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# Hedgehogs

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HEDGEHOGS

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Charles Ambler, Ph.D.  
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by

Oscar Antonio Moreno Huizar

2019

## DEDICATION

*For my family and friends,  
present and absent.*

HEDGEHOGS

by

OSCAR ANTONIO MORENO HUIZAR, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

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of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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## PREFACE

### THE TITLE

Whenever I talk to people about the book, I'm asked "Why 'Hedgehogs?'" I attempted to answer this throughout the book in different scenes. Part of the inspiration for the title came from an episode of the anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, titled "The Hedgehog's Dilemma." In the episode, the lead character Shinji Ikari has run away from home and his responsibilities. Misato Katsuragi, the woman who has taken him in, explains that he could be going through what she calls "The Hedgehog's Dilemma", meaning that hedgehogs have to get close to each other in order to keep warm during cold weather despite the fact that they can injure each other with their spikes. As a character, Shinji is often running away from other people because he's afraid that they'll hurt him. But he needs to acknowledge that he needs to be with other people in order to grow up and to follow through his responsibilities to protect the world.

I believe this sums up the friendship between the main characters of my novel; Mateo and Susana struggle with accepting each other. They want each other to be different than who they are, to take on different habits. But in the end, their friendship is the most fruitful element they have. It pushes them to be better people, more responsible, to actually find their place in their world. Meanwhile their friend Abby is always on the fringes and because of this, she always finds herself in a mode of self-destruction by escaping the help that their friends want to give her and going back to her abusive ex-boyfriend Raúl.

Self-destruction and self-sabotage are a common theme in all of the characters: Mateo lets his anxiety get the best of him, Susie lets herself fall back in too easily with drugs and alcohol, and Abby seeks to end her own life by whatever means she can. Sometimes this self-destruction is aided by someone else in that trio, but even so, they still protect each other from doing worse damage to

themselves and even to find a greater good they can do for the world. In that regard, the characters go through the Hedgehog's Dilemma and that is why I thought it would be a fitting title for the book.

At the same time, it allowed me to make something of a pun in the title and the way it alludes to the main setting: The border. In Spanish, the word for people who live on the border is "fronterizos." In that same language, the translation for hedgehogs is "erizos." This pun is even referenced in one of the earlier chapters of the book. By joining all of these elements, I believe that I have given the book a title that's enjoyable in its own right and specific to this book.

I hope that none of this is too obvious but I believe it's also fitting with the book's genre; although the story goes into some very dark places, I see it as a comedy more than anything else. After all, the crux of the story are the relationships and the differences that stand out between the characters. And although the story comes close to being tragic, it has a happy ending after all, going well with Aristotle's definition of comedy in his *Poetics*. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle defined comedy as aiming to represent humans as worse than as they are. I believe that this is true in so many contexts of the book: First, they are stuck in the border which I've represented as a dark place marred by a Drug War and negligent government policies. And often, the characters present the worst, most embarrassing sides of themselves: Mateo's anxiety and digestive issues, Susie's bad temper and drug use. Abby falls more into something of a tragic figure due to her death wish, but even then, I made sure to get comic mileage out of her bad temper and anti-social attitude, providing the story with a lighter angle on her character that contrasts with the darker turns of the novel. Having a title like *Hedgehogs* provides the reader with an entry to the comedy but also to the social setting and themes of the story.

## USING DIFFERENT CHARACTER PERSPECTIVES

When I sought to write *Hedgehogs*, I decided that the most appropriate thing to do in terms of form would be to write it in different perspectives. I first wrote *Hedgehogs* as a short story, told purely from Mateo's point of view. I was fine with the story being told that way because in that version, Susie is supposed to have a bigger allure and mystery to her that was supposed to be slowly stripped away as the story progressed. Focusing solely on Mateo allowed this mystery to be maintained and for the reader to be surprised by Susie just like he was.

However, my main interest in expanding the story into something that would be the length of a novel would be to explore the relationships between the characters, specifically Mateo and Susie and see the effect they have on each other. I started to imagine the actual effect they would have on each other.

On one hand, perhaps I could have written a novel that maintained that sense of mystery to Susana throughout. But I think this would have made it too similar to narratives like *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns*, where the veil of the lead character's romantic interest is lifted and they realize the truth about them and in turn, they come of age and into a better understanding of the person they love. There's value in a story like that, but it wasn't what I was interested in. Imagining Mateo and Susie's future as friends led me to imagine what sort of adventures they could have together, and all this propelled the idea of having it be a novel.

But given the narrative that I thought up, I wanted to focus on Susie's perspective as well. There's a constant risk in these kinds of stories of letting the female character fall into the trap of becoming a Manic Pixie Dreamgirl. Film critic Nathan Rabin coined the term in a review he made about the film *Elizabethtown*, applying to the lead female character as an example of female characters that "exist solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful

young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures” (Rabin, 4.) Often, these characters are accused of only existing for the benefit of the lead male character and having no discernible inner life. First of all, it’s likely that Susie could never be seen as a Manic Pixie Dreamgirl under any circumstances; she takes Mateo into a darker side of things and at first, keeps him at a distance and even mocks him. Her life lessons are questionable at best, despite how well intended they may be. I didn’t create her character with all this in mind, but when it came to writing the novel, I realized that one way to sidestep this potential flaw was to write as much as I could from her perspective. I could have written it all in third person, but I believed that picking a different perspective allowed for each other character’s point of view to come through clearly and in turn, allowed their comedic misunderstandings to be played at a higher degree than I didn’t think would be possible in third person.

In earlier drafts, Abby had her own point of view chapters. I ended up getting rid of them because it became obvious that she wasn’t a very active character. Perhaps the way to remedy this was to make her a more active character but at the end of the day, I felt that Mateo and Susie’s friendship was the focus of the novel and moving the reader away to focus on Abby would prove counterproductive to the progress of the story and character development.

However, she does get the prologue and epilogue. I opted for this because I believe she’s the character that’s most affected by the circumstances of the border, in this case, her father’s death that comes senseless at the hands of organized crime. I set up this plot point because often that’s the case in the border; people are killed without apparent motive, often because the hitmen have confused their targets with someone else (“Ejecutados Por.”) And it’s this murder that becomes the catalyst for everything that goes wrong in her life and that in turn, makes Mateo and Susie want to help her. She also gets the final say so the reader can see the change the story had in her. I wanted to show that in

both Mateo and Susie being good to each other and accepting themselves and each other, they ended up having a positive effect on Abby. Of course, they do rescue her before and all, but I wanted to show the change of attitude she has after all this.

It was key to me to find an individual voice to each character, not just in their dialogue but in their ways of narrating. I thought of Mateo as being more literary with a silly sense of humor, more observant. Susie shares some of the same traits but they're underscored more by her biting sense of humor and sarcasm. Again, one can see an overlap of traits in both characters' voices and my hope is that this also makes the reader see how they could connect with each other with their similarities and not just because of their differences.

I wanted the language of the characters to reflect the language that's spoken in the border. It can't simply be reduced to English or Spanish, but it's something that can be more complex often because of the way it's inconsistent. Readers will notice that Abby especially engages in Spanglish by mixing her English and Spanish together. I wanted this to be a distinct characteristic of her, especially in the earlier drafts where she had her own point of view chapters. I think it works because I can see it as a mark of the distance she tries to have from her dark past in Juárez and the ways she's trying to reinvent herself. There are points in the novel or their narration where Mateo and Susie do the same. This was all part of my goal of presenting the border in the most realistic context possible as Spanglish is seen as one of the main characteristics of people who live on the El Paso/Juárez border since many are bilingual in English and Spanish. I wanted the characters to be a reflection of that. This was inspired by the work of writers such as Benjamin Alire-Saénz who often sets his novels in the same area and allows the mixture of languages to come through, as seen in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*: "I could look handle them grabbing me by the shoulders and saying, "Let me look at you. Dejame ver. Ay que muchacho tan guapo. Te pareces a tu papa." (75.)

This element can be tricky for readers so often it was a matter of having words in English around the statements in Spanish so the reader could have an idea at least of the emotional context behind the words, and it could be easy to tell if the characters were upset or happy.

## IMAGERY

One of the great characteristics of literature is the ability to make that image sensual to the mind's eye, so often this became something that this novel attempts to achieve throughout. One of my bad habits as a writer is that I often resort too much to explaining and I often forget the power images can have on their own. Some of my biggest influences in this regard are J.K. Rowling (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*) and Stephen King (*11/22/63*) who often describe in detail how their characters are feeling in given situations. Often, this is focused on characters' digestive issues. Both writers have been accused of playing too much their hand in toilet humor but it's these kinds of details that keep their fantastical stories grounded and their characters relatable.

*Hedgehogs* isn't a fantasy novel, but I wanted to present that kind of bodily humor as a way of showing the character's anxieties and issues in a way that allowed their circumstances to feel lived in. Much is made of how hazardous living on the border can be for people, but often the narratives go for the wider picture of drug violence and racist policies, but I wanted to show the minutiae, even if this is done comically. That's why I saw fit to open Mateo's story with him suffering from a nervous stomach as he's on the bridge. I thought this was a good way to introduce the character, his anxiety and present it in a way where he suffers a conflict that comes as part of being on the border. I hope that readers aren't turned away from this, but given the humorous context in which it's presented and without any real graphic detail, I hope they can connect to the character, the situation and hopefully get even a laugh from it. After all, this kind of humor has been a staple of literature from the days of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which is regarded as the first novel and is considered a classic to this day.

## THE SETTING: TIME AND LOCATION

Could *Hedgehogs* be set anywhere else? Probably, but the details that make the characters and their circumstances would have to change. The reason why I opted to set it in the border was because I saw many opportunities. The first one is self-indulgence more than anything. Since the border is the place where I was born and raised, I've known it well and observed it my whole life.

As a habitant of it, I have my own issues with the border but I also have enough love of it. Enough love to get angry at the one-sided cliché depictions I see on books, television and film. I think these representations do have their place and often have a good reason to exist, but I believe in the possibility of telling other stories, of showing the characters that appear only in the background of scenes. If this was a different book, the story would probably fully focus on law enforcement and the drug cartels. Mateo, Susie or Abby would probably end up in the background of a scene for an instant and we'd never see them again. As a writer, I believe that my duty is to show a different side to Juarez; I try to set as many as my stories in the border as much as I can because I believe there's so much untapped potential of what literature can do in it.

Picking Juárez as the main location for *Hedgehogs* allowed to give it a social context that feeds well into the characters' desire to escape the border in a way that seems natural. At the same time, it allows to give it a sense of danger to the mundanity the characters are living as in the border all these elements are amplified; a bad relationship with a bad man or woman can become risky since the characters can have a short distance from being close to a criminal. There's also an anxiety of something terrible being able to happen at any moment. I wanted to capture this anxiety, by contrasting what's essentially a story about friendship to the backdrop of the drug war without explicitly making it a part of the plot. I was hoping to show how the trauma of all this crime and violence can run deep, especially in young people.

But readers will also see that the novel expands beyond the Juárez/El Paso area. It took a while for me to find what was a suitable character goal that could serve as a thematic and narrative thread for the characters and the story. The idea of a road trip had always been presented in all drafts of the story, even without making it a central part of the story. I always imagined that the characters would end up getting away from the border in one way or another. And as I further thought and explored the characters, I realized that a road trip was effective as a goal. I realized that it made perfect sense for the characters to attempt to escape the border because of the situations they had lived in their past and the situations they were living in their present. At the same time, I saw potential in how each of the characters could have their growth and conflict marked against a road trip: Susie could seek to experience things sober, Mateo could experience new things, and Abby could find herself trying to find the sort of joy that had left her.

In initial drafts, the trip was shorter in terms of narrative space and physical distance; Mateo, Susie and Abby traveled as far as Ruidoso, New Mexico, totaling to a four-hour car ride from El Paso and back. I decided that it would be more fitting and more challenging for them as characters if they traveled a longer distance. Los Angeles seemed like the right place; it's far away from El Paso but not so far away to make it unfeasible for the characters to reach it in a road trip. It has a mythical quality to it that would be appealing to Susie at least, and it's also a center of entertainment, art, culture and politics, especially Latinx politics that seemed fitting with the context of the story. Hence, I made it my pick for the characters' destination.

At the same time, the wider distance allowed me to put the characters in places that could prove to be more uncomfortable to them and explore more of the story's political side. Yes, the story starts out in Texas, which is famously a red state. (*Practicing Texas Politics*, 125.) However, El Paso is always in a bit of an odd spot since it's majorly Democrat or liberal. This in large part to the fact

that it has a population that's mainly Hispanic and Bilingual (Jones, et al., 12) Despite all of their complaints, Mateo, Susie and Abby are in a space that's relatively comfortable for them.

But once they go through the likes of Arizona, they find themselves in a place that's truly uncomfortable. Although it has been changing, as explained by Zachary Smith, Arizona is a red state that has pushed forward some strong anti-immigration policies and home to anti-immigrants such as former Sheriff Joe Arpaio (Rizzi, 6.) I thought this would be a good place to make the characters have to openly deal with the racial tensions that are found in the United States and how they deal with them. I also thought this fed well into the character's journey and their frustration to find a place in the world. It's all part of the intention of playing with the character conflict and feeding into it.

