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Muros



Prose Contest Runner-Up

The ride home after Dr. Moreno's lecture was largely silent. When I moved to turn on the radio, Mando laid his hand on top of mine to stop me. He shook his head and continued to stare ahead at the dark highway that stretched before us. Since I couldn't have the radio on, I drummed my fingers on my thigh and closed my eyes. If he didn't wanna talk to me, I could entertain myself.

"Please stop doing that with your hands, Memo."

I huffed and folded my arms to keep from fidgeting any more than I already had been. It was really only irritating to me that Mando was getting to me so bad this time. Usually when he was acting like a baby, I could shrug him off and ignore how on-edge he would get. Riding out a tantrum usually wasn't shit to me, but this time I could feel the tension all over my body, and I couldn't stop moving or touching stuff in his little red Honda Civic with the tint on the windows.

"Chill the hell out in my car, Guillermo. It's distracting,

cabrón.”

“You want me to sit all still like I’m a statue and not move just so you can drive? Fuck you, okay? I’ll walk *si sigues siendo culero.*”

“*Cállate, wey.* You don’t mean that shit.”

“*Vete a la verga.*” I flipped the bird in his face, and he smacked my hand away. At least he was paying attention to me now.

Once we were quiet again, I took out my headphones and put them in, but Mando reached over and pulled one out of my ear. I rolled my eyes and stared at him until he glanced over at me again. He was smirking, but I wasn’t amused. Even though he was done with his little attitude, it didn’t mean all was well.

I cleared my throat and said, “We gotta talk. For real, Mando.”

He shrugged casually, but his eyebrows furrowed. “*Dime.*”

“My siblings... my mom... everything that’s happened in the last two weeks.” I paused and put my hand over my eyes so I could block out some of the images that popped up in my head when I thought of the raid. Julio opening the door and all those ICE agents in their black uniforms rushing in. Mari getting grabbed off the couch first. The baby screaming. My mom getting arrested in her nightgown. I wasn’t even there to help.

“It’s just that I gotta figure out what I’mma do next, and I just don’t think that stuff with us...” I trailed off and let the silence return to the car.

Mando didn’t really react. He stayed quiet so long that I had to move my hand to look over at him and see if he was still breathing even. “Armando, c’mon. Say something at least.”

“Something,” he muttered.

I left that conversation there and tried to think of ways to make the mood light again. I’d chosen a shitty time to discuss

our relationship, but you gotta rip Band-Aids off real quick so they don't hurt so long. Time was of the essence here.

"What did you think about the talk? You think Professor Diallo will be discussing it in class tomorrow? She loves it when we go to those things."

"You'd know what she discusses in class if you'd go," he answered me shortly. I'd forgotten that he was originally mad about me telling him right after the lecture we'd gone to that I was gonna have to drop out of school. It's not like the decision was easy, but it was obvious. I needed money. To think now that my dad wanted me to be a professor and my mom had sacrificed so much for me to afford school gave me a sharp pain in my chest, but I ignored it.

"Oye," I said with my jaw slightly clenching, "you know I got new responsibilities now that my mom is gone, okay? School is gonna still be there when Julio graduates in five years. 'Til then, I just gotta make money to support the kids and pay a *pollero*."

He shook his head at me. "A trafficker, Memo? You go to a fucking university, but you can't see why it's fucking nonsense to hire a *pollero* to bring your mother back across the border?" He paused and softened his voice before adding, "Or at least you *went* to a university."

I threw my hands up in the air and tried to readjust myself to get comfortable in his stupid-ass passenger seat that wasn't meant for a man as big as me.

"You don't know shit about the situation I'm in, Armando; your parents were born here. And your grandparents and your great-grandparents, for all I know. You been American since before my mom was even a twinkle in my *abuelito's* eye. We both are Mexican, but I'm first generation to this country and you can't ever know what that is."

"Well, I know it's affecting you, and I'm gonna be worried about that. I am your boyfriend. Or at least I was a few minutes ago. Why would you try to break up with me in the fucking car, *wey?*"

We pulled up to our apartment complex and Mando parked, but he made no move to get out. I couldn't stand to be trapped in the car and arguing a second longer. When I said we needed to talk, I didn't expect it to be so messy. The shit that mattered was clean-cut and easy to understand. ICE had done a raid at my house, detained my mother for not having papers, and my two younger siblings and niece were now staying in our one-bedroom apartment with us. I couldn't handle being the man of the family and being a good boyfriend and being a college student and working part-time at the neighborhood center. To keep Julio, Mari, and Marcela intact, I had to find a full-time job and focus on them, nothing else.

"Let's talk inside, Mando," I suggested.

"No, Memo, the kids are in there. I don't want them to hear us arguing."

"Well, it involves them, don't it? We don't hide shit from each other."

