I thought for a second that if I did quit, the guys would probably think I'm a pussy who couldn't handle the pressure of running the hub. Rampage. Or that I'm an ungrateful bitch for throwing away the job my own brother pulled strings for just so I could get bumped up on the application pile as if

hundreds of men were desperate to work with dicks. Ramshackle. The dicks in the store were the kind that stayed planted there forever, raising fat trolls on dollar menu cheeseburgers and leaving pissed off wives at home with their failed dreams of being interior designers or nurses. Dicks that needed second and third jobs to be able to afford hookers or pot or beer or whatever the shit they spent their money on. Shoe Guy sold stolen shoes on the side and had to pretend his seventy-five-cent lunch was a vagina to escape judgment of having only that to eat because the reputation of an idiot supersedes the reputation of trash. I'm sure the applicant line for the auto parts store went around the corner. Rambling.

"I'm serious," I said. "I can't work here anymore."

"Why are you quitting? You can't quit now." He put the phone down and let the person keep talking. I heard the mumbled complaints; they sounded like they'd continue on for the next couple of minutes. "What the hell's wrong?"

"I just realized that if I don't leave now, I'm going to be here my whole life. I don't want to end up like these idiots." I felt like shit for saying it, but it was the truth. I could tell he believed me because he knew what I meant. Twelve years my senior. I wouldn't want him to end up like the guys if it were the other way around.

"You can't just fucking wait until we train a new supervisor? You know the hub can't run itself. Besides, what are *you* going to do if you leave now?"

"I'll figure something out. Find something somewhere. Maybe a call center."

"You're going to figure something out? When did you start figuring things out? Stick to what you know and go run the hub. Get back to sending those parts out."

We stayed quiet for a moment. I could actually feel the phone ringing two hundred feet away in the hub office, the ink ribbon of the old printer sliding left and right, vomiting out order after order after order. The hub drivers would be back from their routes soon, see the unsorted receipts for their stores and start to panic. In a fortunate metaphorical way, I had all of them by the balls.

“What do you want?” the boss said. I couldn’t think of anything he could give me. Couldn’t give me a raise, even if I actually wanted one, because the fact that we shared the same DNA alone was reason enough to get him fired if the regional manager found out. Besides, people did some stupid shit for raises in that store as if a dime more every hour made all the difference in the world. He could blow *me* to make me keep my job, but that’s just fucked up.

“I want to quit this job. I want out.”

“You’ve been running the hub for one stupid day and you can’t pull your own weight, or what?”

“You know that’s not why I’m quitting. Ben apparently couldn’t pull his own weight.”

“That’s not funny.”

“You weren’t there. You wouldn’t know.”

“Just take a day to think about it. I’ll put one of my counter guys in the hub for today. Go home. Sleep on it. You know you can’t do anything else.”

I had to pass through the counter area to leave the store, trying to escape all the stares from the workers there. Coming in, it was usually a forced “Good morning”

because I was expected to have to reply back to them. Going out, it felt like I walked with a shit-stain on my pants and they stared and they laughed inside, the fuckers. They knew it wasn't my normal time to get out. They'd get pissed like they did when I'd get dibs on taking my vacation Christmas week at the start of the year, but they wouldn't say shit. We never complained.

I took a break on the half flight of loose wooden stairs that led up to the loading dock to smoke a cigarette. Ben's funeral was taking place in the Catholic church next door, though he wasn't even Catholic at all. The previous year, he tried to be. He saw a bootleg copy of Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* at his Baptist church and started pushing Eddie away when he would try to hump him. Said he didn't play like that anymore. He stopped spreading gossip all the time. I told Eddie once I wanted to be a writer. He told Ben, and within the day, all the chains in the region knew. A week after the *Passion* charade, he realized it wasn't really who he was and put the fake halo away.

They allowed the workers to go to the funeral during their breaks that day, but most of them had to choose between Ben and food so only about three people went. I had to choose between Ben and a cigarette.

Javi joined me after a while, cleaning out his ears with a metal nail file from a nail clipper. He ran the distribution center in front of the hub, where they stacked hundreds of buckets of oil and paint. Everyone called him Plato all the time, as in the Spanish word for "plate" because his face was shaped that way. Not after the philosopher.

"You know what's the difference between half-full and half-empty?" he said.

“Can’t you cut the insides of your ears doing that shit?”

“Well, I have to clean them,” he said. He pulled out the file from his ear and rubbed the wax off against his jeans. “No one wants to have dirty ears.”

“Ever heard of Q-tips?”

“Don’t like them,” he said. “They leave residue behind in the ear. Even the ones that are wrapped up really tight. Fucking hate them.”

“Well, you’re going to end up bleeding out of them.”

“So, do you know the difference? Between half-empty and half-full?”

“Why?” I sensed something sexual going on with the question or joke. I tried thinking of a possible punch line to it. A half-full woman squirts all over your face when you make her come? Half-empty means you’re gay? I didn’t know where he was going with it.

“It’s just a simple question,” he said. “I have this bottle of Coke here. I drank half of it already. So which one is it?”

“Half-empty.”

“Why?”

“Because it all depends on the previous action that took place to determine which one it is. If you’re drinking out of it, it means you’re emptying it, so that would make it half-empty. If you were filling it up with God knows what, then it would be half-full. Is that it?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded his head and looked at the people going in and out of Ben's funeral across the street. "Have you ever realized—"

"Fuck me."

"—how each of us is like an auto part in this auto part store? The manager is like the computer, making sure all the other parts are doing their jobs. The people in the front counter are the exterior of the car. Retail. They're the things people see and judge the car on. Back here, we're the internal parts. We're the alternators that make sure everything's powered up. The starters are the stockers, Eddie and Shoe Guy, who make sure the store gets going every morning. The hub department—"

"You know, my brother uses this comparison all the time," I said. "He doesn't go into that much detail into it, but you don't have to fucking tell me. If we are all car parts, our car is probably really shitty."

"You going to Ben's funeral?" he said after a while. "It's messed up, what happened to him. Not the way to go. You worked for him. You should go."

"I never liked Ben. It would be hypocritical of me to put him on a pedestal now that he's dead. I've done more than enough for him and his family already."

"Your brother's going."

"Because he'd look like a dick if he didn't. The company paid for the whole fucking thing, and all because Ben is an idiot who couldn't watch his step because his extra large beach ball gut was in the way."

Javi left without saying anything else. A woman in a black dress stepped out of the funeral. She kept wiping at her eyes as if she had been crying and was still crying.

She lit a cigarette and sat on a bench, crossing her legs and revealing part of them. I stared at them for a while, fantasized about crossing the street to touch them, and run my mouth all around them. Pulling the dress off to the side to get more. There on the bench, in front of the church. I didn't care.

I wanted to have sex with her. Or wished I were delivering parts so I could stop on one of the empty farm roads by Edcouch and masturbate to her. I wondered what the rest of her skin looked like underneath her dress. The real shape of her breasts without a bra's support. What color her panties were. If she shaved down there. Maybe even her name.

The thoughts disappeared when she sunk her face into her hands and continued to cry. I didn't know why. Who would Ben mean so much to? He was pathetic. I spun my wedding ring with my other hand before I climbed the stairs to get back to work.

Shoe Guy and some other guys stood by the loading dock garage door looking at her, too. He started mumbling some sexual words and humped the part of the garage the door slid down on. The other guys laughed or rubbed their dicks like they were hurting.

"Hey," Shoe Guy yelled out to her. "Hey, *chiquita*. Give me your number?" He never stopped humping as he said this. The girl on the bench wiped her tears and retreated inside the church. The guys whined as if they had not won the lottery and one by one went back to work.

Spider Man had been running the hub while I reviewed applications. He usually helped out Eddie and Shoe Guy with the stocking; they called him Spider Man because he looked like the pussy side of Tobey Maguire from the movies, thick glasses, covered in acne, skinny like he did crack and blow for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. He usually hid

from Eddie and Shoe Guy to avoid having to work with them. He'd hide in the bathroom, come around the back after his lunch break after clocking in at the front to take longer to get there. Sometimes he would just stand in the aisles with a cart of parts to stock, looking at nothing and just waiting for the second hand to finish another turn.

He gave me the cordless phone without saying a word and left the office. It rang almost immediately in my hand.

“Hey, this is Rick from Donna. Can you check to see if you have a part for me? It's an A1 60-365.” I hated when they called asking for a part on the second floor. I had to squeeze through the rack and pinion boxes sticking out of the aisles, feel the humidity of the warehouse swell around me as the sheet metal roof turned all of it into a microwave oven.

“Yeah, we got it.”

“Can it make the next route?”

“Yeah, you still have time.”

“Thanks a lot, buddy.”

On my way back to the office, Jaime stepped out of the commercial department. “What's up, faggot?” he said. It was the least the guy could do to better his reputation. Everyone else thought he was the faggot because he had long hair tucked underneath his cap and painted his nails black from time to time. He said it went well with the whole rocker thing he was trying to get at.

“Just because I let you suck my—.” I stopped myself before finishing.

“What?” he asked, walking towards the front of the store.

“Nothing.” The phone started ringing in my hand again. I wondered if I should answer it then to check the part or if the caller would ask me to use the computer in the office to check for something else. I let it ring as I walked back.

“Phone’s ringing,” Shoe Guy said as I passed him while he ate another cherry pie, showing Spider Man how to treat a pussy. He was finding it funny.

“Yeah, it’s probably your mother,” I told him. I stepped into the office. I let the phone ring some more.

V-Lo asked me to repeat the story in the commercial department, which he ran and basically dealt with delivering and selling parts to local mechanic shops. He had been telling different versions of it to different people over the phone and wanted to hear the real thing again.

“Well, you’re the only one that saw it happen,” he said. “Tell us what happened.” Everyone else in the room pretended not to be interested, but I could tell they wanted to hear. Saint Peter, the really old guy who dealt with Mexican accounts, would turn every once in a while. Made a shitload of commission by selling parts in bulk. V-Lo had been waiting a long time for Peter to retire or die to take his accounts. Jaime was in the room, too.

“There’s no story,” I said. “He went to go get a few parts upstairs, probably lost his balance, and fell down. The chain just happened to be in the way of his head. It was an accident.”

“Lost his balance?”