The time of the story is a little bit more ambiguous; it's obviously set during the Trump administration, but I decided not to specify any year of it in particular. I felt this was the right choice since a lot of the issues that stemmed immediately as soon as Trump took office have remained, despite all of the changes in it and around it. The state of crime in Juárez is what I decided to keep more ambiguous; in some ways, the situations are similar to when Juárez endured its greatest crime wave in the years 2008 to 2012 (Toyes, Quiroga, et al.) It has slowed down majorly since, but there has been an escalation. Enough escalation to alarm politicians and local businessmen (Jervis.) Regardless, the issue here isn't so much the quantity of crime and violence, but the idea that any murder, any crime can have traumatizing consequences. I didn't want the reader to easily dismiss this element because of real-life statistics or the like. I wanted to go for something more visceral so they could understand that no matter how many are killed in any given time in Juárez, one murder is a tragedy that can have repercussions on people, especially the young, for their whole lives.

## HEDGEHOGS' PLACE IN LITERATURE

I believe that *Hedgehogs* could be classified as a Young Adult novel. As established by Michael Cart, Young Adult literature is defined as being narratives that are aimed toward an audience aged twelve to eighteen, frequently dealing with topics of youth and coming-of-age. It may seem that some of the topics and language that this book deals in might be too harsh for that audience, but young adult literature often falls into controversies because of its content (Scales, ix.) Books such as *The Hate U Give*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *Looking for Alaska* have been attempted to be banned in different parts of the United States due to their language, sexual and drug content. However, this hasn't stopped them from being considered young adult literature or from being read by their target audience.

At the same time, *Hedgehogs* is a coming of age story dealing with characters who are in their late teens and early twenties, so in many ways it does fit the definition. Some of the works that inspired the novel have been the books by John Green, particularly *Looking for Alaska* and *Paper Towns*. These books share a few common elements: The main lead character is infatuated by a girl and they end up uncovering their inner life. In *Looking for Alaska*, it's the girl's death that ends up unraveling the mystery of the girl, while in *Paper Towns*, it's the girl herself beckoning to be found and revealed by the clues she leaves to the lead character. Both novels deal with the reversal of the previously mentioned Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope, and have even been criticized of making its lead female characters fall into that trope (McCarthy.)

However, from my point of view, both novels are a successful reversal of this trope. The whole idea behind both books is that nobody should idealize anybody; the people we become infatuated with are human beings just like everyone else. They have their own lives, their own secrets

and their flaws. Both books commit to this theme and explore it in entertaining and moving ways. I believe that they both have a message that's worthy for teenagers to learn.

But as I've stated before, part of my interest in this novel was to not exclusively give the spotlight to Mateo but to Susie as well. For me, this wasn't a story about uncovering Susie's life or anything like that. The initial short story may have had this in common with those novels by John Green, but when it came to my book, I realized that this wasn't the story I wanted to tell. Instead, I thought that if these novels end with the characters' discovering the flaws and differences in these girls, then *Hedgehogs* could be about living with those differences and accepting them or not. One detail about those books by John Green is that once those differences are discovered and the characters reach their epiphany, we don't get to see the lead characters deal with these girls in their lives. Instead, like in the case of *Looking for Alaska*, they die or in the case of *Paper Towns*, they disappear from their lives permanently. Not that this is a flaw in these books, it isn't, but I wanted to explore what kind of relationship forms between radically different people and how that can happen.

Another influence was Stephen Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. That book is written in such a raw way, even with the kind of grammatical flaws that a fifteen-year-old might write with, that it feels true, it feels as if we are actually reading real letters sent by a real person. I wanted that kind of rawness and energy in the book as well. I wasn't interested in having those kinds of grammar flaws, though. I feel like my own voice and the characters' voices themselves don't work well with those flaws. They don't feel authentic. Instead, I sought to have the grammar as clean as possible while also trying to capture the authentic voice of the characters. As mentioned before, I felt the way to do this was to have the characters be bilingual and sprinkle that detail throughout the book. That said, as always, my goal was to find the character voice and to be as true to it as I could.

My influences aren't purely literary, though. *Hedgehogs* also spawns from my love for film. In this case, I was inspired by character-driven road movies in which characters come together despite their differences to go on a location together. If one were to follow Devin Orgreron's characteristics of the road movie, *Hedgehogs* fits well as it highlights the differences between various societies, represented both by characters and the landscapes they explore. One example of this was *Safety Not Guaranteed*, directed by Colin Trevorrow and written by Derek Connolly. In this film, a jaded intern joins a fellow intern and a journalist to write a story about a man who claims to be building a time machine. The film does a great job of dealing with the characters' differences and putting them in a scenario that tests their flaws and personalities; Darius, the lead character, slowly drops her cynicism as she meets and falls in love with Kenneth, the creator of the time machine, even starting to believe in the possibility that time travel might exist. Meanwhile, journalist Jeff must come to terms with his past regrets by meeting up with a woman who was his teenage fling. At first, he only wants to meet her for sex and his general attitude about the trip is one of cynicism and debauchery, but as he gets to spend more time with her, he starts to realize his feelings for her may run deeper than he thought. This scares him and he sabotages the relationship, but in turn he helps Arnau, the other intern to live life more fully in the moment so he doesn't have the same regrets he has. We don't see much of Arnau later to realize if he really learned his lesson but at least the beginning of his journey is there.

Another road movie that *Hedgehogs* has taken inspiration from is *The Darjeeling Limited*. Directed by Wes Anderson and written by Anderson, Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman, *The Darjeeling Limited* follows three estranged brothers who are reunited in India in an attempt to go on a spiritual journey. Once again, Anderson's film highlights the narrative potential of the road movie by having three highly different brothers having to share space in a train for a large part of the story. At the same time, their abstract goal of having a spiritual journey made me realize that Mateo and Susie's goal in the story could be equally abstract as long as I could find sufficient conflict for them in the story.

With all this in mind, I believe that I have been successful in writing a novel that is true to its ideas and effective in its storytelling. It also proves to me that a work can also dabble in different subgenres without falling apart. They are elements that can work as long as the story is compelling to the reader. But more than anything, I feel like I have expressed myself and my ideas just as I hoped.

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## HEDGEHOGS

A novel by Oscar Moreno

### PROLOGUE - ABBY

My family and friends from Mexico City laugh when I tell them that going from my house in La Chaveña to la Ejército Nacional is a ridiculously long distance. “In Mexico City,” they tell me, “You have to ride two hours on a bus just to get to work.” They’ve got me there. But they’re used to it. You never get used to anything in Juárez. And in el D.F. you can get anywhere in the metro. In Juárez, you have to drive. And driving in Juárez is no easy task; there’s bad pavement, los pinches baches that could make holes in your tires, pendejos disguised as drivers, you name it.

It didn’t help that now we had pendejos with guns. And not just any guns, but cuernos de chivo. Dozens of little Scarfaces running around in their shitty safety houses and shitty cars, just plugging bullet after bullet into other little Scarfaces. Or their friends, families, lawyers, doctors, teachers, students. “Say hello to my amiguito!” So something like the thirty minute drive my sister would do from her job at Costco to my house, it would understandably have anyone crapping their panties.

La Chaveña is like Mad Max Region Cuatro version turned into a neighborhood: There are no big buildings, the tallest ones are like two-stories high. They’re all despintados, sucios, rusty. There are alleyways filled with basura. The pavement is cracked or non-existent. When it came to my house, it was the prettiest in all of the neighborhood. It was a two-story home, painted blue, up on a hill overlooking Juárez and El Paso. I’ve always liked the vista from my window, especially at night when I could see all the cars passing by UTEP on the I-20.

That night I was the only one home. A rarity. But Abril was coming home from Costco and my dad was just picking up some mail in El Paso. Mom was out too, but she was just hanging out with a vecina. When Abril called me to tell me she was coming home, I told her: “Traeme pan de Pradera.” I could just feel her rolling her eyes.

“Take it easy on the pan dulce, Abby,” she told me.

“Yeah, like you aren’t going to eat some.”

“I’m actually on a diet.”

“I’m not so bring it on.”

There’s a legendary panaderia in Pradera Dorada, a neighborhood close to the Costco. A panadería so legendary that they franchised it and now you can get some of that sweet bread in other parts of the city. When I used to visit friends who lived in Pradera or during my one-month stint in Catholic confirmation at Nuestra Señora de la Paz, I’d always try to pass in front of that bakery. It smelled like sugar, cinnamon, chocolate and coffee. And once you tried the bread, it lived up to the promise of its smell. But with me going away to El Paso for school and arriving pretty late at night, there wasn’t any time for it. Add to that the little Scarfaces and the mess we call streets here, and driving thirty minutes for some doughnuts and bisquetes just seems like an exaggeration dreamed up by a writer of a telenovela with a fat character in it. But Abril wanted to work and she didn’t care about any of that, so naturally, she became my delivery girl.

I was sitting on the table at home, not doing anything, just enjoying the quiet of the night. We were isolated enough from the rest of the city to not really hear it coming through our window. The most we heard was the sound of cars trying to climb up the dirt hill outside our street. But there were no cars. Just me and the buzz of the refrigerator, and those sudden little bangs and pops in the

foundations that make you wonder if there are ghosts. Abril came through the spring door, showing off the bag on her hand.

“As ordered, your majesty.”

She threw it on the table. I plopped it open at full speed, trying to make sure the staples that shut it wouldn't end up stabbing into the breads. I dug in and pulled out an igloo or concha, however you'd prefer to call it.

Abril took a chair and sat next to me. She reached for the remote on the table and turned on the little TV/VCR Emerson set up in the cabinet since we were kids. It was set on the Canal 44 News and Armando Cabada was talking. He was mentioning something about another murder, the seventh of the night. Back then, Juárez averaged eight murders a day. It was in the Ejército Nacional, under the bridge where Abril passes to go to work and back. I was just about to tell her how lucky she'd been. How maybe her picking up the bread stopped her from seeing that.

But then, I recognized the car. Papá's white 2007 Tsuru. I recognized the license plate number. And I recognized my dad's face, covered in blood as the camera zoomed in on it, I always guess to avoid to showing the bloody bullet wounds. I kept staring at the screen, trying to make sure that it wasn't him. That it wasn't his car. I couldn't breathe. I kept gasping for air but it wouldn't come. Something was blocking my throat. I felt as if my nostrils were blocked as well, I couldn't feel any air come in through my nose. I was choking on the bread. Abril had gone white from the news and was shaking. It took her too long to notice I was choking. Later she'd tell me that she thought I was just in shock, that I was losing my breath because of what happened to Papá. But I felt some of the bread slobber down my chin. She saw it and got herself behind me, pushing on my diaphragm with her fists. I spat out the concha. I had taken a big bite, enough for it to just fall like a rock onto the floor. I gasped and sobbed, now able to catch my breath. That was the last time I had pan de Pradera.

## 1. MATEO

There's nothing like feeling you're going to shit your pants while you're crossing the Santa Fe Bridge. I could have used the bathrooms on the American side, but they seemed occupied, no doubt because of the bus that had stopped so all the passengers could go to the bathroom and get their travel permits. I would have to find one in El Paso as soon as I could.

It was my first day of college and I have something with first days of school; First grade, I cried the whole damn day. First day of junior high, I got shoved into a locker. Thank God for growth spurts. First day of high school, I got a black eye after being punched in the face. Everyone thought I was an asshole because I kept wearing sunglasses inside.

So, that first morning of college things weren't going particularly well. I was crossing the Santa Fe Bridge from Juárez to El Paso when I felt a quick slosh of crap rush from my stomach to my guts. This could mean a few things, but lately it had come to mean that I'd better rush and find a bathroom. These kinds of attacks had become more frequent lately. My mom chalked it up to stress, but I didn't feel stressed. She was using that word too lightly, especially for someone who was there the night I had a gun pointed to my face when I was ten. But once I got to really think about it, yeah, there was plenty I could be stressed about; criminals started killing people again on the streets, I was going to college for the first time, I had to deal with the Customs and Border Protection agents, all the girls I liked didn't care about me.

The rising sun was heating me up and burning the side of my face. The heat was boiling my guts, just making them churn quicker. And the line in front of me was long and not advancing. It was seven in the morning. I didn't think there were any bathrooms open. But even if I wanted to stop at a store, I wasn't sure how to make my way to the University.

The bridge doesn't seem to be that long, but it sure feels like it. Especially in the August heat with your body begging for the closest toilet. The pavement feels bumpy and dirty, with the faded, darkened pieces of gum and trash now permanently pasted to the floor. The fence on my right side would seem to reflect the heat off it into my body, with the heat from the sun and the cars putting me into a wall of exhaust.

Below the bridge there was this old, skinny guy. Shirtless. Hairy and covered in bruises, yelling about something, I couldn't tell what. He was waving his cap in the air, some folks would walk by and throw a couple of pesos down to him. My first time in ten years or so crossing that bridge and I remembered that old guy from last time. Had he been there all along? Does he live there? How can he scream so loud? His gibberish was carving into my eardrums.

Finally, the line advanced a little bit. But not by much. I had to distract myself somehow. Maybe that would help. I turned and paid attention to the people around me. Lots of people like me, going to school. Backpacks, cups of coffee, breakfast burritos in hand, uniforms, moms with their children. Then the cars passing on the line next to us. Coffee. Backpacks. Burritos. Uniforms. Moms. Children. Yeah, people going to school or to work. Why else would you bother being here this early on a Tuesday?

I felt a tap on my shoulder. The people at the front had gotten ahead of me. I had to move forward. I took a few steps and wiggled my back, my stomach and my buttocks trying to keep it all in. I walked forward.

I got to a CBP Officer, he was a tall, burly man with graying hair and a tiny badge on his uniform that read: Cortez.