Armando took a deep breath in, and I started to drum my fingers on the dash again when it took him too long to respond. It didn't seem like he wanted me to say nothing else, so I just waited for him to relax and find words. The sooner he spoke, the sooner I could get out of this stupid little coupe.

Instead of talking again, he just reached over and put his arm around me. He took me by surprise, but I rested my head on his shoulder and wrapped my arms around his torso. Even though our position was awkward, it was full of memories. This front seat was where we were after our first date to the drive-in movies, the first time we'd said I love you, and when Mando's uncle called him a *marica* and he needed me to comfort him. His cramped little Honda was like our other home together before we got the apartment, but even in all this cute-ass reminiscing, I couldn't forget I had three people in that apartment upstairs who needed me more than Mando did.

I still couldn't let go, though. His arm felt warm against

my cheek, and all the tension in my body from earlier was gone when I held him like this. The comfort felt good, but I had to go. Being a real adult meant that I didn't spend all night cuddling in my boyfriend's car. It meant that I started looking for a second job ASAP, or a third if need be.

"Guillermo, *te amo tanto*," Mando was murmuring in my ear as he rubbed my back. His beard tickled my face, and I tried to stifle my giggles. "*No me dejes*."

"Armando, my family..." I answered feebly. I couldn't say it out loud again or that'd make this nightmare real.

"I know, I know, but I'll help you. We've been together all these years, and we're family now, too, right?" I nodded without saying a word. "Then we'll figure it out together."

Suddenly, my eyes welled up and my face felt hot. I didn't want to cry and I really didn't need to, but tears were starting to race down my face before I even had the chance to keep them from getting Mando's sweater wet. This was too much. I couldn't think straight and I didn't like how disorienting it felt to cry like this.

Mando noticed after a second that I was sniffing and wiping my face, so he said gently, "*Ay, no llores, wey*, it's a good thing we're together. You're finally letting me help you with something, and now we have the five of us."

I picked my head up and reached for the glovebox where he kept extra napkins any time he went to a fast food place, which was often. It was overflowing when I opened it, and a few fell on my lap by themselves. On a regular day, I'd chuckle and poke his *lonjas* that I loved, but tonight my head was pounding. After cleaning my face, I inhaled as deeply as my lungs would allow and exhaled as slowly as my nerves allowed.

My father crossed my mind and I closed my eyes. When he was my age, he was married and working dawn to dusk to raise enough to cross with my mother. He was the only one who would tell me about the way the sun burned their skin during the days and the way they shivered through those

freezing cold nights in the desert. Sometimes, when he wasn't looking and he reached for something high or when he rolled up his sleeves, I could see scars and burns that I knew better than to ask about. My dad knew more pain than I had in my whole life.

We didn't have insurance when he got sick, so when he died, me and my mom started setting aside our just-in-case money to prevent it from happening to the kids. But now I wasn't sure what to even do with that. What did this little money that we'd stashed away for years mean if the cost of a lawyer for my mom would be triple the amount, but I only needed a few hundred more for a *pollero*?

"Are we okay now, *llorona*?" Mando joked.

I blew my nose and tossed the napkin at him, which he batted away. "*Cállate, pendejo*."

"*Dame un besito, wey. No me importa el moco*." I let him have a quick kiss before I pushed him away. All that lovey-dovey shit was hard to do after I'd just stopped crying and my nose was still a little runny.

As we walked up to the apartment, I felt my heart rate returning to normal and my mind clearing up little by little. As much as I wanted to be the man my father was and handle this alone, he had my mom and I had Mando.

"*Oye, you gotta buy a bigger car, pendejo*," I mentioned while I waited for him to unlock the door. "A car seat for my niece, a growing Julio, Mari's prissy self, and our two fat asses won't fit in that tiny thing you got."

Glossary

Cabrón- (n.) buddy, dude, asshole; similar to *wey* and *pendejo* in use
Mira, cabrón, no quiero hablar contigo. = Look, dude, I don't want to talk to you.

Decir- (v.) to say/tell
Dime la verdad. = Tell me the truth.

Dejar- (v.) to leave
No dejes tu tarea. = Don't leave your homework.

Ir- (v.) to go
¡Vete pa' la verga, pendejo! = Go to Hell, asshole!

Llorar- (v.) to cry; root word of *llorona*
No llores tanto o te llamaré llorona. = Don't cry so much or I will call you a crybaby.

Lonjas- (n.) love handles (in Mexico)
Me gustan las lonjas, mi amor. = I like your love handles, my love.

Marica- (n.) derogatory term for a gay man
No seas homofóbico, no digas marica, wey. = Don't be homophobic, don't say fag, dude.

Moco- (n.) snot
Hay moco en la cara, nene. = There's snot on your face, baby.

Oye- (v.) listen
Oye, necesitas manejar mejor. = Listen, you need to drive better.

Seguir- (v.) to continue/ keep
Ella sigue estudiando para la prueba. = She keeps studying for the test.