“Yeah. Fat people lose their balance a lot. It’s a miracle the impact of his body hitting the bottom floor didn’t kill us all.” Everyone in the room laughed.

“It still doesn’t make any sense,” Peter said.

“Why don’t you go illustrate it for us, then?” Jaime said. “V-Lo would like that.” More laughter. That was the interesting thing about working with idiots that didn’t understand the concept of emotions. Coworker dies one day and we joke about it the next. Earlier that morning, a bum had run off with a fuel filter probably to sell for drugs. Jesse, one of the counter men who had court once the same day I did (he ran a red light and I went ten over), tried to catch up to him but failed. After that incident, everyone forgot Ben had died.

V-Lo seemed to be the only one really interested in Ben. Ben had christened Victor V-Lo for having a tight ass. It wasn’t that no one questioned whether or not he had one. Most of the coworkers just liked the sound of V-Lo so it caught on.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” he said to me. “Yesterday, when you were with La Polla —” (district manager’s nickname because it rhymes with his last name, Moya) “—one of your writing friends came looking for an oxygen sensor for her car. She had these nice tits.” He put his hands up to his chest and started rubbing invisible nipples with his index fingers and thumbs.

I went back to reviewing applications to replace Ben, picking out the idiots that made it obvious they filled them out to get a signature and prove to the government that supplied them with food stamps they had been trying to find work. The boss had asked me to fix this while he cleaned up the death mess and got things back on track.

We interviewed the first candidate together. He showed up with a black t-shirt that read THE ONLY JOB I NEED IS A BLOWJOB and had a stick figure of a girl on her knees. He picked his nose and scratched his balls throughout the entire ten minutes. When he left, the boss threw the application in the trash.

“Definitely not,” he said.

“He’d actually fit in perfectly. He’s just a little more open about it. What about this application?”

“I remember her dropping it off,” he said. “It’s a no.”

“Her? It says his name is Alex. He’s thirty-eight.”

“*She’s* thirty-eight, and I’m not hiring a woman.”

“You know that’s sexist, right?”

“My job is to make sure all the jobs in this store are done,” he said. “If we were to hire a woman, you know what’s going to happen to everyone here. Same thing that happened last time.” He opened and closed every drawer of his desk, looking for any misplaced applications and disappointed that out of all of the ones I had reviewed, I had picked a female with a background in auto parts retail.

“What? Back to caveman times?” I said. “You think that everyone’s going to fight for the love of this woman? What if she’s not even good-looking?”

“I’ve been managing here for ten years. I know my men can’t function if there’s a woman present.” He handed me another pack of applications to look over. “Might as well start looking at the ones you looked at already again.”

“Says a lot about the kind of assholes that work here.”

“Take a break,” he said. “I’ll get someone to work in the hub for a while.”

I settled for the stairs by the loading dock. Plato joined me after a while, cleaning the inside of his ears with a nail file, and asked me what the difference between half-full and half-empty was.

Eddie walked into the hub office while I caught my breath. It was the end of his lunch break and should have been the middle of mine. He was eating from a bag of mixed nuts and offered me some before saying hello. I refused. I wondered if the guys had made fun of him already for eating nuts. They had probably told him something like, “Yeah, you like the feel of nuts in your mouth, right?” He would’ve been better off with the cherry pie.

He took a seat in the only chair we had in the office, facing the printer, right in front of the fan shooting hot air—but air, nonetheless. We looked out the window overlooking the distribution center for a while. Some of the guys from that department smoked cigarettes underneath a palette of batteries. Red, who enjoyed cheating on his wife despite the fact they’d been together since they were twelve; Güero, who always parked his piece of shit motorcycle where the delivery trucks were supposed to be loaded so no one would steal it; and Omar, who Eddie and I thought had a strong phobia of toilets. They had written him up a couple of months before for taking a piss in the corner of the distribution center. At the time, I assumed laziness. The restrooms were on the

opposite side of the business. But then, he came out of the restroom one day, after learning his lesson. I had been waiting for a while and never heard the toilet flush. When he came out and I went in, piss covered the sink. “Maybe his parents used to give him baths in the toilet as a baby,” Eddie said once, “and one day they almost flushed him down. *No, mami, no.*”

“Ben not back yet?” he asked in the office. He chugged down a mouthful of nuts and sucked the salt out of them for a while before chewing them. “Hasn’t he been gone for more than an hour?”

“Is that supposed to be surprising or are you following a script? I take it the next question is, ‘Aren’t we usually allowed only one hour for lunch?’ Yes. ‘Shouldn’t you be out to lunch now instead of him?’ Yes. ‘Aren’t you going back on the road in twenty-five minutes?’ Yes. ‘So, you’re not having lunch?’ No. I’ll probably have to wait until I leave.”

“Alright. Calm down, asshole.”

“Fuck off, queer.”

“Just because I let you suck my dick,” he said, “don’t mean I’m queer.” That was his defense for any homosexual attack against him, and he never realized how retarded he sounded saying that. I don’t think the rest of the workers he used it on knew either. The first few times I tried letting him know that was exactly what it meant, but I guessed he liked the quick comeback for those occasions. He also used, “When I ask for your opinion, I’ll pull my dick out of your mouth,” but rarely because he’d fuck it up by reversing it and ending up with, “I’ll pull your dick out of my mouth.” No one else would

catch it. They could've been called "pretty" for all they knew; anything with the intention of an insult needed a comeback.

That time, I didn't say anything. I waited for more orders to come in to take five or six with me on every trip to the warehouse instead of walking back and forth for one order at a time. Eddie grabbed a Coke and started spitting the unsalted nuts into it. "Perfect lunch," he'd always say. "What, you don't like Coke and nuts? Man, everyone *loves* Coke and nuts." I laughed the first few times his Mexican accent would get the best of him and he'd end up pronouncing "Coke" a different way.

"Fucking fat ass probably eating everything in the fridge," he said about Ben. "Probably eating the fridge, too. His wife and his kids. The dog. He's eating everything. Fucking fat ass." He clocked back in with the computer and left the office. Through the small window by the computer, I saw him run into Ben in the warehouse. Eddie tried to lecture him, but Ben kept walking straight to the office, a blank look on his round face.

He let the door slam shut behind him, clocked in, and looked at the three orders on the printer. "I'm sorry I'm late," he said. He looked more serious than usual, like the time he had been demoted for humping Eddie and swinging a thick rubber hose in front of his pants pretending it was his dick. "I know there's no time for you to go to lunch, but I'll try to make it up to you this week. I'll let you leave an hour early on Friday."

"We're going to be shorthanded on Friday."

"Oh, yeah. Fuck. Well, we'll work something out."

"Are you okay?"

“I think my wife’s cheating on me.”

“And?”

Ben looked as if I had said the wrong word. Perhaps he expected me to care about his situation. It wasn’t because of the lunch thing. I really didn’t care. “Don’t you cheat on her like all the fucking time?”

“This is different,” he said. “A wife is supposed to be loyal to her husband, at all costs. No questions asked. Regardless. It’s okay for a husband to cheat because it’s good practice to use on the wife. But when a wife cheats, it’s like someone else has had her, you know?”

“Ben, that doesn’t make any fucking sense at all.” The steel legs of the chair bent down a bit more when he sat down. It still surprised me his ass fit between the armrests. He shuffled the orders with his pudgy fingers, breaking a sweat.

“You know, one day you’re going to get out of here.”

“I don’t know about that. I can’t even go out for lunch.”

“No, you’re different than the rest of us. You’re going to leave. Maybe one day you’ll write a novel about all of us.” I told one person in the whole store that I had an interest in writing and Ben managed to get the word out to the rest of the chains in the region.

“Yeah, I probably won’t,” I said. “No offense, Ben, but you guys are idiots. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying I’m not an idiot. I work here after all. I know it rubs off. But I don’t think anyone would want to read a piece of literature about a bunch of moronic pieces of shit.”

He sat there for a while longer, thinking hard about it. I hate him more than any other person in the store. It wasn't just the fact that he always fucked me over with lunch or with making sure I got the worst route to drive or picking me to be assistant supervisor just so he'd have it easy. I hated who he was. I hated how he pretended to be more important than everyone else in the store. How he pretended he was smart because he used the word "flabbergasted" once. How he'd pretend to be religious.

"Want to go watch the Super Bowl at my church on Sunday?" he asked me a few months before. "We're going to make fajitas."

"Don't you usually pray in churches?"

"Oh, yeah. We're praying during the commercials."

"For the Eagles or Patriots?"

I hated everything about that guy.

"Take a break," he said in the office after a while. "I'm going to get these parts."

It took him a moment to get up from the chair; it came up with him for a moment, attached to his ass. He stepped out of the office and into the warehouse. I kept looking out the window, saw him fumbling with a few parts on the second floor. I saw him grab the chain attached to the forklift we used to lift and load engines and put it around his neck. I saw him jump.

I didn't react. Not even when the head came off.

CHAPTER VII

OTHER PARTS

It was like Christmas came early for our auto parts store when we heard a female from the Pharr branch was transferring to ours. An actual female. She meant to replace Cool Whip, who had quit over a stupid newsletter. I had returned from mapping out a new delivery route to find my boss, Ben, leaning on the counter of our back office—pensive and fat. He rested his head on one hand and swung air at his face using sweaty order receipts with the other. He always broke more than he worked. You have it real easy, Big Show, he would say to me to justify his laziness. You're out there on the road, in an air conditioned truck, while I'm in here, getting all these auto parts ready to be shipped in this heat-oven warehouse.

The air condition in the office switched to a low, cooling hum. The thermostat was set for sixty-five degrees.

“He called me a motherfucker,” he said, still staring out into the distribution center behind us. “Cool Whip called me a motherfucker.” Ben had a thing for giving people nicknames at work and promised himself to never use our real names. It wasn't just his thing. Some of the guys in stocking liked to poke fun by nicknaming other people, but they would eventually drop it when it got boring. Not Ben, though. If he had

the money, he'd drive us to the courthouse to get them legally changed. Cool Whip's last name was Whippie, the only white guy in our McAllen, Texas branch. Hence, "Cool Whip," which happens to be white, and having worked with Ben for three years, I'm sure there's also a semen connotation involved.