"Where's your passport?" he gruffed.

God, was that sweat or shit I was feeling in my jeans? Border weather confuses you in that way.

And all that time thinking about shit, I had totally forgotten why I was actually there in the first place. I apologized and pulled my passport with my student visa out of my pocket.

“Your I-20,” he grunted.

I pulled out the folded I-20 from my pocket and showed it to him.

His eyes surveyed both documents from behind his sunglasses. He looked at me and, on his sunglasses, I could see myself pale and sweating.

“You’re nervous about school or what?” he asked.

“No. I’m excited,” I stuttered.

“You’ve got anything on you?”

“Uh, no.”

“Let me check your backpack.”

I wrangled my backpack off my shoulders and handed it to him. He opened it. I thought that he wouldn’t take long, but, no, instead he crammed his hands into the backpack, sticking his fingers into every pocket as if he was picking ants out of the fabric. Then he pulled out a notebook and flipped through it. I hadn’t written anything on it. He also grabbed a binder and flipped through my schedule and paperwork.

He returned the backpack. I thought he was finished. But suddenly he took his hands to my back and started patting my back. He took his hands all the way down to my hips and then he patted

my stomach. I felt myself fart a little. I prayed that I hadn't crapped my pants. Once he saw that I was finished putting it on, he handed me my passport and I-20.

"Go," he said.

I passed him, trying to take my time. I walked under the border station, trying not to call attention to myself. I couldn't let them see me run. I was sure they'd want to double search me if they saw me running. The heat kept getting worse now that the sun had fully risen. It burned the side of my face and my arms. The heat touched my guts again. Under the roof of the border station, the heat congealed with the hot exhaust of the passing cars. I found myself lost between the masses of people making their way into and out of El Paso. I ran between them, hoping I wasn't hitting everyone as I tried to escape that whole human ocean.

I made my way out of the station and then I ran, trying to get to the downtown Sun Metro terminal. I ran until I reached the corner of a sidewalk, and an orange hand on a traffic light stopped me. I could see the terminal on the other side. I wasn't too far now. The orange hand now became a walking man. I ran.

Everyone who has traveled to other cities around the world tells me that El Paso is an easy and short city to walk on. I suppose it is to an extent, but again, throw in the heat and everything turns into hell. If anything, the old style of the buildings was keeping me distracted from all the trouble in my stomach. There were closed stores showcasing Quinceañera dresses in mannequins from their windows, a whole line of people waiting outside a blood transfusion center ready to donate their blood, construction workers on gurneys next to the highest windows of the tallest buildings. Apartment complexes with clothes hanging out their windows, over their railings.

I reached the bus terminal, and saw many of the same faces I had seen on the bridge, some sitting in benches, others standing waiting for the bus. There were buses making their way in and out of the terminal. The place was no big shakes, just a tiny brown building surrounded by the benches and buses. School wasn't too far out now, but I knew they had bathrooms inside the terminals. I checked the time on my cellphone. I had ten minutes before my bus was supposed to get here. More time than I needed.

I ran to the inside of the terminal, feeling cool air conditioning on my hair, spilling it on my eyes which saw the bathroom doors, vending machines and more benches inside. I found the door to the bathroom and rushed inside. I was greeted by amber-colored walls and steel stalls. I ran into one, and pulled down my pants. I sat on the toilet and I farted. That's it. I farted. For a long time. But no shit. The human body is a mystery. I pulled up my pants and washed my hands and left the bathroom.

But once I got to school, I felt like going to the bathroom again. Only this time, I just wanted to pee. At least now I didn't have to get in a line. I saw the UTEP's weird architecture in front of me, looking like something out of Jurassic Park. A weird combination of modernity with something like a Bhutanese temple. Kind of cool and beautiful, and I would honor it by peeing inside.

I went into the first building I saw, surrounded by the chatter of students, catching glimpses of their faces. I still had time to get to class, so I gave myself a chance to look at the girls. This wasn't my first time in El Paso. I went at least once a week to El Paso to go shopping. But if you go to the stores, you'll find a lot of other Mexicans. Take away the Mexicans, and pay attention to the Americans and one of the things that will most impress you when you first look at them is how white they look. For some reason, they look so tan in movies but I guess that's what Los Angeles will do to you. Just guessing because most celebrities seem to live there. But they like to say that British people are the only pale ones, but, no, the Americans, too.

I got into the bathroom. All the urinals were occupied. No big deal, at least the toilets weren't. I sat and pulled my pants down. Then, I noticed a tiny brown stain on my boxers. I had to spend the rest of the day with some toilet paper between my butt and boxers.

I was hoping it didn't smell. Didn't seem like it did. I went to my first class, Astronomy. I went into what seemed the newest, cleanest building in the whole school. Three stories high with the highest ceilings and windows, and the faint smell of chlorine. I remember once hearing that it used to house a swimming pool and the smell just stuck. I went into a dark auditorium, with a few students scattered in different seats. A huge screen loomed at the back of the room. I searched for a seat and made my mission to sit next to a pretty girl. I looked around the auditorium, trying to find one.

And there she was, a brunette with green eyes behind glasses. Petite. I walked over to her place and sat next to her. And I froze. I had no idea what to say. Hi? Hello? What? Then, I finally thought something up.

"Hey," I whispered.

She turned.

"Have you bought your book for this class yet?" I said.

"No."

And she turned away.

We didn't say anything to each other after that.

And then, she walked away to the other side of the auditorium as students filled the other seats.

How stupid! “Have you gotten the book for this class yet?” Really? That’s the best you could do? And why? This was the first day, unless she was a psychic, there was no way that she could tell me what the book was going to be. I had toilet paper on my butt. I had screwed up trying to talk to a girl. I thought there was no use trying to push my luck any further. So I just went to my other class that day: Music Appreciation. I was taking classes like that because I had no idea what I was doing. I hadn’t declared any major.

I was also taking the obligatory Core Curriculum classes, among them a Writing and Rhetoric class where we had to learn how to make essays and knowing how to make speeches. The class was in the Liberal Arts building which always confused me with its architecture. It looked to be one story high from the entrances but once you looked at the sides, you’d see that it was actually four stories high, going down into a terrain of rocks and bushes. It wasn’t that it was dirty inside or anything like that, but you could see the age of the building. The lights were dim, the floors and walls were faded. It was even more noticeable inside the classroom where I could see scribbles by the windows, and the windows themselves revealing a nest with a dead pigeon surrounded by cracked eggs. The teacher was a Mexican guy in his mid-20s, Andrés Payan. He had a bit of a thick Mexican accent, but his English wasn’t bad. But his jokes were. He joked about wanting to show off that he knew English despite his accent, so he asked us to tell him random words in Spanish and that he would translate them on the blackboard. For some reason, I’d had the Hedgehog’s Dilemma in my head, so I yelled out “*Eriños*”, the Spanish word for Hedgehogs. He wrote it on the board and translated it to Hedgehogs. But he didn’t finish there, he added letters to it so it would read Fronterizos, the Spanish word for people who live on the border. “Get it?” he said. We all did. But no one laughed. It seemed like in an attempt to take away from the embarrassment of nobody laughing at his joke, he tried to embarrass someone else: Me.

“Sorry, what’s your name?” he asked nodding toward me.

“Mateo,”

“May I ask why a hedgehog?”

Some people laughed. I felt myself go red.

“I was just remembering this thing about them, how they have to be close to each other when it’s cold so they can keep warm, even though their spikes hurt them. Yeah,” I stammered.

“Interesting,” he said and went on giving his lesson. He seemed to have been the only version who was listening and I’m not even sure if he had actually paid attention.

My parents wanted to pick me up in Juárez but my Dad didn’t want Mom going alone because carjackings were happening again in the city, especially close to the downtown bridge where they’d pick me up. I had to wait until Dad got out of work at six.

I just walked around the school, trying to see if there were any familiar faces. I heard some of my friends were coming here, but I didn’t see them. There was a different atmosphere here. I would say it was the difference between high school and college, but I had visited the university of Juárez a couple of times and thought this would be more of an American thing. Back in Juárez, you can see people talking, maybe even being a little loud, gathering in groups. There’s a certain warmth, as if everyone is engaged with the rest of the world even if they aren’t. Here, sure, you could see groups but everyone seemed to just be on their way to another place, in a rush. There seemed to be more silence than anything. The walk to anywhere felt exhausting. Everything was mostly dirt and brown or tan-colored buildings, save for the plaza that was mostly made of grass and had some tall, white, blonde guy in glasses yelling something about abortion and the pope being a false prophet. The heat

exhausted me, as well as all the walking. I tried to look at the girls but they didn't look at me. I tried to smile at them, but I caught my face on a window and I looked stupid when I smiled. I sat, going through Facebook and my phone contacts, trying to see if there was anyone to talk to. Everyone had pictures of themselves at parties, at dinners, in trips to places like Guanajuato or London. Places I didn't even know they were going to. I sent messages to my friends but no one answered.

I got myself into the library and walked between the books, trying to find something I could read. Although I'm sure there are bigger libraries in the world, I was still taken aback by the size of this one: Five floors, all of them filled with students. The ambiance that was somewhat lacking outside could be found here, although I still felt that coldness and distance from everyone in there. I took the elevator to the fourth floor where the book stacks started. They looked old, easy to get lost in. I had never seen so many books. I had plenty of options. The library in my high school wasn't terrible and was limited compared to this one. I just walked and kept looking. I would pick a few books and look at their tattered spines and yellowing pages. I looked at the borrowing slip and checked out the dates. I flipped through the pages and I'd notice how some were underlined, or had little apostrophes between them. I wondered who had left those marks on the books. If they were people like me, reading this same book on their freshman year. Being stuck in a library for hours makes you philosophical, I guess.

I saw the sun coming down from the windows and the sky turned dark, so I thought it would be a good idea to make my way to the bus stop and go home. I walked to a bus stop just outside the school. The night air was warm and even through my shoes, I could still feel the heat of the sidewalk. The streetlights were turning on their amber lamps.

From the corner of a sidewalk, waiting for my turn to cross I saw her for the first time, sitting on the bus stop bench, the streetlamps making her shine in amber. Her backpack made me think that she was a student like me. As soon as the traffic lights let me walk, I crossed my way to her.

I sat next to her and she didn't say anything. She just kept staring into space.

"First day too, huh?" I asked her.

She didn't turn. She took her time. And then she looked at me, with a smirk.

"You're a freshman, aren't you?" she said as if she was holding back a laugh.

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"You reek like a freshman."

I caught a whiff of myself. Had she caught the shit on my underwear? I couldn't smell anything. I just turned and stared at her while she stared back into space. She sighed and shook her head.

"Don't do that," she said.

"Don't do what?"

"What you're doing. Staring at me like that. Don't do it," She said, her sight penetrating on mine, and then looking away.

"I'm sorry. I won't."

I stared to the other side. At that point I had no idea why I was still there. I saw the bus approaching. Whatever this day had been, at least I was going home. We stood up and the bus stopped in front of us. The sunburned driver opened the door so we could get in. But I just stood there. She

stood behind me. I turned to her. She just looked at me. And then I looked at the driver. He just looked at us. Then he closed the doors and drove away. I felt her hands hitting my shoulder.

“You dumbshit! That was my bus!”

“I nodded so you could get in!” I said.

“You just had to go in first!”

“But you’re a girl!”

“Oh, fuck off!”

She walked away.

“Hey! Where are you going?!” I called to her.

“The fuck you care!” she answered, not turning back.

“You aren’t gonna walk home, are you?!”

She turned.

“The fuck. You. Care!”

“Look, if you’re going to Juárez—”

“I’m not going to Juárez!”

“How long is the next bus going to take?”

“Thirty minutes if you’re lucky!”

She turned and kept walking, and I just watched her go. I turned back to the other side of the street and waited for the bus to come. Ten minutes passed. Nothing. Maybe she was right. I heard footsteps coming toward me. I turned and she was coming back, holding a pack of cigarettes in her hands. She stopped besides me and ripped open the pack.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” she asked, pulling a cigarette out of the pack and putting the box in her pocket.

“No.”

“Good little boy,” she said as she put the cigarette between her lips and lit it up. She took a drag and blew smoke from her mouth.

While we stood there, we didn’t say anything to each other. The bus came and this time, I didn’t make the same mistake. I got in first and sat in the back, while she sat at the front. In the instant that she entered, under the lights of the bus for a moment I could fully figure out her face; he had long black hair, a little curly in places. Big brown eyes with faint bags below them and tiny lips that seemed to form a heart on her pale skin. Her skinny arms were covered by a long-sleeved, red flannel shirt.

When the bus made a stop near San Jacinto Plaza, she got off. I watched her walk under the bright lamps that shone like Christmas lights between the trees. She never turned to look at me or to talk to me. The bus kept going and I hoped that at some point the next four or five years would be better.

## 2. SUSIE

I can't remember why I took the bus that night when I could've just walked. Call it stoner's paranoia or whatever. But something didn't feel right. El Paso's supposed to be one of the safest cities in the USA but, man, did I see some shit I never saw back in Juárez. Folks doing coke rails off a bench in Prospect Park, gals smoking crack pipes among the bushes of the tiny canyons near Remcon. It wasn't like a twenty-four-seven thing, but it happened. But hey, in Juárez you see dead people, so I guess El Paso isn't that extreme. I had the crackheads on my mind that night so I didn't feel like walking to my apartment on Mesa. My suspicions about being a walking citizen that night got confirmed when I saw that short, long-haired skinny kid sit next to me at the bus stop. I wondered if he was in high school. What would a high school kid be doing out this late on a Tuesday, anyway? He just started hitting on me. I didn't fall for that, but the asshole made me lose my bus because he was trying to be chivalrous by trying to get me in to go to the bus first. Dumbshit.