"What happened?" I had laughed at first. Calling Ben a "motherfucker" was like calling his uniform shirt "green" and his daily stretchy shorts "black"—just another adjective that describes who he is as a person. In a literal sense, he fucks his wife (gets back from lunch late because of this), who happens to be a mother, so he's a mother fucker. I wanted to explain this to him, but his facial expression didn't change during my laughter.

"He kept calling me *fat*," he said. There was something hilarious about the way he said that word, too. He stretched the vowel, made it sound like it was disgusting to be that way, almost to the point where it sounded like *fate*. "We got into this argument over the newsletter, kept saying I was this fat guy on page 13." Bastard remembered the page of the newsletter, too, like he meant for me to take a look at it. "I told him he was the guy with the buckteeth, but just playing around, you know. I was joking when I told him. You could tell by the tone of my voice that I was totally kidding with him."

"Randy *does* have buckteeth, though," I said, "so, yes, you probably struck an insecure nerve."

"And then he said, 'Well, you're a motherfucker.' He took off on the Roma route. I'm just waiting for him to get back to see what he's going to do. I think he might quit. He looked like he was going to quit. I know you hooked him up with the job, but you

believe me, right? I have the newsletter here,” he said after I wasn’t saying anything. “As proof of what happened. So you’ll take my side if this thing heats up, right?”

Corporate would send us these newsletters every month, highlighting all of the accomplishments and endeavors other branches up north had made. None of our auto parts stores in the Rio Grande Valley ever made it in there, either because corporate was never willing to send down a photographer or we really never accomplished much. So we pretended we were in there by searching for look-alikes. Someone in our store would find a fat guy with a goatee, write in BEN by the picture and an arrow pointing to him. We’d look for cross-eyed black guys and say it was V-Lo from the commercial department. A pimply teenager standing in the background of a group snapshot and it was Spider Man from stocking. A salesman from our neighboring branch in Mission made it to an issue once, and we still thought he resembled our Shoe Guy, who had never sold a part in his life.

We kept the ones that came the closest, cut them, and pinned them on the bulletin board in our hub office, hoping to find great ones in the following month’s issue. Cool Whip found one of a fat guy in a Santa suit that looked like Ben and accepted his initiation as one of the clan by writing in Ben’s name with a black marker. In retaliation, Ben found a buck-toothed redneck from a Missouri store and tagged COOL WHIP by it. By the end of the day, Cool Whip had called him a motherfucker for it.

“Ben, I haven’t even heard Randy’s side of the story.” I walked over to the printer spitting out orders to have ready to deliver the next day, refusing to let the last twenty minutes of the day go by in Ben’s gossip.

“Cool Whip,” he said. “That’s his nickname.”

“Damn it. You really care about that now?”

“How come no one ever gave me a nickname? Everyone has one except me.”

The hub office door always opened with a bang that echoed all over the warehouse. Dust rained in a few places and the garage door chains of the loading dock slapped against the concrete wall. We usually took this as a sign that Ben’s break was actually over and he was working again.

I ran into my cousin, Bern Berns, as he came in from driving the Weslaco-Elsa route. Since childhood, his mother (my mother’s sister) always wanted us to be in the same place. If he’d lose an eye, I had to get mine removed. We had to be into the same sports, take the same classes. But he never made it to the advanced ones in high school.

He adjusted his black cap with the green lettering CARLO for the hundredth time. He wanted to let his hair grow, not because of a religious promise, but because he wanted it long enough to be able to tie a tight samurai tail to complement his sword collection. The only way they would let him have long hair at the auto parts store was if he concealed it under a cap.

“Were you there when Ben and Randy got into an argument?”

“Ben and Cool Whip?” he asked, nodding his head.

“What happened? Whose fault was it?”

“Well, if you ask me, Ben was in the office when Randy. But Randy was eating lunch. Those soup things you put, heat microwave. And then, *Ben*, grabbed the newsletter to make fun people, and Cool Whip said he was a fat.”

I could never hold a serious conversation with Bern Berns. He always went on like that: stuttering, mumbling, and refusing to make sense. If he were ever cast in a movie, his only lines on the script would be “[inaudible dialogue].” But it always amazed me how multi-tasked he could be. We shared an apartment once, and he could be on the phone with a friend, while chatting with another one on the computer, sharpening his swords, listening to Japanese music as inaudible as his speech impediments, and still be able to tell me—while struggling to announce half of the things—everything that happened in the anime episode playing on the television behind him.

But when I’d ask him where the cordless phone for the hub office was, he’d space out and say, “It’s on the—”

“Where, Berns?”

“Oh, it’s on top of the—” Even when he wasn’t focusing on anything else.

“So, whose fault was it? Randy’s or Ben’s?” I asked him again.

“Bendy’s,” he said.

Cool Whip refused to leave a two-week notice and took the newsletter as proof of how stupid we all were. I’d like to think he just didn’t want anyone else to see it, even though they usually sent a copy for each employee. He had told the manager he couldn’t function anymore in a place filled with “non-intellectual low-lives.” By the time we all heard his reason for leaving, the bucktoothed redneck on all the newsletters had COOL WHIP on him. I heard he went back to cutting pictures at a portrait studio up the street in McAllen, masturbating to the ones of nude girls.

The rest of the guys drowned Ben in questions. Red, Güero, Juanillo, all the guys from the distribution center, gathered around Ben, wanting to find out more about Genie. Before the transfer became an idea (or, in Ben's case, a fantasy), he had been spreading rumors—as was his custom—that she had been blowing her manager for an easier time at work: better hours, better pay, and some other shit. The channels were never an issue since, according to Ben, the district manager had given her a taste, too. Why she'd leave a store with all those perks was beyond me. It literally paid to have an attraction to men in this company. With this background knowledge, the interviews with Ben were limited to questions about her looks. Lou, one of our drivers, walked in the room to catch the conversation.

“Yeah, they're pretty big,” Ben said. The workers in the office grew excited as if the third lotto number matched, too. Ben enjoyed every second of it; I bet he even thought he was doing us all a favor by getting a female onboard. Anything to lay off the very fat jokes, though. It looked like he'd enjoy the talk of someone else's tits for a change.

“No, she's really fuckable,” Ben said about Genie. “I mean, by how she looks. She looks like anyone would want to fuck her. I don't know how fuck-able she is, though. At least when it comes to you guys.” He tried opening a round of laughter by giving everyone an “I'm kidding” smirk. It worked for the most part. I sat in the back corner of the office, eating/drinking another cup of Ramen and thinking Ben would be the last guy she'd want to fuck in the entire warehouse. Meanwhile, the orders came out of the printer behind Ben's ass, oblivious to their urgency to be sorted and delivered to other branches.

“She’s got a kid, though.” A couple of the guys got discouraged—no jackpot, after all—but most of them didn’t care. “Yeah, she’s got a baby girl, a couple of years old.” A lot of their faces did seem as if the conversation was no longer interesting, though. Lou smiled.

“Oh, three-something,” he shouted, punching the guy in front of him on the shoulder. Lou didn’t speak English, which isn’t much of a requirement to work in the Rio Grande Valley anyway. Everyone and their dogs speak Spanish. But he knew, as much as we did, what he implied by saying that. It’s what he always said instead of correctly saying *threesome*. “Three-something” was his signature line. When he’d walk into the store in the mornings, the workers would greet him with “three-something” instead of the usual whatever-the-hell-they-said.

Lou was Ben’s favorite employee, got all the perks Genie got in Pharr without having to blow or fuck or be fucked by Ben (as far as any of us knew). He was even always out of work by 3:00. They worked at Pizza Hut together when Ben held two jobs to support his wife and sons, all of which were named after Bible characters ending with *-iah*. Ben quit flipping pies when he got the undeserved promotion and raise. Lou stuck around for a while.

Ben made me teach Lou the Weslaco-Elsa route when he first started, which had been my route until Ben made me stick around the warehouse and do all his work for him. Lou slept for most of the route. The times he was awake, he’d tell me about how much he needed to have two jobs and how he liked delivering pizza to hotel rooms because the girls would ask him if he wanted a tip or to flash their tits.

“Which one would you say?” I asked him.

“Well, the tits, of course.”

He told me about the prostitutes on 17th Street in McAllen and about a motel in Pharr that charged by the hour, like a lot of the hookers did. Said he’d even pick up guys sometimes, too. “With a condom, nothing happens,” he said. It sounded like a slogan when he said it in Spanish: *Con condón, no se hace nada*. I even pictured it at the end of a TV commercial. I ran into him and his wife at Target a couple of times. I didn’t know if she was a bitch at home, but her looks would give me no reason to cheat on her.

Which is probably why I was the only one that didn’t laugh in the office when he suggested a three-something with Genie and her baby girl. Everyone else liked the idea, even high-fived it.

“Lou’s leaving early,” Ben said, turning to me, “so I need you to teach her the Weslaco route.” Everyone screamed in unison as if something was going to happen between the female and me in the shitty Ford Rangers they made us drive.

Omar, one of the workers from the distribution center next to the hub office, walked out of his department, zipping up his pants after probably taking another piss back there. He had already been written up twice for that. He walked in the hub office and asked, “So how big are her tits?”

I learned to appreciate every opportunity I got to drive at work ever since Ben took the routes away from me. He gave my route to Lou, and my duties after that consisted of sorting out the parts other branches ordered and getting them ready to be

shipped out on the routes. Ben held on to the cordless phone to give the impression he was running the department. A worker from another branch would call him to double-check on a part, and he'd then hand the phone to me so I could go into the warehouse to check for him.

I drove on Saturdays (since Lou always had weekends off), when I was training someone on a route, or when a new store was on the verge of opening and I had to re-map a route. Thanks to Cool Whip, I discovered the joys of audio books and illegally downloading them and putting them into an iPod. When I drove the long routes with endless tree lands and crop fields, I felt like I was getting paid to escape from work. The week before Cool Whip quit, he asked me what book I was listening to.

"I found *Deception Point* online," I said, "so I'm checking that out right now."

"*Defecation Point*?" he asked. "Wow. You're actually a step up from Dr. Seuss."

"You have buckteeth."

I didn't care if he thought it was stupid of me to be listening to Dan Brown while he listened to *Lolita*. I wasn't very good at locating MP3 books. Cool Whip swore he had found a version actually read by Nabokov. I listened to *Fight Club* right before Dan Brown, and I pictured Brad Pitt, Norton, and that chick from the movie as I listened. You can't fucking escape with James Joyce working at this auto parts store. What I listened to might be shit, but it didn't stink as much as listening to Ben at work.

"I wish I could drive her and show her the route," Ben told me, "but I want it to be you, Big Show. You deserve this. You've earned it, man." I didn't care to argue his logic. Anything to get out of there.

I waited for her by the truck, double-checking to see that all the part numbers matched since Ben was known to make mistakes and blaming me for them. She climbed down from the loading dock like the rest of the guys do instead of taking the stairs. Ben said something about me not being a gentleman for not helping her down and opening the passenger door for her.

“Don’t worry,” she said when she climbed in. “You don’t have to do any of that shit for me. I expect to be treated the same as everyone else.”

“That’s admirable,” I said.

“Is that really your name?” she asked, looking at the embroidery of my uniform. “Or is it just something you go by?”

“No, it’s my name. Just like the restaurant. Fortunately, the uniforms get ordered before Ben has a chance to christen us with a nickname.” I started showing her how to fill out the clipboard we all carried around for when we picked up outgoing parts from other branches. “We start off by taking 83 to the Donna store, then Weslaco and Mercedes. From there, we take some back roads to get to Elsa. We come back south on 107 towards Edinburg, and come back to McAllen. Simple?”

“We’ll see,” she said.

I settled for a mix radio station. I thought it would be inappropriate to finish listening to the novel in her company, or worse, play my song collection—hundreds of Ramones, Guns n’ Roses, and Aerosmith songs compiled between a few 80’s pop songs that seem out of place. It was a canvas I wasn’t ready to be painted on. Not by her.

On the way to Weslaco, she asked me if Ben was a good boss.

“Do you want the truth or do you want me to tell you what you probably want to hear since you just got transferred here?”

“Shit,” she said. “The truth.”

“It’s better if you just pretend he doesn’t exist. One way or another, the day’s job needs to get done. Ben’s not going to do anything to make it easier for anyone, so the best thing I do is pretend my job is already tough and I just have to finish it so I can go home at five. The sad thing is that Ben usually means well. Everything he says and does he thinks it’s trying to help someone else. It never does, though.”

She kept talking about how they would treat her in the Pharr branch, without mentioning the blowjobs. I kept looking at how half of her last name disappeared into the middle of her breasts. They really were as big as Ben had described them the previous day. On the outside of her left breast, RES was displayed in white, while in the valley was the first half of her last name, CASA. Spanish for *house*. I wondered if anyone else had made that connection about that place of her body.

“Do you actually like this music?” she asked.

“No, not really,” I said. “I don’t know what kind of music you listen to, so I thought I’d just play a variety station. I listen to mostly rock. Well, everything. I’m universal. But mostly rock.”

“Then play the rock station, man.” She tuned to it herself; a Velvet Revolver ballad was playing. “Oh, I love this band. Did you get to catch them when they came down to Hidalgo last October?”

“Front row.”

“My boyfriend is a crew member for the rock station so he was able to get us backstage passes for the show. They give them to all the workers there. At the concert, we got to meet and hang out with Slash and the rest of the guys. It was a real blast.”

“Oh, you have a boyfriend?” I asked, not really knowing why.

“Well, he’s my ex-boyfriend. He’s my daughter’s father. We don’t really see each other anymore.”

I introduced her to the guys in Mercedes before showing her where we left the parts and where those workers left the outgoing ones. Mingo, one of their counter guys, called me back after she walked out and asked if they were going to be sending her on the route from now on.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think Ben just wants her to know how all of them work, just in case.”

“Well, tell him to send her on this one from now on,” their manager said.

Everyone else loved the idea and cheered.

She mostly sang on the back roads to Elsa. These were always the most peaceful for me. Thirty minutes of nothingness and usually silence. She sang along to “Sex Type Thing” before she started talking about sex.

“I don’t think, personally, that there’s anything wrong with having casual, promiscuous sex,” she said. “I enjoy having it as much as I expect other people might, too.”

“No, you’re right.” I found myself agreeing with everything she said, though mostly I wondered why the hell she was telling me all that.

“I like going to clubs to meet guys and have one-night stands,” she said, “as long as we’re both safe.”

“Nothing happens with a condom,” I said. I thought of the one I had in my wallet, thinking only losers carried them in their wallets.

“That’s right,” she said. “That’s totally right. And another thing...”

I took the short cut road I’d usually take to avoid passing through La Villa at thirty miles per hour. Hardly any traffic ever passed there. There were cornfields on each side of the road. I’d usually stop the truck there to have lunch when Ben would take that hour away from me so he could leave home early. I was always forced to mess with Texas there to avoid getting fired for having food in the truck. The managers would write you up even if the truck *smelled* like food.

It was very desolate back there. I could’ve stopped the truck. For some reason, I knew that if I asked her if she wanted to have casual, promiscuous sex, she would’ve said yes. Hell, we had time to kill. The route was running with perfect timing. No one would see. No one would know. And she’d say yes. She just seemed like that kind of person.

“How about you?” she said. “Do you enjoy casual, promiscuous sex?”

“I’m married,” I said.

I finished preparing the routes at seven-thirty in the morning. The sun wasn’t even fully out yet, and already the warehouse was cooking. Ben arrived while I took a break and waited for more orders to start coming in. Getting the routes ready is a two-man job. Ben was late as usual.

“Where are the rest of the orders?” he asked, as if he really didn’t think I could sort all of them out on my own. I gestured that they were ready to go. “I’m sorry I’m late, man. You’re lucky you don’t have any kids.” He had the fifth one on the way; the biblical *-iah*’s were running out. “I had to go drop them off at three different schools. My wife couldn’t do it because I needed the van today. You’re just lucky that you don’t got kids.” He sat down on the chair in the office to catch his breath. The steel legs were beginning to bend outwards. “Did you hear about Genie?” he asked.

I hadn’t seen much of Genie since I showed her the route the previous week. The times I would see her, she was with Ben. He always tried to do everything for her. “Anything you need,” he’d say. “The people here in the warehouse tend to give crap—I’m sorry—tend to act inappropriate with each other. If you see that anyone’s being inappropriate with you, just tell me who and I’ll report him.” He’d go the extra foot for her, readied her route before the rest, loaded up the parts for her. I don’t know if he expected a blowjob out of it or something. The guys from the distribution center would stand facing her back every time she and Ben spoke. Güero would make the most amazing mime interpretation of a blowjob. He’d even make his Adam’s apple move up and down. Then Red would mime out the fact that it was Ben and do the same thing using the thumb and index finger.

“Did she quit, too?” I asked.

“No. Guess what she did. She moved in with Juanillo, the fucking bitch, man.”

I didn’t find *this* rumor hard to believe. A few months before, Juanillo—Red and Güero’s coworker from the distribution center—left his wife and child for a girl half his

age employed at the smaller branch up the street. He didn't have a problem disclosing this to the rest of the warehouse. If anything, he felt proud that he could bag himself someone that young. He'd talk about her all the time, even if we weren't interested. The girl was crazy about him, too. She would get out of her uniform into something skimpy and bring Juanillo food. It pissed the shit out of Ben. They moved in together for months, until they had an argument over something and Juanillo went back to his wife. And she took him back.

Juanillo was the guy who waited until the beginning of every year, when we got new calendars from corporate, and was the first guy to write his name, J-U-A-N-I-L-L-O, along the entire week of mid-March where spring break usually landed. Everyone else tried to get Christmas week, or Thanksgiving, or New Year's. Juanillo always wanted spring break. He'd go to South Padre by himself, take a shitload of pictures with naked girls, and show them off to everyone at work.

I usually doubted or dismissed all of Ben's rumors, but I actually accepted the possibility of this one. "Shit," was all I said. Ben's eyes lit up, probably upon realizing that I might believe him, or surprised I wasn't questioning it, asking who the source was. He picked up the phone and dialed the store in Elsa to tell one of the workers there about the romance.

"You're going to take Genie's route today," he said to me after he hung up. "If she wants to fucking spend time with Juanillo, then I'm going to keep her here with me all day. So, make sure you leave your cell phone in your car, and you can get the truck ready if you want."

I drove Genie's route for the rest of the week. I offered to switch with her a couple of times so she could take a break, but Ben refused to let her go. "I don't want to separate her from her little sweetheart," he would tell me when I'd ask. He would tell her, "You need to learn where all the parts are in the warehouse this week."

I listened to an abridged version of *Desperation* that week, by Stephen King and actually read by Kathy Bates. That Wednesday, Ben decided to give me my lunch hour. "I'm not going to blow you," I told him. He laughed, but didn't get it. I got back from eating within fifteen minutes, realizing that I didn't really need the full hour after all. I walked back into the office to help out with the orders when Ben snatched them out of my hand.

"No," he said and handed them to Genie.

Plato joined me at the loading dock stairs as I waited for the other thirty minutes to pass. "Do you know what 'Weslaco' stands for?" he asked. "It stands for West Louisiana Company. Wes-la-co."

"Is that a fact?"

"It's what they tell me," he said.

"Did you know Genie and Juanillo are seeing each other?"

He stared at me for a moment, looking slightly disappointed. I would be, too.

"Is that a fact?" he asked.

I had told a couple of other people in conversation that week, too, and some of them had given me that same look. I thought they would've been pleased to hear the gossip. I thought it was hilarious before I started finding it sad.

Ben called me back into the office to tell me he wouldn't be showing up on Saturday. "You have to run the hub because you're the only other person that knows how to run this department."

"I'm the *only* person that knows how to run this department."

He laughed again, still not getting it.

"Don't let Genie go out on a route," he said. "You make her sort out parts and keep her in the warehouse with you. If she goes out on a route, I'll write you up for insubordination."

"How old are you, Ben?" I asked.

"Why?"

I gave Genie a choice that Saturday. She could either go on a route or stay behind. Saturdays weren't busy days, anyway. She chose to stay.

"Today's my last day," she said when there were about twenty minutes left for her to leave. "I'm not going to be working in this company anymore."

"That's probably a good idea," I said.

"My ex-boyfriend hooked me up with a job at the radio station. I think it's going to be okay. I don't know how you've made it so long working for that fucking idiot. How the hell do you put up with that *thing*?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've seen almost every side of Ben, and he really has a lot of sides. I guess you just get used to it with time. Some of the other guys have been here ten years. I can't picture myself working here for that long. I'd hang myself the moment I realized it."