No big deal, I got home anyway. The bus dropped me off a couple of feet away from my complex. It wasn't anything special but five hundred dollars a month for rent is doable, depending on how you want to live. I lived in a three-story complex, the sort that looks like a perfect square of windows and doors. It was a one-bedroom apartment but with the size of the rest, you might have thought there was room for one more. I had the whole place decorated with my own paintings, my art projects, perhaps a bit narcissistic, but what the hell am I going to do with all that? Chuck it? Of course, I could always sell it but it wasn't something I was quite ready to do yet. I mean, they were good but maybe not that good and if they were good, they were probably too weird. People can be so fucking obtuse sometimes, especially when it comes about stuff like art. I drew stuff like the places I wanted to go, how I imagined them to be: Hyde Park in London, the inside of the Notre Dame Church in Paris, the fields of Porto in Portugal. Then people would look at them and ask me why I wasn't

drawing stuff like the mountains of El Paso or Juárez. Then I'd go and do that, and they'd complain that I'd made them too ugly. Fuck off. It's not my fault that they're ugly cities.

As soon as I got in, my cellphone was ringing. I checked the caller ID: Mom and Dad. Forget it. I don't know why they bother. Both of them working on those commercials about feeling proud to be from Juárez. They're scared shitless about the new murders. How about taking into account that they never stopped? They make ads about Juárez being the birthplace of the burrito without even mentioning how that happened or that it's a fucking urban legend. But hey, I guess it's all right as long as people stay dumb. Why wait until now to give a fuck?

I went into my kitchen and took out the jar where I kept my weed. My head was buzzing about Juárez, about San Francisco, about Tony and his girlfriend, about the kid at the bus stop. I needed to sleep somehow. I grabbed some rolling paper and a razor from a drawer. I cut it up and made a joint. The phone kept ringing. I turned my lighter to the tip of the joint and took a hit. Ring ring. I went to the living room. I felt sleepy. No biggie. Not the first time. At least weed makes me dream. Maybe this time I'd sleep on the couch. But I took off my Toms and my socks, and upon feeling the carpet I just wanted it to feel it in my hands, on my back, that static that builds up and gives you tiny electroshocks. I lay down. I felt the little carpet fibers tickle me through my clothes. Ring Ring Ring. It was hot inside. The path to the air conditioning switch seemed too long and it only seemed to get further away from me. Ring fucking ring. I should have probably given it a good ringtone at least. I looked up at the fan above, suddenly I could feel it cooling the drops of sweat that had collected on my forehead. I couldn't hear the phone ringing anymore. Then my WhatsApp pinged. She had left a message. It was better if I heard it. If I didn't, she'd get the idea that I hadn't seen it because I was dead or kidnapped. So I heard my mom's voice. Annoying as always.

“Susie, you think we didn’t see the pictures? You think we don’t know what you’re doing? Come home, Susie. Please stop and come home, sweetie.”

What pictures could they be? Had it really been the pictures? It was hard to say when everything about me pissed them off. If it wasn’t me sharing pics where you could see a joint at my fingertips, then it would be those pictures of me drinking with my friends? The pictures Tony took of me where I’m covered up with a bedsheet? Jesus, I was in my underwear. Is that such a big deal when I also have pictures of me in a bikini? The question wasn’t what pissed them off. The question was: What didn’t piss them off?

I could hear her breathing for a while after. As if there was more she wanted to say or as if she was hoping for me to pick up. “I know you’re there,” she said after a long pause. The message ended. I just lay on the floor, hoping they wouldn’t call again. But then, I got another phone call, from a number I hadn’t seen in a long time: Abby’s.

“Hello?” I asked.

“Susy?” she whispered, sounding as if she was crying.

“Abby! Long time no talk, what’s going on?!”

There was a pause.

“I’m in El Paso, I’m living in El Paso and I feel like shit, Susy, like total shit. Please, I need to see someone. I need to talk to anyone. Please. It’s been a mess.”

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“Everything sucks. I can’t stop thinking about Dad, about how fucked up everything is. We’re in hell, aren’t we? We really are.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Don’t you look at the Goddamn news? ¿A dónde chingados se va uno? Es un desmadre. Mejor me mato, I better die, I better fucking die.”

“Abby, don’t say that. What do we all do, then? Do we all die then? Do you want to spread the misery all around.”

“Who’s gonna give a shit?”

“I would!”

“Bullshit, you haven’t even called me in like a year.”

Fuck.

“I know, I’m sorry. But I thought you might need the time. The time to be alone, deal with all this. That’s the way it is with some people. And like, come on, dude, you don’t like talking to anybody.”

“Don’t fucking blame me.”

“I’m not! I’m just saying that sometimes you need to tell people that you need something. Okay? No one’s a mindreader.”

“Everyone knows my Dad died.”

“Yeah, but not everyone knows how you want to deal with it.”

“Fine. Okay. I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. But look, why don’t we meet up sometime, huh? I’ve got a party coming up if you want to come.”

And then it was like old times. We caught up with each other, until Abby fell asleep. I hung up and shortly after, I fell asleep too. And for some reason, the last thought of the day was Mateo.

### 3. MATEO

The second time I saw the bus stop girl was when I went to get some copies from a textbook. She was inside the library's copy shop kiosk, writing something on her laptop, her long black hair covering her face, an older Samara Morgan.

I said: "Excuse me."

She looked at me, her eyes widened for a few seconds, and I felt mine do the same. But she quickly settled into a look of customer-friendly diplomacy

"How may I help you?" she asked, smiling, turning her heart of a mouth into a thin, long line of lipstick.

"I want to get some copies of this," I gave her the pages of the book and she took them.

"Alright, how many? What pages?"

"Just one copy, please. Um, fifteen through thirty."

She went to a copier and began to make the copies. I stared at her and began to wonder if she was pretending to forget me or if she had truly forgotten about me. It didn't seem unnatural for her to not remember me, after all, it had been about two weeks since we had seen each other, and after all, it had been dark and at night and she looked tired that time.

"So, uh, what's your name?" I asked her.

"Do you want to know my name or do you want me to make the copies?"

"Uh, make the copies."

"I thought so."

She went on making the copies.

“Have you worked here long?” I asked, twiddling my fingers on the table.

“Why do you want to know?”

“Just curious, I, uh, I want a job.”

“What does my time here have to do with you wanting a job?”

“I just want to know if this is a good job.”

“You want to take it away from me?”

“No! I...don’t”

“Don’t act like you do, then.”

I thought of what to say next.

“Do you have a break or something?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“I don’t give that out to strangers.”

“Okay.”

She grabbed the copies that had popped out of the machine and brought them to me.

“Do you want them stapled or bound?” she asked.

“No, loose is fine,” I answered.

“Alright then, it will be two dollars and twenty-five cents.”

I took out my wallet and began to count the money in it.

“You’re bullshit,” she whispered.

“Excuse me?” I said, looking at her.

“You’re bullshit. You’re a fake. You’re a phony. That’s all I’m gonna say. I don’t want to make you cry in public and I don’t want any trouble. But I thought you should know.”

“I’m sorry is this about...last time?” I asked, my wallet hanging from my hand, dropping a couple of quarters into the ground. I leaned down and picked them up.

“What do you think?”

“Look, I’m sorry. I just thought you had forgotten me for real,” I said, still picking up quarters.

“You’re really fucking gullible, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“I only got fifteen copies of the first page.”

“What?!” I said, quickly and fully standing up.

She laughed.

“See?!”

“Well, but why would you pretend to forget me, what’s the point?!”

“It’s fun! It’s just fun. Come on.”

“Well, I guess I can see the funny side of it.”

“Not you, no. Then there would be no fun from it.”

She smiled. I only stared back at her.

“I should get going,” I said.

“Alright, see you around.”

I left.

The weather on the border is, in layman’s terms, weird. First off, the way the weather behaves throughout most of the year is one of dry heat that penetrates the inside of your house. You better pray you have some decent air conditioning to make it bearable because you just can’t escape it. That’s the thing with heat. With the cold you can at least protect yourself by covering up in a jacket and maybe a bundle of blankets. With the heat what do you do? You really can’t stop it. And that’s the way it is here for most of the year. But lately, we had started getting rains every couple of days or at least once a week. There’s a time I remember from when I was six where it kept raining throughout the summer. So maybe it’s all cyclical? That’s what I’m afraid of, and not because of the rain but because of the other anomaly we were facing at the time. They were killing people out in the streets again. It never really stopped, I think there was at least one killing per day. In a way that brought back memories, the streets would have bodies with blood drying under the sun or washing away in the rain. But hey, I suppose it’s a huge improvement over having eight to ten of them in one day. But now they seemed to be on the increase again, they were killing sometimes five people on the same day. And not just in the outskirts of the city but in the most open streets filled with businesses and people. And a few of them were pregnant women. I hadn’t learned to drive just yet, but how was I supposed to now

with this happening? What if I got myself shot? What if my mom or anyone else who was with me got shot? I was starting to not sleep at night, remembering that night they carjacked us.

It had been two years before. It was a February night. We were on our way back from El Paso to our house. We were in front of the S-Mart near Tomas Fernandez. Wide open to escape and wide open to get attacked. There was a real fifty/fifty chance that we weren't going to make it out of there, defined by how wide that street was. We stopped at a red light, just listening to the radio giving news about a scuffle that had broken out in Congress. Our windows were down. Big mistake. But we were starting to freeze inside the car with how low the temperatures drop. Mom had heard that it's bad to turn on the air conditioning or the heat without turning down the windows. Something about it having pollutants. And right through my open window, this guy, this kid, who couldn't have been more than fifteen was aiming his gun at me. He kept yelling at us to give up the car. I kept feeling the hot barrel of the gun hit against my temple. Even though it wasn't in my hands, I could tell it was heavy. I was surprised this head-shaven, skinny kid wasn't dropping the gun. He hit me a couple of times, leaving a smudge of a bruise. The cars crossed on the other side of the street and nobody seemed to notice what was happening to us in the moment. Or more likely, they noticed but didn't care. I swore that at one point he was going to pull the trigger, even if only by accident and then I'd be gone. I don't really believe or not believe in God. I'm not sure about it. There were so many times where I wanted to believe in him. I went to a confirmations course right before finishing high school, thinking that I was ready to confront the evils of the world. But as I saw my confirmation leaders insult those who didn't agree with them, stand behind accused priests, I wondered if that was something that I wanted to stand behind on. Hearing about twenty teenagers being gunned down at a party, or seeing evil men become presidents, I wondered what the whole point of believing in God was. Christianity has the Apocalypse, so why pray when in the end this is the end that they want? They want us all to die? So why care? Why care for that in the first place? Why care for a God that's seeking that kind of fate?

And with no picture of heaven or hell or any afterlife in my mind, I wondered what it would be like to be gone. If that kind of emptiness could even be felt. What would it be like. But that idea of being nothing, of imagining my mother spattered in blood crying for me, and my dad doing the same was something that I couldn't bear. I trembled with the gun to my temple. I closed my eyes, feeling tears go down my face. I must have even screamed. I can't clearly remember. People have told me that other drivers would just get out of the car and give it up so we could be safe, but neither my mom or I were feeling safe. Her foot hit the accelerator in the instant the streetlamp went from green to yellow. We sped forward and the kid fired his gun. I felt its explosion vibrate through the body of the car and through my muscle and bone. And that was it. We made it out alive. But for a lot of people, surviving that kind of ordeal makes them think that now they have conquered death and can stand to survive the worst life has over. I didn't. Instead, I felt that the probability of death was too real. Too real and too close for my age. I'm supposed to be having fun in university, dating and I'm supposed to have friends who do the same. Instead, I can't even stand to cross the street without fearing that I'm about to take my last steps.

And I wish I could say that this was the only thing that had happened to someone my age. Other people weren't so lucky. I've already mentioned the party. I've not talked about Giovanna; she was working at this internet café. Nothing exactly comfy or special. That's one thing about Juárez or Mexico in general, every place is make-shifted into being like something else even if it wasn't built for that purpose. This internet café was a two-story house where the owners lived upstairs and the job was downstairs, placing a bunch of old computers in a half-circle that filled where the living room used to be. The café part was the kitchen where they had set up some small tables and chairs. One day, these two gunmen got into the place and just started shooting at everyone. No warning, no orders to anybody. They just started shooting. Giovanna got a bullet through the throat. She choked on her own blood. They took her hand purse. But she had nothing in it. That was going to be her first payday.

There were times when I was just walking when I would suddenly feel the gun again making me stop and turn until I couldn't feel it anymore. But sometimes it'd be shoulder, on my spine or the back of my neck. Now more than ever, I was feeling it more constantly. And sometimes it wasn't just the gun, sometimes I would feel a flash of fire going off from it. I never felt the gun go off, but it was what I guess a bullet would feel like. I wasn't sleeping and when you have to get up early to cross the bridge, that complicates things.