“And he’s so manipulative,” she said. “All last week, ‘Oh, I’ll do this for you, Genie. No, Genie, let me get that for you.’ And this week? Fuck. You know what I did just to fuck with his head?”

“What?”

“I got Juanillo to play a prank on him with me. We told a few people that were seeing each other, just to see how fucking jealous Ben would get or how many people he’d tell. Son of a bitch ended up telling everyone. And don’t even get me started on how he chose to act out on his jealousy. It was fucking hilarious.”

“Yes, it was pretty funny,” I said.

“You knew about it, right?”

“Yes,” I lied. “I think Plato told me. I went along with it.”

“I’m going to take off already,” she said. “Is that all right?”

“Sure. Day’s practically over anyway.”

“Well, it was great knowing you. I hope you don’t stay here forever. You’re too smart for a place like this.” She raised her fist and finished with, “Death to Ben.”

The phone rang immediately after she took off.

“O’Reilly Auto Parts,” I said. “This is Shoney. How may I help you?”

“Hey, Shoney. Mike from Weslaco.” Wes-la-co, I thought. “Did that part I just ordered make it to the route?”

“Sorry, Mike,” I said. “The route had taken off five minutes before you ordered it.”

“Fuck,” he said and hung up the phone.

CHAPTER VIII

AÚN NOS MUEVE

—¿Estás seguro? —le pregunto.

El señor de mediana edad en la esquina del espejo retrovisor me mira con sus ojos verde oscuros sin sentimiento. Entre el humo escapándose de mi boca y nariz puedo ver las primeras arrugas apareciendo en su frente mientras que las arenas del tiempo en su vida llegan a la mitad. El hombre en el espejo pasa su mano por su cabello, moviéndolo a su derecha (mi izquierda); su color, una mezcla de marrón y gris en una paleta blanca.

—¿Qué si me averiguan? No sé si pueda seguir viviendo—. Respiro más pesado que lo normal, y cuando trago saliva, siento como si el almuerzo quiere regresar. Sudo de nervios y nada me puede calmar.

—Cálmate, Éber —me dice. —No pretendas que nunca lo has hecho. Sabes de lo que estoy hablando. Sabes por que estás aquí, estacionado afuera de la funeraria, considerando si entras o no para gozar de la pena y tristeza de otra gente. La semana pasada fue un soldado joven; ¿quién será ahora? Algunos lo llaman una enfermedad, una adicción, un fetiche, pero tú sabes que no es nada de eso. Es simplemente... pues simplemente tu cosa.

—La gente no sabe nada —digo. Le doy una chupada larga al cigarrillo, mirando el tabaco en la punta volverse color naranja mientras que le saco todo el cáncer. Digo que prefiero ignorar a los ignorantes. Fijo la mirada hacia el periódico en el lado del pasajero. El artículo en el centro de los obituarios, con un círculo rojo dibujado alrededor, tiene foto de una mujer. “Natalia Pérez: 12 de Marzo del 1934 – 27 de Septiembre del 1970.” Se había colgado en el sótano de su casa.

—Natalia —digo antes de un suspiro largo que sale con más humo; me deshago del cigarrillo medio-fumado, tirándolo por la ventana. —Treinta y seis años. ¿Qué la habrá empujado a hacerlo?

—El esposo rico la ha de haber dejado sola en la cama —dijo el hombre. —¿Y quien la puede culpar? Se iba de la casa, buscando mejores mujeres, mejores amores.

—¿Por qué no lo dejó?

—Abre los ojos, Éber. El hecho es que no lo dejó. Se mató. La vida no es una serie de ilusiones.

—No lo creo —le digo. —Nuestra base de existencia está hecha de ilusiones. El tiempo es una serie de riesgos que convierten el futuro al presente y nos mueve, puede ser para delante o para atrás, pero aún nos mueve.

Me bajo del Ford Fairlane rojo y siento la brisa caliente del otoño enrojecer mi cara mientras que hace su transición rápida de aire acondicionado al comal llamado el sur de Texas. Conozco todo adentro y afuera de la Funeraria Darrow como sólo un niño puede conocer su cuarto, de el póster de Led Zeppelin a los Playboys escondidos abajo del colchón. La funeraria de un piso está en la mera punta del lado oeste de Albric como

si fuera la última parada en la salida. Irónicamente, la clínica pediátrica está totalmente en el lado contrario. Como una metáfora de ciclo solar y vida.

La funeraria tiene una vidriera circular representando a Jesús con el cáliz en la mano sobre la puerta principal, una hostia voladora en frente de él tiene rayos de luz saliendo de ella como si es la respuesta de todos mis problemas. Un grupo de gente rodea el porche, sentados en silencio en bancas verdes hechas de metal fino. Pocos lloran quedito, otros sólo sueltan una que otra lagrima, y el resto toman las manos de los dolientes y fijan las miradas vacías y sin expresión como si estuvieran atorados en una ensoñación más agradable que la realidad.

La vidriera hace mi entrada casi celestial. A las seis de la tarde, los rayos del sol se proyectan directamente a mí como una luz de escena, como si estuviera apunto de actuar, como si la gente me espera. Mi audiencia me mira con tal conocimiento y compasión en sus ojos que empiezo a preguntarme si ellos también son asiduos de funerarias.

El velorio ya está para terminar cuando entro al cuarto y me siento atrás. El sonido fuerte de la puerta causa que todos me miren con ojos furiosos, casi como deseando que yo fuera el muerto. Un señor viejo y calvo en la primera banca me voltea a ver cada ratito durante el final del servicio y le susurra algo a una mujer a su lado, probablemente su esposa. Luego me voltea a ver otra vez, con lagrimas de rabia o de tristeza en los ojos. Supongo que es el padre de la difunta.

Le ofrezco una sonrisa, pero eso sólo empeora las cosas. A lo mejor me hubiera parado el dedo si no hubiera una cruz de madera con la escultura de un moribundo Jesús

clavado a ella en el otro lado del sitio. No sabía que se enojaría tanto por solo una interrupción breve.

Después del servicio, trato de fijar la mirada hacia la ventana para evitar todas las caras que me miran con odio. Unas casi me escupen mientras que salen del cuarto y otras me tocan el hombro, no sé por que. Probablemente para señalar que no hay resentimientos. El quinto contacto con mi hombro lleva forma del señor agarrándolo fuerte y mirándome a los ojos.

—Espero que sufras por esto —me dice con lagrimas en la cara. —Era mi única hija y crees tú que puedes entrar aquí y... — Hace un puño con su mano derecha y la alista para pegarme cuando dos señores jóvenes lo agarran de los lados y lo arrastran para afuera. Mientras que se lo llevan sigue gritando, —Muérete tú. Muérete tú, hijo de puta.

Pobre; vuelto loco por la muerte de su propia hija. ¿Qué tiene ella tan especial? Cuando no queda nadie, camino hacia el ataúd para averiguarlo. Natalia no parece tener treinta y seis años, si no más como alguien que acaba de entrar al colegio. No está vestida en ropa de recién difunta; éste ha de haber sido su traje informal favorito. Nunca había visto que enterraran a alguien con tenis de correr y pantalones azules. Su blusa roja de manga corta se le ve apretada contra su piel blanca. Sus manos se abrazan sobre su panza como si son la única parte de ella que no se dejan ir, y sus uñas, cubiertas del mismo color que cubriría su ataúd en la mañana.

Su pelo largo es color fuego como las pecas preciosas que decoran sus brazos. Hubiera dado mi vida en ese momento por sólo poder ver a Natalia sonreír en vez de esa nada durmiente. Sus labios pequeños están pintados color rosa, no el fuerte rojo dinámico

que yo anticipaba. Un rubor claro anima su mejilla pálida como si en ese mismo momento, San Pedro le estaba contando a su alma los pecados más vergonzosos que había cometido en su juventud, tomando en cuenta que se había ido al cielo.

Bajo la mirada hacia su bajo vientre y no puedo evitar de preguntarme si sus pelos de ahí son del mismo color que las llamas vivas escapándose de su cabeza. Mi corazón late aceleradamente, enviando lo que parece galones de sangre a todas las partes de mi cuerpo. Examino el cuarto para estar seguro que no hay alguien más, que nadie más se me quedara viendo. Sólo unas tres personas quedan en el vestíbulo, hablando con si mismas, pero no viéndome a mí.

—¿Me quieres dar un beso? —En el punto más alto de mi temor, la mujer muerta abre sus ojos verdes y sonrío después de hablar, frunciendo sus labios y luego riéndose como una niña de siete años. —Creo que sí quieres. Lo puedo ver en tus ojos, en la manera en que me miras, Éber.

—¿Cómo sabes mi nombre? —le pregunto, mirando alrededor una vez más. Los demás ni oyen. —¿Qué carajos es esto? ¿No debes de estar muerta?

—Sí estoy muerta, tonto. Por eso sé tu nombre. Ándale, ven y bésame.

Camino hacia el baño lo más rápido y discretamente posible, pasando por las últimas tres personas en la funeraria que ya están para irse, y le doy gracias a Dios que tienen los baños privados con cerradura. Cavilo en círculos, mirando hacia el suelo.

—Cálmate, Éber —susurro a mí mismo. —Cálmate con una chingada —.

Considero irme en ese momento y dejar a todo, pero lo pienso de nuevo y saco un cigarrillo de la bolsa. Lo enciendo y soplo una nube de humo hacia la señal que dice

GRACIAS POR NO FUMAR. Apoyo las manos sobre el fregadero, el cigarrillo en mi izquierda, y miro hacia el espejo. Un señor sufriendo en terror me regresa la mirada.

—¿Qué está pasando? —le pregunto. —Nunca se han despertado antes. Nunca me han hablado. Por eso me gustan. Porque no hablan. Porque no me chingan con que nunca estoy con ellas, que sólo las quiero para una cosa. Porque no pueden; porque están muertas.

—Tranquilo, Éber —me dice. —Sólo está en tu mente; no creas lo que ves. Si se te hace mucho, ¿por qué mejor no te vas?

—No. No voy a hacer eso —. Saco la caja pequeña de cigarrillos de mi bolsa y empiezo a contarlos. Quedan diez y tengo intención de no salir hasta acabármelos. Uno por uno los fumo en silencio; los únicos ruidos escapándose son los respiros de humo y el tic-tac de mi reloj. Fijo la mirada hacia la puerta, pensando en nada y en nadie. Ni en mí. Como si yo también estoy atrapado en una ensoñación más agradable que esta horrible realidad.

Cuando abro la puerta de nuevo, no queda nadie en la funeraria. Las puertas principales, atrancadas; la única luz es la que ilumina sobre Natalia, en el cuarto donde su cuerpo duerme eternamente. Realmente es hermosa, como una Bella Durmiente momentos antes de que su príncipe le de su beso. Pero cuando abro su boca con cuidado, y busco su lengua muerta con la mía, sé que los ojos de Natalia, de cualquier color que eran cuando estaba viva, no se abrirán, por lo menos no en la realidad.

No sé por cuanto tiempo la beso, pero nunca había sentido por nadie lo que siento por ella. Siento como si estuviera besando a mi primer amor de nuevo, como si floto en el

aire cuando paso mis manos sobre su piel blanca, sobre su pecho. El tiempo se para cuando beso a Natalia y deja de movernos. Cuando me hago para atrás, el tiempo sigue y sus ojos se abren de nuevo.

—¿Qué haces, Éber? —me pregunta. Al principio, me sorprende, pero luego me doy cuenta que sólo es otra alucinación. Esa vez, el color de sus ojos se han cambiado de verde oscuro a intenso azul. Me ve a mí y luego a sus pantalones, pidiéndome con los ojos que le quite la ropa. Me quito la mía primero antes de quitarle la de ella, ignorando la rajada gruesa de cirugía entre sus dos pechos.

Subo al ataúd con ella y cierro el cofre mientras que me acuesto sobre su cuerpo frío. En la oscuridad, la beso más. Beso sus labios, su cuello, todas las partes de su cuerpo. ¿Por qué no podemos estar juntos? Es sólo un mundo que nos separa, el mundo entre la vida y la muerte, y aún así no dejo de amarla, a Natalia. Su pelo bello no dejará de vivir; puede entrar el siguiente siglo y aún me quemaría las manos al tocarlo.

—Te amo, Éber —me dice. —Sólo te pido que me ames. No te guardo rencor por nada, pero por Dios, sólo ámame.

Dejo de besarla y empiezo a llorar. La recuerdo. Empiezo a entenderlo todo, las miradas de la gente en la funeraria de familiaridad y compasión, las manos en mi hombro, el señor que me quería matar. —Siempre te he amado, Natalia —le digo y la beso otra vez. No dejo de llorar, pero no dejo de besarla tampoco. Sigo perdido en ella, pidiéndole perdón por esta enfermedad, esta adicción que resultó en su suicidio. Le pido perdón a mi esposa por quererla más muerta que cuando aún se movía, cuando aún me

podía decir, persona a persona, que me amaba, cuando mis deseos estaban plagados, sólo pensando en los muertos.

CHAPTER IX

WAKE

Macondo saw her first. She walked into his study sometime after midnight, like she always used to on Friday nights when Macondo worked late translating a book. She greeted Macondo like nothing, and then continued to the bookshelf on her right, browsing the Spanish book collection slowly as if she were in a bookstore. He remained speechless. She wore her favorite Angels cap—the one Macondo gave her the last time he took her to one of the games—the black dress she got on her birthday, and the jeans she dirtied every weekend. She pulled out *Death in the Forest* and set it on the desk right in front of him. She smiled briefly, as if everything were okay, and took a seat and swung her legs back and forth. Neither of them said anything. Macondo had been crying already, so he continued to do so. But she kept on smiling and swinging and making it hurt. And then she was gone. He didn't know if it was a hallucination or not, if it was the alcohol or the desire to see her again. He took another shot and put the Dávila book back in its shelf. He chose not to tell Rachel about it at first as he slipped into bed while she lay awake. As much hope as seeing his dead girl again had given him and finally having a chance to know why, the atheist side of him refused to allow him to register the unexpected contact. Besides, he couldn't do that to Rachel without being completely sure that their house was haunted by the ghost of their daughter. Rachel was the one that had found her a month

before, hanging in her bedroom with her desk chair probably lying flat on the floor. By the time Macondo had arrived from the school, after scrambling through the L.A. traffic, they had already taken Bonnie's body away. No. He couldn't tell Rachel just yet.

"Did you see it?" Rachel asked. She reached over to turn on the lamp on her side table. A book lay open face down on it turned to only the second or third page—one of the *Chicken Soup* books she was always reading. She turned over to look at Macondo, ghoulish black bags puffing up under her dark green eyes. For a second, he wondered if she had seen the ghost, too. If it had happened to her, just before it walked away into his study.

"Did I see what?" he asked. "What is *it*? There can be many things here in the house that can be *it*. So what is it that I should've seen?" He regretted his words almost instantly, but things had been like that between them for a while. *After* Bonnie hanged herself, not before. Their marital problems couldn't have been the reason behind it because there were none. The arguments started after the first week, when Macondo had decided not to show up to counsel students at the high school office anymore. They had stopped showing up anyway. No one wanted to see the guy with the daughter who committed suicide.

"The package, Mac," Rachel said. "A package arrived for you today. I left it in the dining room. I think it's from the school." She turned the other way and clicked the lamp off. He heard her sigh and then sniff. She started to cry. So he closed his eyes for a moment and tried to find sleep. They wanted to make sense out of the suicide since the moment they realized it had happened, but they couldn't find a logical reason for it. The

family functioned well, or at least it appeared to. Bonnie seemed happy all the time, from when she'd come downstairs to eat before school until she'd slip back into bed at night. Sweet. Beautiful. Didn't leave a suicide note behind. All A's in school. Macondo and Rachel even turned to her teachers for answers, but they all had none. The meetings with them had only brought more pain and nothing else. The people who knew they were atheists blamed it on that. Some atheists were just good at hiding it without even trying, while the rest preached for atheism as if it were an actual religion. They tried their best to be the ones that hid it. As Macondo lay awake next to his crying wife, he wondered how an atheist processes a ghost apparition. The book Bonnie's ghost had taken from the shelf remained moved, but it could've been a hallucination. It couldn't have been anything more. He'd hallucinated before in his life, so it wasn't an unfamiliar sensation for him. But what about those atheists that saw ghosts day after day? The children who were raised as atheists afraid of ghostly noises in the house. Do they all believe it's just some negative energy field manifesting itself in the form of another person? He felt a cold hand grab his ankle. He jumped in bed as if he were dreaming of falling and had just hit bottom. His chest began to cave in as he was trying to breathe but couldn't. Emotions and thoughts battled each other as he felt fear and used his logic to tell himself there was nothing to be afraid of. He wanted to see Bonnie standing there, reaching out to him, but there was nothing. The ankle still felt cold. Rachel shifted her body, but she didn't say anything. He walked downstairs to the sound of California crickets outside. It sounded like there was at least one inside, too. Moonlight illuminated half of the dining room and half of the package on the table. He took it to the kitchen to open it there, not turning on

any lights. It had some of his things from the office: the appointment book, some of the notes he took for the book he had been translating, his digital recorder. He took that first and pressed the PLAY button. The sound of his own voice played. “The student is confused about what classes to take next semester.” He stopped it after hearing footsteps coming down the stairs. They sounded like naked footsteps as they reached the bottom, like bare feet stepping and leaving imprints on the cold linoleum floor. Rachel, he thought. But it was Bonnie again, looking like the day she looked before it happened. Wearing one of the oversized t-shirts she wore to go to sleep. It had been her sleep uniform since she was six. She rubbed her right eye like she had just stepped out of a nightmare. When she stopped rubbing and pulled her hand away from her face, there was an empty hole where the eye should have been.

Bonnie asked why she couldn't go to sleep and then walked away again; Macondo didn't follow her. Instead, he stood there, digital recorder in hand, waiting for the sound of the footsteps to disappear as they walked up the stairs. He wished he had recorded that to have proof. Rachel screamed upstairs; Macondo knew she had seen Bonnie's ghost, too. He didn't run upstairs since it was just one quick scream and not continuous ones like at the funeral. He took his time, asking himself the entire time what an atheist does with something like that.

Rachel came home the next evening with different spirits. Macondo had been sitting in his study again, staring at a blank computer screen while constantly looking at the doorway to see if Bonnie's ghost would walk in again. Part of him wished it wouldn't. And though he felt a presence, he had convinced himself it was hopeless anticipation. He

thought about nothing but Bonnie the entire time Rachel was gone, how useless it all was to know the truth about her. He walked downstairs. Knowing why Bonnie came home from school a month ago, grabbed some rope from the garage, tied it around her neck, and kicked the chair under her feet, wasn't going to make the fact that it happened disappear. Whether it was an imagined, disturbing vision of the future she saw or plain fourteen-year-old curiosity, it didn't matter anymore. When he made it downstairs, Rachel was pulling out some small equipment from a plastic shopping bag. It all looked used, but still useful.

“What's all this?” he asked. She looked like a typical insane person while she fumbled through all the gadgets as if they were prescribed medications. She took a small black one first, about the size of a beginner's guitar pedal. It had a white fading RadioShack logo imprinted on the front over some numbers. She turned it on and a small beeping noise, like a charging camera flash, emitted off of it. She started walking around the entrance, holding the gadget with both of her hands and moving it around as if she were looking for buried treasure in the walls. “Rachel, what the hell is that?”

“It's an EMF detector,” Rachel said. “The guy at the store off Figueroa said it's a good tool to find cold spots. Since spirits use energy to manifest themselves, this thing finds places where a lot of energy's being used. I also bought a white noise generator from him. You set it next to your recorder and it'll act as a catalyst to catch some material. We won't have to ask people why they think Bonnie killed herself, Mac. Now we can ask Bonnie herself.” She proceeded into the dining room and then the kitchen. “This is where you saw her, right? She was standing right there, by the refrigerator?”

“That’s where I think I saw her,” Macondo said. “Rachel, you don’t believe in spirits, remember? *We* don’t believe in spirits. We saw and heard what looked like Bonnie because we wanted to see and hear Bonnie. I still do, but it’s impossible, Rachel. No amount of equipment’s going to change that or make us find her. We’ll see and hear what we want to, but that won’t mean it’s actually there.”