I kept thinking that I had made a mistake staying in the border to go to school. But it wasn't like I could be anywhere else. Mexico was a disaster with more and more cities and towns becoming filled with violence. If you wanted to travel, it had to be through plane because the roads were filled with criminals on the street waiting to attack in the same way my mom and I had been attacked in Juárez. Then smaller towns or cities, happier ones were starting to become dangerous or seemed to be under the care of some terrible people who wanted to do things like slam Christianity into textbooks or get rid of gay marriage. Different versions of this seemed to be happening all over the world. So where could one go? Home, I guess. I didn't like it, but there really wasn't anything else I could call Juárez and El Paso. But I kept wishing that I had a bigger possibility of leaving. I kept wishing I hadn't committed to doing a degree that could take me four or five years to finish. I kept feeling I wasn't going to live that long. But there I was. There wasn't much else I could do.

The CBP Officers seemed to take their time longer than usual with me. Mom said it was because I wasn't shaving and because of my plain black shirts. I decided to shave, cut my hair a little and maybe start wearing a few bright colors. It didn't work. It did work for someone, though.

The next time, we bumped into each other in the morning as we were on our way to our classes. She smiled, even though she was looking a bit pale and had bags under her eyes, all made too clear under that kind of Fall light that seems to dissolve any shadow. It was as if she was trying to

sneak up on me in the way she came in. It was on this bridge they had built to connect a parking lot to the rest of the campus, and you could see a good deal of Juárez from there. We were right beside the Nursing Building, looking down at passing cars and some of the bigger campus buildings and mountains. There was this thing with people from El Paso who had never set foot in Juárez thinking that the view they had from El Paso was all they needed to know what Juárez was really like. All that you can see of Juárez from El Paso is the poor and old section of Anapra with its cardboard houses, deteriorating buildings, all of them standing on wavy, dirty hills. We were high enough to see the lights of Juárez and El Paso all around us. The sounds of passing cars melded into roaring waves that echoed into the morning.

“Thanks,” I told her, trying to smile.

She softly hit me with a fist on my shoulder.

“Hey, chill out, dude. I don’t bite,” she said, standing beside me and leaning herself on the bridge. She groaned and leaned over the edge, looking like a seasick passenger.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She chuckled.

“I’ll be fine. I’m just extremely hungover. I got so high and drunk last night. I’m really aiming for immunity. Hope I can achieve it very very soon.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and soon she did too.

“Why didn’t you stay at home?” I asked once I had stopped laughing.

“I’ve got a test. Maybe I’ll go home after.”

“Not a bad idea.”

“What are you studying?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? So you’re just in the Core Curriculum or what?”

“Yeah.”

“Should’ve gone to Community, dude. Same shit for a lower price.”

“I dunno, it just made sense to go here first if this is where I’m gonna end up.”

“Oh well, it’s your money.”

“It’s my parents’ money.”

“Oh well, it’s your parents’ money.”

I thought it over, she didn’t seem impressed with the idea that I didn’t know what I was doing, that I was wasting my time, maybe I just had to tell her the truth, even if it was in a roundabout sort of way. Not like she would be or should be. I wasn’t impressed with myself either, and this only added to the feeling that I shouldn’t be going to school there anyway.

“I’m thinking of taking up Communications,” I told her.

“You’re thinking of being on TV or some shit?”

I shook my head.

“Nah, just looking at myself in pictures makes me feel sick. But maybe something in that field, maybe a journalist, maybe um...something that helps people. That gets people to talk, to get their message across. I don't know. I haven't really thought about it much.”

“People don't really seem to want to talk a lot these days.”

“But we have Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp...”

“Yeah, we do. And people use it to talk among themselves. I'm just saying, I think you could find a job in something like that if you set out to get people to talk about themselves.”

“Well, this would be something like that. I'd like to get people who can't talk to talk.”

She shrugged.

“Maybe you're in the right place then, but you've gotta steer things in that direction, man. Your life's your ship, be the captain. Whatever, man. That's kind of a shitty, stupid thing to say,” she chuckled and I laughed along with her for a moment.

“It makes sense at least, which is more than I can say for a lot of things I say,” I told her.

“I've gotta feeling you're right on the money,” she nodded.

I took a moment. This all seemed to be going pretty well. I needed to think of a few decent questions and not screw up like I always do.

“What are you studying?”

“Graphic Design. I'm a junior.”

“How's that?”

“Awesome if you like it.”

“Do you?”

“Yeah. Love it.”

“You’re almost done.”

“Oh, but I’m not finishing.”

I got in closer, thinking I may have misheard her.

“What?”

“I’m not finishing here. I dunno if I’m finishing school at all.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no rush. I can finish any time I want anywhere I want. I think I may be going to Florence. Somewhere with a bit more culture than here, somewhere cooler.”

“Florence. In Italy?” I asked.

“No. Florence, Texas. Florence, Idaho. Yes! Florence, Italy!” she replied, widening her eyes.

“Why Florence?”

“Why the hell not?”

“Each place can be special in its own way. So, what’s special about Florence?”

She thought it over for a moment.

“You’ve ever seen pictures of it?”

“I might have, but maybe I’m thinking of Venice”

“It’s sorta in the same ballpark. But as far Florence goes, just being amongst those ancient buildings, getting that sense of history, of art, of creativity—”

“There’s history here too.”

“Sure, but it’s not the same. This, this place is old hat to you, to me. We know it by heart. The best and the worst. What else is there? Florence would be new at least. Can you imagine, leaning on a bridge and looking into the water of the Arno. The sculptures on the streets...,” she stayed quiet, looking out into the stars as if imagining what all that must be like.

“Sounds like you really want to go.”

She came off her trance and then looked at me.

“It’s not just Florence. Like, think about it. You think of Florence and you start to think about the whole world. What’s out there? Where could you go? London maybe?”

“What would there be in London?”

“Just the idea of being in the subway—” she stopped herself to look at me, “-they call it the Underground there. Looking at all the people, feeling the air of it as it wooshes by, as it echoes in those tunnels. That’s—that’s different. It’s something I want to live.”

“You have a very cool imagination.”

She shrugged.

“I’ve gotta. I’m an artist.”

“But don’t you think that other people from other places in the world imagine that about us? Or could if they knew? That they could find it just as special as a place like London or Florence?”

She thought about it for a moment. I couldn’t tell if she was trying not to laugh or to get angry. It was more like a face of bafflement.

“Maybe. But that’s them. That’s not me.”

“What’s wrong with El Paso?”

“Everything! And not just El Paso, but...”

She stretched out her arms.

“...Juárez, Las Cruces...everything! It all sucks. People only know how to get drunk and kill each other. It’s a mess.”

“I guess, you’re right.”

She smirked and laughed. She no longer seemed able to keep her feet fixed on one place. She would turn around to face where my back was pointing, and then back to the other side of the bridge. My eyes could barely keep up with her.

“You aren’t just saying that, are you?”

“No. Things have gotten bad in Juárez again. You’ve seen the news?”

“Oh yeah. I hope it’s because they’re in—wait, are you from Juárez?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Yeah. I hope it’s because the government is like transitioning or something. But that fat bald bastard Cesar Duarte, you know, the governor, or ex-governor, he’s like ‘I’m leaving a safer Chihuahua.’ That guy is a fat fuck because he’s full of shit.”

I chuckled.

She smirked.

“But yeah, no way I’m going back there. Not for now.”

“Oh well, I’m stuck there for the meantime.”

“Get an apartment here!”

“I don’t have money. And I—”

Oh great, there it was. It had taken its time. Don’t worry, I’m not a stutterer. I will never have Colin Firth playing me in a movie. But when I get nervous, I choke. Words seem to hit a wall against my teeth and I just can’t talk. But why was this happening now? I was doing fine. Perfectly fine. Now I was thinking about Juárez, about the CBP Officers, about the gun on my head, about Giovanna. And she was staring at me. I started to feel like going to the bathroom like that time in the bridge.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m fine. My head just went...elsewhere.”

“It happens to me too. But you were saying?”

“Yeah, I, uh...I mean. I can’t get used to any of this. Going back and forth. Like both cities are entirely different worlds. One I’m used to and the other I just don’t know, and I keep coming here and I don’t understand it. And it’s not that different, but it just doesn’t feel...right.”

She put a hand to my shoulder.

“You think about it too much. Don’t. But hey, take baby steps. It’d be for your own good if you lived here. Or maybe not. But at least to have that experience. But you’ve gotta have the balls to do it. And hey, maybe you don’t have those balls. At least not yet.”

“Yeah, maybe not.”

She smiled again.

“But they might be getting there.”

We both laughed.

“At least take a trip out to Chihuahua, get some burritos down in Villa Ahumada. Baby steps, you know.”

“I don’t drive.”

“So learn.”

“I’m not sure if that would help me.”

“Why not?”

“I just...I get nervous. Have you seen how people drive? I don’t know if I can do it” I stopped for a moment. “But hey, you don’t drive either!” I told her.

“I do. I just don’t have a car, which is different.”

“Okay, you win.”

“It’s not that big of a deal. You go to Europe; a lot of people don’t drive there. They just have better public transportation than the rutas. Even the buses here are better than the ones in Juárez. I know that’s not saying much. Still, you should. It’ll free you up. This isn’t a city where it’s easy to get around without a car. It’s all paradoxical, though. El Paso’s not that big.”

“Maybe I’ll do something soon. What’s your name?”

“Susana. Yours?”

“Mateo.”

She shook my hand in an exaggerated almost sarcastic manner, but the next felt true:

“Pleasure to meet you, Mateo.”

The following weeks we’d meet at the same time. She’d show me her artwork; a wide-ranging body of work that went from simple things like silhouettes of trees to creepy like bodies made out of eyes. She tried to get me to draw, but I could barely do proper stick figures. She taught me how to draw an eye, which I almost got right. She got me into one of her classrooms, one of the studios where she and her classmates would take their drawing classes. We sat on stools and sketched away at a piece of paper set on a board, the paper shining brightly due to the fluorescent lights above us.

“It’s such a cliché, but it’s the truth: Eyes are the window to the soul. You get them right, you get everything right. People will be able to connect with the art,” she told me.

“What about things like landscapes? Nature stuff? Those don’t have eyes.”

“People connect with those in a different way. C’mon, don’t get ahead of yourself. You can’t even draw the fucking eye and you’re already calling your self Monet.”

I laughed.

“I’m not Monet.”

“We can see that.”

Another time we took the bus over to some of the used bookstores they had in El Paso. She was there to get art books and graphic novels. Now, I’m not the biggest reader in the world but I had read more than her. I liked books more than she did, meaning none at all. I looked around for stuff that she might like. Among the tall, messy piles of books, with the smell of coffee and old pages around us, I told her about García Márquez’ *Doce Cuentos Peregrinos*, about *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran-Foer, but she just wasn’t having it.

“I don’t know, dude. I just don’t feel like my attention span is long enough for a book,” she said.

“How do you know if you haven’t even tried one?” I asked.

“I’ve tried, and I don’t really last any longer than twenty minutes.”

“That’s enough for a day.”

She nodded.

“Give me the names and I’ll get them from the library.”

“What? No? Let me give them to you as a present,”

“Mateo, c’mon, you don’t have to do that.”

“My treat.”

“Maybe on my birthday, okay? If I’ve not read them already,” she said and smiled.

I must’ve looked a bit disappointed because then she tapped my shoulder.

“Hey, but thanks. It’s a nice thought.”

One time, she invited me home and she started to give me her idea of a make-over: Unbuttoning the top of my shirt and messing my hair. I reached for the locks that would sometimes cover her eyes, but she backed away with a grin on her face.

“Now,” she said “This isn’t just about your clothes. But also, about your mind.”

She took out a tiny, round pill.

“Is that an Altoid?” I asked

She chuckled. “No, it’s X.”

I pursed my lips.

“Take it.”

I shook my head.

“Not my thing.”

“Nothing’s gonna happen. Promise.”

“Don’t tell me you do that stuff.”

“Sure do. Come on, don’t leave me alone on this. Let’s party together. Loose up a little. That’s what you need. That’s why you don’t have a girlfriend,” she said, smiling.

I froze for a moment, felt something surge up from my guts.

“Fuck you,” I stuttered.

She laughed hysterically.

“You’re so fucking funny.”

There were those thoughts again. The gun, Juárez, Giovanna. Except that soon those thoughts weren’t just in my head, they were starting to come out of my mouth and as it would happen sometimes, I couldn’t find a way to stop them.

“Don’t you fucking see that this is the fucking bullshit that causes all the trouble everywhere and that you’re supporting it like crazy? Like seriously, where do you even get these things?! Where do you get your pot?!”

She looked at me with raised eyebrows and an open mouth.

“Jesus, dude, shut the fuck up—“ she said.

“Me shut the fuck up?! Jesus, don’t you just want to listen for once in your life?!”

“Don’t talk to me like that, especially at my place. You don’t know shit about me, about my friends, about my fucking life—“

“And do you know about it?! What if one of your friends has connections to like, the Juárez Cartel? And you’re just giving them money to kill and then you fucking die from all the drugs you’re

taking and shit? Huh?!” I caught myself hyperventilating, I couldn’t really talk anymore, I was hyperventilating. “Fuck…” I said after I stopped myself. “Sorry.”

She stared at me, looked down at the floor and shook her head. She put away the X tab in one of her pockets and then looked at me.

“Take a breather, Mat, get outta here.”

“Susie, I’m sorry—“

“Get out or I’ll fucking personally kick your ass and balls out of here.”

I had to take the hint, but I couldn’t. I just remained frozen in place. She pushed me to the door and opened it. I got up and made my way out the door, but I still couldn’t move. She kept trying to shove me out. At one point, she tripped on my leg and fell to the floor. She gave a yelp and soon I turned to see, she was holding her nose with blood seeping between her fingers.

“Jesus, Susana. I—“

“Pinches manos de estómago,” she said and slammed the door in my face.

I stood outside her door until I got tired. Then, I just sat, waiting for what seemed like hours but couldn’t have been more than fifteen minutes. I looked at the hallway of white walls and blue, stained carpet, hearing the hum of the heating going into every room. I saw this man who looked a couple of years older than I did; thin; clean-shaven with slick hair and a leather jacket.

“You’re waiting on Susie?” he asked me.

“No.”

“Then, what are you doing here?”

“Nothing.”

“Okay.”

He knocked on the door. She opened it. She had bloody toilet paper rolled up in her nostrils.

“Jesus! What the hell happened to you?!” the man said.

She peeked out the door and noticed me.

“You’re still here?!” she told me.

I stood up, ready to turn and leave.

“Wait?! Did you do this?!” he said, turning to look at me.

“Tony, he didn’t do shit. I fucking fell, okay?!” she said, grabbing his hand.

He pulled away from her and he came charging towards me like a rhino. I made a run for it, but the problem was that he did too. He easily grabbed me from my arms and pinned me down to the ground, pressing on my back with his knee. Susana ran from the apartment doorway.

“Tony, for fuck’s sake, I’m telling you it wasn’t him!” she said, grabbing his shoulders.

“Don’t defend him!”

“Just look at him, you think that he could hit me?! I fucking fell. You know how fucking clumsy I get.”

Tony got up.

I turned and Susana had made her way to face me.

“Go. Now,” she whispered. I obeyed.

As I walked away, I turned and saw him put his arm over her shoulder, as they walked into her apartment. I then turned towards the night, with the cold air hitting me. Fall had come as other years, but in like every fall, every year, nothing had changed.

I just let the rest of the semester pass like nothing. I went to my classes. Did the best I could in them and then would go home. Didn't really bother much in socializing or doing anything else. It was pointless. No one bothered with me, so I never bothered with them.

I didn't see Susana in those months. Sometimes I think I'd see her coming my way and I'd take another road. My Music Appreciation teacher once said that the great curse of college students was having to bump into their ex-girlfriends on campus. True. But at that point, I hadn't been able to bump into anyone I knew. But of course, after the accident with Susie, I kept almost bumping into her.

One night back home, I got a message from Susana:

“Hey, I'm sorry about last time and about everything. I'm leaving for San Francisco with Tony, so I'm having a farewell party on Friday night in my apartment. I understand if you don't come, but I'd like you to. Take care.”

I never answered.

But I did end up going to the party anyway. I thought I would stay for an hour or two. I stayed the whole night. And then some.

She had lit up her apartment with some gels she once told me she had stolen from the theater department, and used them to surround the lampshades or hanging them in the light bulbs. From time

to time someone would switch them, so the apartment would look as if we were submerged in blood in one second, and in the other, it would look like some kind of permanent dusk. Her tiny apartment now did not even seem to exist with it so crowded with drunk boys and girls, and the jumble of their conversations and indie hip-hop, and it smelled only of beer, pot and cigarettes. I walked through the maze of invitees, if I so much glanced Susie in the distance, I would walk away to get as far as I could. I was starting to regret showing up in the first place. I kept thinking maybe I should let her see me, just to show her I was nice. But I don't know if I really cared anymore at that point.

Unfortunately, I couldn't avoid her all night. She tapped my shoulder and showed up behind me. The smell of cigarettes and perfume gave her away. She'd always say she never wears perfume. I call bull on that. I turned to face her.

"Hey! You came!" she told me.

I tried to smirk, trying to play it cool. But I guess it must've looked stupid because I always look dumb when I smile.

"Yeah," I wanted to say something like "obviously" but I thought I would sound like an asshole.

Susie peeked behind my shoulder.

"Did you come alone? Were you talking to anyone?"

"No and no."

"Okay. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"But we're talking already."

“Outside.”

“Okay. Are you sure about it? You’ve got a party here.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure about it. It’s just for a minute.”

“All right.”

We stepped out her apartment and walked past the hallway to this balcony where the stairways connected the floors of the apartment. Despite the amber streetlamps, our faces were covered in shadow. The cold December air would hit me in the face from time to time, and I wondered why we weren’t wearing scarves.

“What’s up?” I asked her, sniffing back a gob of snot that I felt creeping out my nostrils.

“Look, first of all I mean what I said in the message. I’m sorry, okay? I shouldn’t have reacted like that. I get really dumb sometimes. Sometimes. And not like that. When I get dumb, I’m normally not that dumb.”

“Fair enough.”

“Are we cool?” she asked, with concern frozen on her eyes.

“Yeah. We’re cool,” I nodded and sniffed again. Goddammit, Susie, don’t make me start winter break with a cold.

“Okay. Good. Listen, there’s someone in there. A friend. I think you two could get along pretty well. She really wants to spend time with me but…”

She pointed her arms towards the hallway. "...you know, San Francisco. Her name is Abby, and I think she needs a little company right now. She used to live in Juárez but she moved to Alamogordo after they killed her dad."

"Shit! Really?!"

She shushed me.

"Keep your voice down. I don't want her to think I'm parading her life facts around."

"Sorry."

"Her friends have been real assholes, and I can't hang out with her. And I think you could do it."

"Why me?"

"Because you're nice."

"But you just want us to hang out? No dating or anything?"

"Yeah. Strictly platonic hanging out."

"Why does it have to be strictly platonic?"

She gave me a stern look and pulled out her hand, making a fist. As she gave me her reasons, she would lift her fingers, one by one.

"One, she's really fucked up right now. I can't have her dealing with emotional dating bullshit right now. Two, you are nice but you are awkward. Sorry, but you are. Again, best if you treat her like you would treat a friend. That's what she needs right now. Three, you are not her type. You know what she likes to do? Dancing. Can you dance?"

I hesitated for a moment.

“No.”

“There we go. She won’t be into you. Sorry. So just take it easy with her, okay?”

I nodded.

“Okay.”

She smiled.

Then I thought of an idea.

“Maybe you should teach me how to dance.”

She cringed.

“No! I’m not teaching you anything, Mateo! Just go in there and talk to her as if she was a normal person!”

“I was kidding.”

“Yeah, sure.”

We walked back into the party. Once inside, we stood in the doorway we looked for Abby together. When Susie nodded her head towards who she was, I froze. She seriously expected me to not think of her as someone I would consider dating? She was short but in a cute way. Thin, with long brunette hair that fell halfway to her back. Almond eyes and sharp features that didn’t seem to lose a sense of tenderness to her. Plus, she had style wearing a black leather jacket and black jeans. Plus, those Converse shoes. One black, one red. That was style. But I had a promise to keep.

Susie dunked a cup full of soda into my hand. I looked at her, confused.

“Pretend you’re drinking beer.”

“Like, you want me to act drunk?”

“No. Just—when you have nothing to say, drink. It helps you calm down, take a breather. Got it?”

“Sure”

“Go,” Susie told me.

And I walked towards Abby. It didn’t really seem inconvenient to talk to her, she was alone. Maybe this could work after all. I just really wished I didn’t have to keep it platonic. I stood next to her and said

“Hey.”

She turned and faced me. She gave me a brief but nervous smile.

“Hi.”

I stretched out my hand.

“I’m Mateo. I’m a friend of Susie’s.”

She didn’t stretch out her hand.

“I’m Abby.”

“Nice to meet you, Abby.”

“You know her from the University?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Cool. What are you studying?”

“Undeclared.”

“Oh.”

I had no idea what to say now.

“I’ve been thinking of going into Communications.”

“You wanna be on TV?”

I shrugged.

“Everyone asks that.”

“Well, what else can you do with that degree?”

“Videos, audio production, it helps some people get into marketing.”

“Do you want to do any of that?”

“For me, it’s more about helping people out, getting people talking and letting them into the world.”

Abby nodded.

“Well, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I took a sip of my drink. I thought it would be 7-Up and it turned out to be Sprite. No complaints, except it wasn't doing shit in making me think up anything cool to keep up the conversation. Then I thought of something that maybe could work.

“Where are you from in Juárez?”

Fucking small talk.

“La Chaveña.”

“Isn't it like Hell on Earth over there?”

She glared at me.

“No offense, it's just that I always hear they're killing people there and—oh,” I froze.

Abby's eyes widened and she quickly turned away. I stood there, frozen in the moment. I followed her.

“Hey, I'm sorry. I'm just asking because I also got a friend killed. Hey-,”

Susie stopped me, her face a cross between bafflement and fuming anger.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“Beat by beat: What. Did. You. Do?”

“I said La Chaveña was Hell on Earth because they're always killing people there.”

Susie facepalmed and cringed.

“Oh God, Mateo!”

“I’m sorry, it just went out like that.”

“You should come with a fucking trigger warning.”

“It’s better to talk about it, you know—”

She held out her hand.

“Stop right there, Mateo. Stop. Right. There.”

“You aren’t even letting me talk. What the—”

“No one else has to think like you. A friend got killed in Juárez a few years ago. I haven’t told you this because I’m barely getting to know you. Get it?”

I shook my head and slapped myself.

“Aw, man. Christ.”

Susie rolled her eyes.

“Now what?” I asked.

She shrugged.

“I don’t fucking know. Don’t even try talking to her again. Not tonight. Not unless she talks to you, which probably won’t happen.”

She left. I sighed. I thought it was time to go home but I had overstayed. I had no bus to go to. I had to figure out how to get home. I didn’t know how I was going to. This had been a bad idea.

#### 4. SUSIE

Fucking Mateo. Fucking Abby. I had decided I would only drink for the night but because of those two, I needed something stronger. Tony would give me shit about it since he's always like "You party too much." Whatever. He doesn't have to deal with this bullshit. I walked between my friends trying to find Abby or some pot or anything stronger than alcohol, whichever came first. But Tony came first. He asked me what's up and I told him about Mateo and Abby, and desperately needing something stronger than alcohol. And predictably, he didn't approve.

"Let's just stick around together for the night, huh? Some wine or vodka, how's that sound?"

"I'm positive we're out of wine and vodka."

"No one's drinking that. I'm sure it's there."

"Well, if you want to look for it, go ahead. I've gotta talk to Abby."

"Forget Abby. Whatever problems she's having aren't going to be solved tonight."

"I've gotta give it a shot because I'm going to spend the whole time in San Francisco feeling like shit."

"Suit yourself, but you better not drink or do anything until I get the wine."

I smirked. He thinks I'm stupid.

"So it's just going to be wine now?"

He sighed.

"Or Vodka."

He left and I continued my search. I walked into my room and found a bunch of baby-faced teens powdering my books with coke lines. They all looked at me, with panic in their faces. I had no idea if they knew who I was but I had no idea who they were.

“Hey guys, are you sharing?” I asked and leaned in closer to them. Honestly, coke isn’t really my thing. It gets me too nervous and it’s too fucking expensive. Speed is a little more helpful if you want to stay awake, but I mean, there’s also coffee. But at that point, I just wanted to take anything. The kids nodded and I jumped over to them, closed in my face and snorted a line. There was always that drop from the nose to the throat that feels super awkward, it reminds me too much of my allergy attacks. I took a beer from one of the kids and swallowed it whole.

“Woo!” I yelled, slamming the can on the bed. “Guys, know if anyone out there has anything else? Molly, ‘shrooms? Any-thing.”

They just shrugged.

“Losers,” I told them and stepped out of the room, keeping my eyes out for anything; if I saw a can, cup or bottle of beer no one was drinking, I’d take it and drink it all up. If I saw someone passing weed around, I’d ask for a drag and smoke. If things were feeling too weird, I had to make sure I wasn’t going to kill myself. One aspect people often miss about putting on parties is that you’re also putting up a show in a way. Actually, it’s not just about having parties, but also partying. You put on a show for yourself and then you dance, even if it’s just with yourself. The thing is that sometimes you just can’t take it. You don’t die. But you do pass out. I bumped into Abby.

“Enjoying yourself?” I asked her.

She didn’t reply, she just gave me a leer. I shrugged.

“Dude, fuck this party!” I told her.

“It’s your party!”

“I know! Let’s fuck it up!”

We started to dance, banging our heads along with the music, oblivious to everything and everyone around us.

## 5. MATEO

I was falling asleep on the couch when I heard the scream. It was ear-piercing, blood curdling. I had heard that kind of scream once before when my mom yelled during our carjacking. I got up and tried to find where it had come from. It didn't take long.

Abby was on her knees, screaming at nothing and no one. People around her were covering their ears, trying to approach her, trying to figure out what was wrong. I ran and got close to her, kneeling in front of her.

“Abby, what’s wrong?”

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” she yelled.

I can't lie, she freaked me out and I backed away. Then she started to cry, burying her face in her knees. Everyone was just staring at her. I looked around, trying to find Susie. But I couldn't see her anywhere.

“Susie?! Has anybody seen Susie?!”

Tony came through the crowd.

“She’s passed out.”

Shit.

“Wake her up!” I said.

“Just chill, Abby’s just having a panic attack. Let her breathe through it.”

“This isn’t normal.”

He just shrugged. I stood up. Susie wobbled in from her room.

“Who the fuck is yelling so hard?!” she slurred as she held on to the walls. Then when she realized it was Abby, she just said “Whoa.”

“Everyone, come on, guys, give her some space,” I said, trying to get everyone to move away. Tony snickered.

“Man, come on, you’re making too much of a big deal. Get her out of here.”

Susie got closer.

“She can’t move! Can’t you see she keeps freaking out?!”