“I believe in what I can see,” she said, starting to get defensive. She got that way when she was scared. “And I saw her. What happened to you, Mac? You swore to me yesterday that you had seen her, too. You sounded so sure of it. Bonnie came to me, too. She stood right in front of our bed. Her left eye was missing.” Macondo wanted to correct her, but everything seemed insane.

“Listen to how crazy this sounds, Rachel. EMF detectors? Cold spots? None of this is possible. It’s stupid and it’s only going to make things worse. It’s not real.” He tried to imagine the possibility of being able to ask Bonnie’s ghost why Bonnie killed herself. He couldn’t. It would be like asking a serial killer why he chooses to kill. What would the ghost say? What would the ghost do? Make something in the house move by itself? No. It wouldn’t work, he thought. It was crazy. He chose not to follow Rachel upstairs after she said she should’ve started with Bonnie’s room anyway. He walked over to the shopping bag and started placing all of the gadgets in his own bag so he could get them out of their house. Besides the generator for white noise, there was also a thermal scanner and a camcorder. His digital recorder lay exposed inside Rachel’s purse. He grabbed that, too. Rachel kept on yelling upstairs as she walked around from room to room—something about having to know why and wishing Bonnie was still alive, so they

could ask her what was wrong before she died. Maybe they could've stopped it. Macondo heard a thump upstairs. It sounded like Rachel had dropped the detector. She ran back downstairs when the lights flickered for several seconds until they remained off. The entire house started shaking. They reached to hold each other. Macondo felt as if he were being mildly electrocuted. As they both fell to the floor, he heard the chandelier in the dining room crash down against the table they used to sit at every night before Bonnie died. Macondo's book collection rained from the second floor; one of them struck him on the face. He knew it must have been Dávila's *Death in the Forest*. He wanted it to be that one. But it immediately lost itself in the pile. The cabinet with their wedding china came crashing down, too, missing them both by luck. Small cracks began to appear in the walls of the house. Rachel started screaming and crying, yelling for Bonnie's forgiveness. Macondo didn't know why. When it all stopped, they looked at each other and she smiled. Rachel smiled for the first time in over a month; they kissed in the middle of all the mess of things. The lights came back on. Outside hundreds of car alarms rang simultaneously, but neither of them cared. Macondo pretended not to hear them.

“She's here,” Rachel said. “Mac, our little baby's here. I'll go find the detector.”

She walked up the stairs, stepping over broken picture frames. The only one that still hung on the wall was Bonnie's portrait, the 8th Grade graduation one they had taken right before she died. It was on the verge of falling. Macondo sat for a while, observing the destruction and trying to make sense of everything. He felt a sharp pain on his forehead, but he ignored it. He believed Bonnie was in the house. He knew it. He felt this was the moment he and Rachel had been waiting for, to ask Bonnie if she was okay and to ask her

why if they had never given her a reason to. He reached for his bag under a pile of books and pulled out his recorder and the white noise generator. Rachel came down the stairs with the detector.

“Let’s start in this room,” she said. She still smiled. She sat down next to Macondo as he began to set things up. She shivered. Macondo turned on the white noise generator and waited. He rewound the recorder, erasing all the useless data, and then pressed the RECORD button.

“Bonnie, are you there?” he asked, and they waited.

CHAPTER XI

BELLADONNA

César.

He explained things again, and Ángel still didn't believe him. On the other side of the narrow street, children gathered pebbles with their bare hands in preparation of a war game. César lit another Marlboro Light; it was the only thing he couldn't give up after dying and meeting God. He'd give up everything else, though: drinking, gambling, cheating on Carmen; he'd even start attending mass over at San José church. As they continued, Ángel pulled out another Carta Blanca from the styrofoam cooler he always carried around and offered it to him for the fourth time.

"Seriously," César said. For a second, he fought the urge to say, "stop fucking around" or any similar profanity to get his older brother to back off. But using bad words made the Lord angry, so he'd give up those, too. "I already told you that I'm not going to drink anymore. Why won't you believe that I've changed?"

"Because you didn't die, bro'," Ángel said. "I was there. Saw it with my own eyes. I almost believed it myself when I saw La Mosca pull out that knife, but the knife was a fake. I showed it to you; it was one of those toy knives they sell on the market on Fridays. Look." He grabbed César's extra, extra, extra large Chivas t-shirt from the

bottom and waved it at his face. “Don’t you think that if the knife had really gone through, there would be a hole or a tear there? Besides, it’d take more than a knife to the stomach to kill you, Muffin Top.”

“I’m telling you, it went in,” César said. “I felt the knife go in after La Mosca tackled me down. I felt the blood gushing out of my stomach, and then I died almost immediately. God saw me messing around with La Mosca’s woman at the bar and He struck me down for that. Now He’s given me a second chance. I won’t fail Him.”

“You’ve been cheating on Carmen since you married her three years ago.” Ángel pulled out the cap from the beer with his teeth and took a long sip before using the cold, brown bottle to wipe the sweat off his forehead. “Why would God choose today to strike you down?”

César thought back to the last time he cheated on Carmen. He usually snuck out of the house at night to go to the whorehouse only a few people in town knew about. A few days before, he couldn’t fight the urges and went during the lunch break at work. “Sorry, I’m late,” he told Ángel after coming back an hour after he was supposed to. He knew Ángel knew about him cheating on Carmen—and was a good guy for not being a snitch about it—but that time he felt he had gone a little too far. He tried to come up with an excuse bad enough to be believable: “Carmen was at home, and when I looked at her, shit, I just had to, man.”

“Okay,” Ángel said. “Well, while you were out with Carmen, she found a way to make the time to bring you lunch.” He handed César the disposable plate concealed under aluminum foil and left the office. César didn’t think about quitting the sinning then; he

stood there, food in hand, with the semi-guilty feeling one goes through when he's caught in a lie. That same night, he kissed Carmen and told her he was going off to play poker at Ángel's. He slept with the same girl, almost out of necessity, because he didn't want to anymore. He did the same thing the following night—would've done it during lunch again if Ángel wasn't still following him around. And then he would've done it in public with La Mosca's wife if he hadn't shown up to stop him. César convinced himself that he'd stop for sure. Because this time, it was different.

“No, Ángel,” he said, “this time it's different. God has intervened, and I'm going to tell Carmen the good news when we get home.”

“Why do I even bother with you,” Ángel said. “It's the same crap you pulled off last year when you saw the Jesus movie. You showed up to work saying you had changed and all—got pissed off when La Mosca got you from behind and started dry humping you at work. By the end of the *day*, you gave up being good and humped him right back. You don't last. I'll give you a full day this time. Hell, I'll give you two.”

César pulled on the screen door of his house and called out for Carmen as they both walked in. Ángel walked straight to the couch and sat down, stretching his legs and then pulling them back towards him. Carmen came out from the kitchen, drying her hands with a towel.

“What's wrong?” she asked. She looked over at Ángel, probably for some kind of answer. He stayed quiet, not smiling.

“Carmen, I have some very good news,” César said. “I met God today.”

Carmen.

A couple of kids cut her off running, bumping into her and almost making her drop the bags of fruits and vegetables and San José rice. They ran straight to the table where the vendors set up all the cheap, imitation toys under a blue canopy. A group of other kids played with cap guns by the tent where the women played *lotería*. Carmen had played once while César worked. She won with *el negrito*, five hundred pesos, and she never told anyone about it—not even Ángel. She didn't know why she chose not to; she always told him everything. But it felt nice being able to keep that from the world, even though most of it played *lotería* with her.

The market had been coming from Cerralvo every Friday morning as far as Carmen could remember. The vendors closed off an alley by the primary school—which explained the kid infestation—and set up several different tents. She walked from home every Friday to stock up on groceries. It wasn't that she didn't trust the little local stores owned by people she knew from town—and she knew they'd probably judge her for buying them from the market—it was the price. Always the price. She could make two hundred pesos worth of food last more than the entire week, and with César eating most of it. She managed that even while he spent most of the money he made at work on alcohol, cigarettes, and women.

That's why she couldn't believe it either when he showed up a week before promising to change for the better. It ruined everything. Had he been two years early with news like that, she would've given him a chance, but things had changed long before César had decided it was time for him to do so. All the night escapades where she'd follow him to that house he'd always go to. The times he'd punch her when he had too

much to drink. She had already gotten used to crushing sleeping pills and putting them in his beer so he'd skip the beatings. She'd leave the house to be with Ángel every time César snuck out to be with other women. Or sometimes Ángel would wait down the street at around midnight to see César leave the house. Then she'd let him in and have him in bed. It had been going on for so long that it was routine. She wanted to leave César, but what would the town say?

Carmen browsed the toy section at the market for a while, wondering what it would feel like to buy one of them for a kid of her own one day. She knew it was impossible, though. Not for sure; she had never gotten checked for that. Didn't have the money to go the doctor for useless things like that. She just knew that if it could happen, it would have happened already. With Ángel if not with César. The vendor lay out M-16's on the center of the table, the ones that lit up by the barrel and made siren noises instead of gunshots every time you pulled the trigger. A few blades were lined up next to them. She reached for one of them.

She turned it in her hand for a while, studying at the small, linear designs on the blue plastic handle. The other knives' handles were green, orange, and red. The blade itself was dark gray. She put the bags down and pushed the blade down with the palm of her other hand, listening for the thin spring inside the handle pop back when she'd take off her hand. She stabbed at her stomach several times and watched how the blade sank into the handle, making it look like she really was puncturing herself. She must've looked like an idiot to all the neighbors walking around—mostly because she cried as she stabbed.

“How much?” she asked the vendor. Only it came out strange due to her blocked nasal passage. The vendor turned his head and leaned in to get a better listen. She sniffed hard and wiped her tears with the back of her hand. “How much?” she said again, correctly that time.

The vendor thought about it for a while. “Fifteen pesos,” he said. “But, for the beautiful woman, I’ll leave it at ten. I also have them in pink if you want.”

Carmen shook her head. She pulled out a coin from her bag and handed it to the man. A kid ran around with one of the knives, chasing after a little girl like they do in the scary movies they sold on the other side of the market. The top half of his blade was colored red, probably with marker, to make the stabbing a little more realistic.

She looked at her toy knife again and asked herself how something like that could change a man forever. Ten fucking pesos, the kind of money she gave to Roel, the retarded homeless man, every Sunday after church so he could go buy himself a Coke. She stabbed at her stomach again. If she knew it was that easy, she would’ve toy-stabbed César a long time ago.

“What else can we do?” Ángel had asked the previous day when he went to see her for lunch. She realized then that lunch breaks would be the only chances she’d have of seeing him alone in the future. When he leaned to kiss her, she knew that he could probably smell César on her since he’d been coming for lunch, too. She waited for him to grimace, but he never did.

“I don’t know, Ángel,” she said. “I don’t think he’s going to change. Not this time.”

“He’s the same at work. Just doing his job, always smiling now because ‘God likes it when I smile.’ Yesterday he almost attacked La Mosca for fooling around with him. Pushed him down on the ground and told him God hated him for doing that. Mosca told him to cut the crap, reminded him that it was a toy knife he had stabbed him with. Said César did more than just dry humping during work hours. César just said things were different now.”

Carmen walked into the living room to cry, away from Ángel, though she knew he would follow her like a lost dog anyway. “He’s never going to change.” He sat down and put an arm around her, picked up her face by the chin with his gentle hand and started kissing her.

“We’ll think of something, Carmen,” he said and kissed her some more.

“Close the front door and lock it,” she said, and he did.

A man sold herbs at the end of the market, the farthest side from the school. Several old ladies always lined up to buy cleansing roots for their homes. The vendor there had several sculptures of the Santísima Muerte in different forms lined up in front of his table—trusting the kids enough not to run away with them or at least tumble them down and break them. Carmen crossed herself as she passed. She looked over at all the different potions the vendor had stored in small glass bottles, reaching for one that had a dark purple juice in it. On plain white paper was the lettering: BELLADONA.

“Deadly nightshade,” the vendor told her. “He’ll start seeing some weird stuff at first, but then you’ll make him lose his freaking mind.”

“How much?” she asked, getting it right the first time.

Ángel.

César answered his door naked, and before Ángel let that image destroy the way he saw him their whole lives, Carmen snuck up behind César and smashed a porcelain Saint Joseph on his head. Knocked him out immediately. She and Ángel stayed quiet for a while; he thought for a moment that a blood pool would start to form underneath César. He almost wished for it—but nothing. César had several cuts in different body areas, though. Fresh wounds, mostly around the arms where he could've taken a razor blade or some other sharp shit and done it himself. Ángel assumed that was the case because Carmen stood unmarked with the bottom part of the statuette where Joseph's feet should have been. She took calm breaths, like she had planned everything.

“Quick,” she said after closing the door, “help me take the body to the bedroom before someone sees.” She wore one of those traditional Mexican dresses. The authentic white ones with the pretty blue flower patterns you can only find in the south where the real culture explodes. Not the fake ones they sell at the market. Those tear easily. Ángel stopped for a moment and pictured her dress tearing. The thought made him wish Carmen's dress was fake.

“What do you mean ‘the body’?” he asked. “He's still breathing.” It looked like she purposefully moved away to grab his arms so he could get stuck with the feet and have César's dick flap around his face. She started without him, sliding César across the linoleum living room floor. When his body started to tremble with the lack of friction, it looked like he was going to get up. Carmen let him go, his head struck the floor, and he was out of it again.

She put her hands on her waist, starting to break a sexy sweat and asked, “Are you going to help me or not, Ángel?” He didn’t blame her for getting tired right away. There were many huge things about César, and not just the one thing Ángel wanted to avoid thinking about as he reached for the feet to help Carmen.

“Why do I have to get him by the legs and not the arms?” he asked. “You’re the one that’s used to looking at it. He’s your husband.”

“He’s your brother.” They passed by all the religious decorations Carmen had collected throughout the years. The painting of Jesus with an enflamed heart, the one with blue and red light coming out of his hands, the Last Supper in 3-D, and Catholic statuettes ranging from different saints to different versions of virgins. A baby Jesus lay bastardly on the coffee table next to a Mary and an empty spot where Joseph had been. She thought they made the house less haunted and more protected that way, César mentioned a couple of times. Said whenever she’d hear things in the house—voices and shit like that—she’d sit in the living room, surrounded by the entire Bible cast, and wait for them to go away.

“Exactly,” Ángel said. “If it were any stranger we were carrying around naked, who cares? Not like I’ll ever see him again. But it’s different when it’s your own brother. You should’ve warned me he was going to be naked, not to mention *here*, when I called. Are you even going to tell me why you knocked him out?”

He had assumed at first that Carmen meant to kill César, but he didn’t think she’d go that far. They had started to complain about not being able to see each other anymore ever since César turned into a saint fit to be sculpted and added to Carmen’s collection—

he'd be more like a Buddha, though. Wrong religion. Ángel tried to picture Jesus rubbing Buddha's belly and laughed softly.

"He's possessed, Ángel," she said.

"Possessed? What are you talking about?"

"He woke up today, and he just started shouting and cutting himself," she said. "It was like he was crazy. Like he lost his mind completely. Here. Help me put him on the bed." She counted to three and they both lifted him and then threw him down as if they were tossing him into a river. "Help me tie him up."

"Tie him up?" Ángel asked. "What are you tying him up for?"

"So he won't hurt himself. I've already called Father Martín to come. He's on his way from Agualeguas right now. He should know what to do." She cut a piece off the skirt of her dress, which was fake after all, and started tying his hand to the bedpost. She took another piece and tossed it at Ángel. "Get his feet."

With the corners of his eyes, he looked at Carmen's exposed legs, which were just a little lighter than her smooth, dark arms. She ripped out another piece of her dress and crawled over César's large body to tie the other hand. She smiled at Ángel as she tied the knots, which made him feel like they were doing something illegal. If César was really possessed, why would she be so calm and happy? It looked like it had been quite a struggle before knocking him down, and Carmen was tying him as if it were just another chore. She walked over to Ángel when she was done and put her arms around him.

"Isn't this a great thing?" she asked.

"It is?"

“Don’t you see, Ángel? It’s like God wants us to be together. He wants us to be happy. The problem solved itself.”

“You mean, the devil wants us to be happy. He’s possessed, not enlightened. Remember?”

“Don’t say that,” she said. “Don’t think like that.”

“I’m not,” Ángel said. “I just think it’s strange how he got possessed now that he’s all God this and God that.”

“Shut up and let’s go to the other room,” she said. They kissed in front of the unconscious and possessed César. Ángel started lifting the rest of her dress, rubbing her leg with the back part of his hand, when someone started knocking at the front door.

“Goddamn it,” Ángel said.

Carmen left the room to answer; he stayed with César. His eyes were open, probably had opened while Carmen and Ángel kissed. They looked straight at his, still unconscious but as if they could read his mind and look into his soul. He took off his uniform shirt and covered César’s mid-region with it before the priest walked in and saw him. He could hear him talking with Carmen in the next room. He sounded concerned.

“Ángel,” Father Martín said as he walked in the room, “how are you?” Ángel rarely talked to the priest, but every time the priest said his name, for some reason, it sounded like he meant an actual angel. The priest took out several things from a bag, which looked like one of those the doctors carried around when they used to visit people in their homes. He pulled out a crucifix, a bottle of holy water, and some other things Ángel couldn’t recognize. “How is he?”

“I don’t know,” Ángel said. “He just opened his eyes a little while ago.”

“Ángel, I need you to leave the room. You won’t want to see your brother like this. I think it’s right for only Carmen to be in here.”

Carmen walked in the room as he was leaving. She carried a glass of water, and he noticed her giving it to César while the priest walked over to close the door. He heard screaming for the next five minutes. No words or any kind of language. Just plain screaming. He looked at all the different saints in the living room, trying to see if he could recognize all of them. He realized he couldn’t name one and didn’t really care much for them. The only one he could’ve named lay in pieces on the other side of the room. Joseph, the father who wasn’t the father. Other than him, he also knew that the guy with short hair clutching the money bag and shitting his pants in the Last Supper was probably Judas.

“I’m Judas,” he said to himself and remembered César’s eyes looking at him.

After a short while, the screaming stopped. The entire house was silent. He could’ve taken the lightest step and they would’ve probably heard him in the bedroom. He heard the door open. Father Martín showed up with an empty look in his face.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t save him. But he’s with God now. You can rest assured that his soul is resting in peace.”

“Why?” Ángel asked. He felt like crying, but held the tears in. The priest stared. “César has been possessed by the devil his entire life. Just recently he started devoting himself to God. So I’m asking why did God let him be possessed now that he was good. He had his whole life.”

“It’s the devil’s work, Ángel,” the priest said. “The devil never took César before because César was a bad person. Why would the devil want to take bad people if it knows the bad people will eventually come to him? It’s the good people it wants. The followers of God. Those are the ones it wants to turn. Don’t you see?”

Ángel stayed quiet as the priest left the house. The first thing that came to his mind was Carmen. They could be together now, without César ever getting in the way. That’s how it was supposed to be anyway. How God really wanted it. He wasn’t so sure about her anymore, though. It wasn’t that he got a thrill with sneaking around behind his own brother’s back to be with her. He never did. It wasn’t that he didn’t love her either. He did love her. He knew that. He tried to make sense out of it in his head. He guessed that it was probably all the time they wasted trying to get César out of the picture completely, waiting for him to leave or for him to die. All that time was what made him realize that he didn’t really want Carmen anymore.

The second thing that came to his mind was what the priest said. How the devil only took the good souls. He didn’t want the same thing to happen to him, so he reached down to grab the baby Jesus on the coffee table and broke its head with the corner of the front door on his way out. He thought that maybe it was a good idea to leave town, to go work in the city. Why would the devil want to take him now?

APPENDIX A

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shoney Flores was born in Edinburg, Texas, raised in General Treviño, Nuevo León, México, and educated in Rio Grande City. He received his Bachelor of Arts in English—with a Spanish minor—at the University of Texas - Pan American in 2007. In May 2009, he received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing - Fiction.

While attending graduate school, Shoney became interested in literary translation. He has pursued that field by making contact with Mexican writers whose works appear in only Spanish for possible American publication. He writes both fiction and nonfiction in English and Spanish.

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