“Dude, this is just the life of the party. Come on, get the hell out!”

I stared at him, trying not to look away. I could sense everyone looking at me, including Susie. Even through her drunkenness she seemed to be compelled by the moment as if in a spell. I think she had no clue what to do. Her eyes were fixed on me and suddenly she walked over to me.

“He’s right,” she said, pointing at me.

“What?!” Tony shrugged.

“He’s right. Party’s over, guys! Go home!”

“Dude, we were just getting started!” Tony said indignantly as partygoers started to make their way out the door.

“Hey, people, come on!”

Susie held and patted Abby’s head.

“It’s okay, sweetheart, it’s okay. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Abby kept crying.

“Need us to take you home?”

Abby nodded between tears. Susie looked up at Tony.

“We’ve gotta take her home.”

“Are you crazy?!”

“No, just drunk.”

“Then you should know this is a stupid decision.”

“You want her freaking out like this on an Uber or on the bus?! They’re gonna call the cops.”

“Jesus, then you two are fucking going too!” Tony replied

“I’m okay with that,” Susie said, pointing at me. “Then, we can take you home, Mateo.”

“I’m not taking that twerp back home. He fucked this up.”

She stared at him.

“You are a fucking asshole, you know that?”

“You’re drunk. I’m going home. See you tomorrow,” he said and left the apartment. Susie drunkenly ran out to the hallway.

“You think I can take them?!”

“Figure it out. See you tomorrow!”

He kept walking.

“Fuck you, asshole!”

A woman peeked her head from one of the apartments and shushed Susie. Susie turned to her and furiously yelled “Fuck you too.” Susie looked at us.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“You are drunk,” I said.

“You sound just like Tony.”

“It’s the only thing he said that wasn’t bullshit. Maybe we should just stay here.”

“Then how are you getting home?!”

I shrugged, I couldn’t think of any options.

“I’ll walk.”

“It’s fucking cold out there.”

“It’s not the North Pole.”

I walked away. Susie followed me.

“Mateo, for real, I can take you there.”

“I’ll figure it out, okay?”

I walked away.

She stood there by the door, watching me.

“This is why you need a car, you know?!” she said, I didn’t turn around. I couldn’t disagree.

I did the math. I could only afford an Uber back in Juárez, not one from Susie’s apartment to the bridge. I decided I’d have to walk to the bridge. It was cold indeed. I hugged myself against the evening walking through the sudden cold gusts of border wind that would blow sand and dirt on my face. Cars kept passing by. I walked past clubs and apartments with their own parties. I wondered if there were others like me walking out and heading alone toward the bridge. I made it to the Santa Fe bridge and walked on back, making it back into Juárez.

There’s a terrifying and peaceful serenity to Juárez at night. I don’t know if it’s just because I prefer the evening to the day, but if you’re in a neighborhood that you know, you don’t really feel worried anymore. I wasn’t in a neighborhood or a place that I knew well. I walked past the Mexican Customs checkpoint, stepping under its fluorescent lights as officers checked cars and other sat, holding steaming Styrofoam cups of coffee. I got into the midnight Juárez darkness, looking up at the mayor’s office building. They had put a star on top to celebrate the Christmas season. In front of me, there were soldiers, carrying their rifles. I could feel them watching my silhouette. I was in the dark, walking over a small treeline, I finally made my way out, seeing a family hospital in front of me. I stood in front of it, its light shining on my back. I tried to maintain myself as close as possible to the inside of the hospital without actually entering. I ordered an Uber and waited for it to come. An ambulance ran past me, parking on the side where the emergency room was. I heard the paramedics open the doors to the ambulance and then carry someone inside. They yelled something about him being “Herido de bala”, and another man crying after him.

“Salvenlo! Salvenlo! Por favor!” he yelled.

I closed my eyes, trying to calm down. But I couldn’t let anyone see me nervous or scared. I always heard that was the easiest way to attract trouble, to let people prey on you. I opened them just

in time to see a row of police trucks shine their blue and red lights on me as they drove by. I kept waiting. Other cars drove by, blasting loud Banda music or reggaeton. Moments like these made me wish that I was living two decades earlier. Even bad music was better. The Uber finally arrived like ten minutes later. The driver was a woman called Ana driving a gray Sedan. She arrived a little while after and prompted by the cold, I jumped into the car. To resist the temptation of asking her any questions, I just looked out the window. All the houses and buildings in Juárez seem to be white or gray, but at night, they look yellow from the streetlights.

There were times when she seemed to get lost, and I would have to redirect her again. In moments like that, I'd feel my stomach and heart jump. We'd have to see more cop cars awaiting in the corners of streets, more ambulances rushing by. I kept wondering what was happening in these places, if I would end up finding out about them the next day on the paper or on the news. I made it home. I entered and my parents were awake, watching the news on the living room.

“How did it go?” my dad asked.

“It was okay,” I said.

“You don't sound okay,” mom said, she stood up and touched my forehead. “and you're all sweaty.”

“That was all the dancing. I'm just tired. I'm not used to being out this late.”

“Do you want anything to eat?”

I did, I was actually starving. I hadn't eaten anything hoping to eat at the party itself but my stomach had been left empty since the early afternoon. But I was more exhausted than anything. It was one of those occasions where I wished I could eat while sleeping. I'd say intravenously, but

imagine if you could eat while you sleep and taste, as if you were dreaming about eating and actually happen? Jesus. Had I accidentally second-hand smoked weed at the party and now I was saying all this?

“I’ll just go to bed,” I said.

“Good night,” my dad said.

“You better not wake up sick,” she told me as I made my way up the stairs. I collapsed on the bed, tried to sleep for a moment before I realized I really couldn’t; had Abby made it home? Had Susie been too drunk that she couldn’t know if she was about to throw up and end up choking on her puke? What if she fell? So many things could happen while I was asleep. I kept looking at my phone, checking Facebook, anything for any kind of updates on her. All I kept getting was friends talking about how Trump was right, about how much feminists sucked and how ugly they were. They were definitely getting drunk tonight. But after a while my body couldn’t take it anymore. I fell asleep.

## 6. SUSIE

Abby went home on her own. I can't even remember much or what happened. But after a while she had calmed down, she felt she could breathe again. She grabbed a bottle of water from my fridge and sipped it down until it was empty. She was about to throw the bottle into the trash when I stopped her.

"Dude, no, put it apart. For recycling," I told her.

I could tell she was about to roll her eyes and just ended up closing them, and sighing.

"Fine," she said and threw the bottle into the recycling bin.

She opened the fridge again and took out another bottle, drank it and threw it away for recycling. Then, she stopped herself. She was too full already. This was her own "limpia" she called it. She could have been sick and that would have achieved her goal, but that idea didn't sound that great anymore in the moment and stopped before she would have actually puked her guts out. Instead, she went to the bathroom and peed like three times in a row, going in and out the door and then came back to me.

"I'm ready now. I peed and cried all the anxiety or whatever the fuck that was," she said.

"Good. Let me take you home."

"You're going to need a lot more than pee in order to sober up."

"I'm fine. I can drive."

"Look, I've had enough bullshit for a lifetime. I don't want to argue with you right now. I need a bed, maybe a shower and a couple of doughnuts. Maybe all at the same time."

The mention of doughnuts made me feel nauseated all of a sudden. I didn't want to dwell on it. But I also didn't want to let her go.

“Dude, please, I think you need someone to talk to.”

“No shit.”

“Abby—“

“Let me just go home. We'll talk later.”

And she just turned away. I was all alone in my room. All I remember next was making my way to my bedroom and collapsing on the bed. But a couple of hours later that felt like seconds, I woke up. Abby wouldn't leave my mind. I kept trying to reach her on the cell phone but she wouldn't reply. Fuck Abby. Fuck Mateo. Fuck Tony. Fuck everyone. Piece of shit assholes. Wouldn't let me sleep with their fucking words. I had to take drastic measures. I looked through my cabinets and I was out of weed. I found the wine Tony had left behind during my little attack. I popped it open and took a swig. And then another, until I finally fell asleep.

Tony woke me up slamming on my door. I tried to get up, but I felt like someone was pulling me from my bed while grabbing my face, my arms, my boobs and my legs. Forcefully pulled myself out of that stupor and set my feet on the ground. I felt the whole apartment tilt and spin simultaneously. Red wine-flavored nausea rushed through my throat and mouth. Somehow, I managed to swallow and open the door. Tony was standing outside.

“You're not ready,” he said.

I was practically and accidentally dressed. I guess my hair gave it away.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“We have ten minutes to get to the airport. Ten. Did you even pack?”

I hadn't.

“Yeah.”

“Let's go, then.”

“I'll be a minute.”

“You better just be a second.”

I ran to my room and ransacked my cabinets for clothes. I threw what I could to the bed. I couldn't find my suitcase. I just grabbed a backpack and tried to cram everything inside – underwear, casualwear, swimwear. Anything that in that hungover moment I suspected I would need for the trip.

I thought I was done so I got to the door. Tony just looked at me, befuddled.

“What the fuck is that shit?” he asked, pointing at the backpack.

“It's my luggage.”

He laughed.

“You're kidding me, right?”

“No, really. It's my luggage.”

“We aren't going to make the plane on time.”

“We won't if we keep arguing about fucking luggage”

He rolled his eyes.

“Okay, let’s get the fuck outta here.”

We ran to his truck and made our way to the airport. He kept trying to take shortcuts, but the distance between my apartment and the airport was too great. “We’re not gonna make it,” he kept saying. All the speeding he was doing and the twists and turns were making me queasy. I was already susceptible to getting carsick, and a lack of weed and a full-blown hangover were only making it worse. I was really lucky to not have hurled at all. Mateo and I would always talk about how there were cities that were bigger than El Paso, but the freeway in El Paso might as well have been in Los Angeles; we came at something of a standstill at one point around Bassett, with the malls and tiny businesses not so far away below us. The cars were going slowly. Apparently there had been a car accident. One of those every day out here. Angry, Tony kept honking the horn. The noise did little else but to make my hangover headache worse and made me realize that I was hungover, nauseated and likely about to lose our flight, stuck in a part of the El Paso freeway.

We got to the airport and ran to the terminal we were supposed to be boarding. We were supposed to be running fast but I didn’t really feel it. The lame airport is one of the shittiest, tiniest things I’ve seen, next to the Juárez airport. It’s small, kind of claustrophobic because everything is so close to each other. It feels more like an airport that’s trying to get you on a plane instead of letting you rejoice in the fact that you are in your last minutes on land instead of up in the air. But the compactness of that airport now felt eternal and I was starting to feel a rush of cold sweat cover my face. Everything felt like it was coming into a blur. I couldn’t hear anything for a moment. Until Tony shook me.

“We missed it.”

“Huh?”

“We missed the flight.”

“Oh. Shit.”

He gave me a long stare.

“Well, we can rebook it. It’s been nothing, right?”

“Yeah. We can. Let me handle it.”

Tony took his bags and walked away, leaving me on my own. I just wobbled to the closest bench. My hot coat, the airport’s heating and the sun coming in through the windows made me sleepy. I couldn’t tell, maybe I was too used to this, but I thought I could be reeking of alcohol. I didn’t dare to sniff behind my sweatshirt. But my bra, my tummy and my back felt icy. I guess because I was sweating all the shit out of my system. I closed my eyes and fell asleep and dreamt of airplanes.

Tony woke me up later, shoving my shoulder. I felt as if my brain was rattling inside my skull with the force of the shove. Dizzy, I got up from the bench and felt the floor spin. I held on to the handle of my luggage bag for support. Tony didn’t seem to notice. I grabbed the bag and dragged it with me, the wheels spinning over the airport floor.

We got on the plane. The wait for take-off seemed eternal. I kept trying to sleep, but I felt sick. Then take off finally happened. The change of pressure, looking out the window and becoming aware of how far off the ground I was gave me a vertigo that seemed to rock my head and my stomach. I couldn’t take it anymore. I threw up in an airsickness bag. Tony closed his eyes, or rather he cringed. He wasn’t grossed out, but embarrassed. Especially since I was loud about it. I hear people rarely get airsick in planes anymore so whenever someone pukes, they’re either pregnant, drunk or sick. I didn’t look pregnant, so that left me with two options that could be socially embarrassing. I stopped puking

and then puked again, this time in Tony's airsickness bag. A tall, bald man with glasses, looking all professorly in his button-down shirt and khakis handed me his own airsickness bag which I did come to need. I also filled it and then passed out the whole flight. By the time we got to San Francisco, I felt better. But Tony's embarrassment about the whole thing lasted the whole trip.

Maybe it was the relief that we had actually gotten there, but that seemed to ease my hangover at least a little, even though the side of all the hill-like streets made me feel nervous that there would be an encore of my in-flight digestive fireworks. But it was all fine. The air was cool, cleansing. There was supposed to be less pollution in El Paso but somehow the air never felt quite as clean. There were colors all over the houses, the streets. There was more noise, more life, yet it was more calming somehow. We checked into our room at the Best Western Inn. The mundanity of the room just contrasted with how we had come to see the city at that point, like nothing of what made the city interesting or cool in the first place was captured within those walls. Just like anything else that's franchised.

We just threw our bags to our beds, sat at the bed for like maybe five minutes and then decided to keep going. I knew it was going to be too easy to let myself feel sick and tired on the bed, so it was better to be more active and walk until I collapsed or threw up again. We walked for a little bit but got tired and decided to get on the boat to Alcatraz. Tony insisted that it wasn't such a great idea because I was probably going to get seasick because I could still feel hungover. I didn't care and so we went. We were standing by the rail. He was completely quiet. Usually we'd kiss or we'd be hugging, but he was just quiet, staring at the ocean.

"It's so cool out here, isn't it?" I said, looking at the Golden Gate Bridge as it was getting closer. "I wish any of the bridges back home would be as cool as that one."

He just nodded quietly. This must be how Mateo feels. I shrugged it off and just kept looking at the bridge getting bigger and bigger by the minute. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths. I got that Tony might think that a hungover me and a boat might not mix, but the salty air, the California sun were actually making me feel better. This is why I wanted to live there. I didn't want to get stuck with the dry, dusty, burning air of El Paso.

“Susie, I think we're through,” he said.

I turned to him so fast that my neck made a popping sound.

“What?”

“We're through. It's over.”

“You're telling this me now?” I said, getting closer to him

“I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't want a shitty memory of San Francisco.”

“It's just a fucking trip.”

“That you'll spoil like everything else.”

“Spoil?!”

“You remember that one time we were at the line for Neon Desert and these two drunk chicks started laughing and throwing up?”

I did.

“Wait, are you saying I am like those chicks now?!”

“Exactly.”

I stared at him and then at the water for a while. I kept my eyes on the waves lapping on the boat. I turned back to him.

“Let’s just get through it.”

“Susie—”

“Look, you’re making too big a deal out of it.”

“We lost our flight.”

“And we got it back.”

“And soon, you’ll make it happen so we lose something that we can’t get back.”

“Oh, so it’s always going to be my fault, huh?”

“And then you embarrass me in the fucking plane.”

“Embarrass you in the fucking plane?! Well, guess what?! I’m going to embarrass you right now!” I yelled, making quite a few people turn around and stare at us. I kept waiting for any to bring out their cell phones to record us.

“Susie—”

“You wanted to do this in San Francisco? Then you’re gonna get it in San Francisco.”

“Susie, please—”

“You make a big deal out of all the booze and the drugs, but you’re the one who got me into coke—”

He noticed they were watching us now.

“She’s talking about the soda!” he told everyone else in the boat.

“Bullshit! You know what I’m talking about. And you know what? Fuck it. I don’t want to be with some overbearing helicopter boyfriend. So fuck it, you’ve got it: We’re done.”

I turned away and didn’t see him. I went inside and sat with the other passengers. Didn’t even get to see Alcatraz. I didn’t get to see any of San Francisco. I hate to say it, but he did have a point. It wasn’t cool to look at the city that way. This wasn’t how I wanted to remember it. I had the spare key to the hotel room, so I got it and got my stuff. I went to the airport and told them that I was going to change my own flight early. I managed to find one that would leave in a couple of hours. The rest of the airport unfolded to me to me. The ceilings were high with the windows bringing down the California sunshine onto my body. I could hear every footstep echo and felt my headache coming back from all the noise, feeling overwhelmed as if I was going to have an agoraphobic fit. Yet I couldn’t help but think about how it felt better than being stuck inside the car or how I was going to be stuck inside the plane, hungover and heartbroken. Thinking of that made me feel ill inside the tram, seeing the doors, the distant San Francisco buildings and sky swing by, so when I got to the terminal, I found a bench and fell asleep. At one point I woke up and saw a Southwestern 737 take flight. Fuck me. Fuck Abby. Fuck Mateo. Fuck helping them. I kept looking at the plane as it disappeared further and further in the air, until I couldn’t see it, blinded by the stabbing sunlight. This was a trip we had thought about for years, that I had thought about since I was six. My one chance to break away from El Paso and I had fucked it up. I put my hoodie all over my face until people could barely see my lips and my chin. I dabbed my face inside the hoodie so no one could see me cry. People walked by and looked

at me. I saw wives reuniting with husbands, children running to their traveling parents, a high school boy giving his girlfriend a bouquet of roses. I don't know if they saw me crying, but I didn't mind. I had to. I needed to settle for another way to shed last night. And between puking, shitting and crying, crying didn't seem too bad.

## 7. MATEO

The thing about winters in Juárez is that you can't escape them. I had already mentioned this, but it's worth repeating. Even in a house with heating like mine, in a room with a portable heater like mine, your lungs will still freeze. Your throat ends up hoarse from breathing in so much cold all day. I had cocooned myself in thick blankets while wearing pajamas when Susie called me like two days after the party.

"How's San Francisco?" I asked her.

"I'm getting there. This is something that concerns me and it concerns you."

"What are you—"

"Don't interrupt me."

"Okay."

"Don't interrupt me."

Okay.

She told me everything that had happened. It sure sounded like a complete disaster. I felt bad for Susie.

"...I had been wanting to make that trip really bad. We had been planning it for years and I fucked it up. It got me thinking that he was right and that you, especially you were right. I really do wanna get out of here, Mateo. And I don't know if that's gonna happen if I keep fucking up like that. But also, we've gotta help Abby. And I've gotta help you," she said.

Help me with what?

“Mateo, are you there?”

“Me? Help me with what?”

“Your choking, the way you look at me, at everyone, the way you talk to people. Everything. I’m gonna sound like a bitch, but I don’t give a shit, but your parents, your friends...no one has done you any favors and I want to help. We’ve—we’ve gotta do this because I don’t know how much time we have left.”

“I’m eighteen and you’re...you’re a junior.”

“You don’t really think that, do you?”

“Isn’t it the truth?”

“I know you don’t believe that. I know you’d like to, but you don’t. But trust me, I know people like you. I know because there was a time when I was like you. Trust me, I know. You’re scared shitless. And you always look like you’re scared shitless. I get it, and you may be right. But right now, I’ve got a bigger chance of something shit happening to me than you. And you know who has the greatest chance? Abby. We have to help her.”

“Okay. I get it. But what do you have in mind?”

“You aren’t gonna be stuck in your house this break. And I’m not either. Or Abby. We’re gonna hit the road, even if it’s just to Mesilla or something,” Susie said.

“Uh. Okay.”

“Are you game?” she asked, a certain enthusiasm growing in her voice.

“I guess so,” I replied, not quite feeling the enthusiasm myself.

“Okay!” she said, breathlessly.

“Are we going to Ruidoso?”

“Well, it’s an option.”

“Does Abby want to go there?”

“Abby doesn’t want to go anywhere.”

“Have you asked her?”

“I don’t have to.”

“I think we should think at least of where.”

“What’s wrong with Ruidoso?”

“Nothing, I just think that...we just have to find some other place to go.”

She took a pause on the phone.

“Are you stalling me?”

“No.”

“I better see you come up with some options when we talk tomorrow.”

She hung up. It’s not that I had never really dreamed of traveling. I’ve always considered it. But I always dreamed of visiting far-away places to go to probably on my honeymoon that probably wasn’t going to happen God knows when. And they were all crazy places like London, Paris, Tokyo, you name it. I had to think of something plausible. Some place cheap and nice. But I was at a loss. Given the circumstances, I did the best I could do: Nothing. I just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling.

I picked up my phone and randomly scrolled through Facebook. Until I realized I was on Facebook and just started to Google things. Sometimes I like to play a game of “degrees of separation”, seeing how connected someone might be to someone else in the world. The way it works: I Google Beto O’Rourke, then on Wikipedia, I end up finding out that he did an interview with Cecilia Carrasco. Cecilia Carrasco almost connects me to the whole world, so I go into her Wikipedia, trying to find out what interesting people she has interviewed. I’ve always liked her stories and interviews. She goes to the places where the news are happening, actually talks to people, asks the tough questions. She was going to be giving a talk at a hotel in Los Angeles. I kept thinking that maybe Los Angeles wouldn’t be a bad idea for a destination.

I met with Susie in school. We went to this spot called the Centennial Plaza. It was the prettiest part of the school. A green field, surrounded by rocks, benches and bleachers. We sat on one of the benches, watching one of the fountains. Water was pooled over its top, splashing down to the floor and then jump to our faces.

“So, have you decided yet?” she asked.

“No offense, but you clearly want me to hear you out first,” I answered.

“Smart kid.”

“Proceed.”

“San Francisco.”

“So you want to give a shot to the failed plan, huh? Really making it happen in California?”

“You’ve got that right. Going and enjoying it.”

“It’s good I’m not your boyfriend.”

She froze. I felt my face redden.

“Why do you say that?” she asked.

“No, I mean, so the thing with Tony wouldn’t have happened with you too.”

“You think that happens to me with all guys?”

“No. I’m just—just kidding.”

She shrugged.

“Just don’t say stuff like that,”

“Sorry,” I said, nodding.

She shrugged and we didn’t say anything for a while. Finally, I knew what I wanted to ask.

“How is it going to help Abby?”

“It’ll be a new place for her. It’s a nice city, it’ll be fun.”

“I don’t disagree.”

“But you’re not going for it, are you?”

“Well, my pick isn’t a stretch but it also isn’t San Francisco.”

“Spit it out.”

I took a deep breath.

“Guess.”

“Fuck you, I’m not guessing shit. Just tell me.”

“Los Angeles.”

Susie looked at me in surprise, her jaw hanging for a moment and then nodding.

“Not a bad idea. But it’s kind of a cliché,” she said.

“Oh, as if San Francisco wasn’t a cliché. Artsy-fartsy central.”

We laughed.

“Oh, shut up, Mateo.”

“What’s your personal relationship to San Francisco?”

“It’s just a cool-looking city, like the streets are hills, it’s an artsy scene. That doesn’t sound good to you?”

“It sounds great.”

“But...?”

“But I think we should go to LA.”

“Why?”

“Do you know Cecilia Carrasco?”

“The dork reporter?”

I scrunched up my face.

“Dork reporter?”

“Are you talking about someone else?”

“There’s no other reporter with that name.”

“Oh. Well. What about her?”

“She’s having a conference and I think we should go.”

Susie burst out laughing.

“Dude, that’s like the dorkiest fucking thing I’ve heard. For a fucking conference? That’s no fun. How’s that gonna help Abby?”

“Look, it wouldn’t be the only thing to do in LA and then we could go to San Francisco. Is not that far.”

“Well...it’s not that bad of an idea.”

I vowed.

“Thank you.”

She chuckled.

“You’re such a dork. But yeah, still, we’ve gotta hear from Abby.”

“Yeah and you better end up agreeing to everything we’re talking about here. If we go to LA, it’s not just going to be your dorky bullshit. Abby picks and I also pick.”

“Fine,” I said, just hoping I hadn’t gotten myself into anything stupid.

## 8. SUSIE

Abby now lived on the Northeast Side, which in El Paso means “La Punta de la Chingada” or the “Middle of Fucking Nowhere.” She had a tiny apartment on the second floor of a two-story complex, with the landlord living in a little RV right next to it. Shitty on the outside but comfy on the inside. Not too different from my own place. The house she had with her family back in Juárez and her apartment were filled with pictures from her high school years, trips with her family, drawings of hers. Now she didn’t have anything. Just white walls and windows. There was no furniture, save for a mattress.

I walked in and she gave me a half-smile and a “Hey.”

I’m sure she saw me making a face or something, because next thing she did was tell me “Sorry about the furniture. You’re the only person I’d let in here, and you don’t mind, do you?”

I shrugged.

“No, it’s okay. Very Japanese. Just how you like it.”

We exchanged a smile, but I wasn’t sure if she really liked me saying that. It had been too long. I wasn’t even sure if she still liked Japanese things. Whatever. She went into the kitchen.

“You want any water or anything?” she said as I could hear her open the refrigerator.

“I’m good, dude.”

I looked down and there was her laptop, opened on a YouTube video on hedgehogs. She came back, a glass of ice water clinking with every footstep she would take.

“Remember when we’d get high and watch nature shows?”

“Sure do,” I said with a smile.

We both looked at the hedgehogs in the video, cuddling together.

“Cute cabrones” she said. “You believe they get hurt with their spikes when they hug? But they still do it for warmth? Crazy shit.”

She sat down on the floor and I followed suit.

“There’s something I wanna tell you,” I said.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Mateo and I—”

“Oh my God, you’re still talking with that creep?!”

“Look, first of all, he’s sorry, okay? He’s a little behind in the social capacities but he’s a nice guy—”

“Yeah, like you’d be a good judge of that.”

“I actually just broke up with Tony.”

“Oh. Good. What happened?”

“I’ll tell you later, it’s not that big of a deal, but I’ll say: I want to switch the trip from him to you and Mateo. Us three.”

“Us three? To San Francisco?”

I nodded.

“Or Los Angeles. Just think California in general. And a few stops along the way.”

“Why?”

“I think we all need to broaden our horizons.”

“You know what’s at the end of the horizon?”

“The sun?”

“No. Shit. You know what’s at the end of the rainbow?”

“A pot of gold?”

“No. More shit. Everything sucks, dude. The US has a Nazi for a president. Mexico is a dumpsterfire. Just like England, France, China, both Koreas, like everything just needs to be swallowed up by the Sun or a black hole and get it over with. We’re fucked.”

“If you die, do you want to die here?”

She took her thumb and gnawed at her nail.

“Who said anything about dying?” she asked.

“I mean, it’s going to happen someday, right? We can sort of choose where we die. You want it to be here? Or in Juárez? Don’t you actually want to see if there’s more things to enjoy out there?”

“No.”

I shook my head.

“I don’t buy that.”

“Anything fun or cool is tainted or dead sooner than later. What’s the point?”

“To enjoy it before that happens?”

“It’s not worth it.”

“You were the one who said you wanted to hang out with me after all the time you were away. I’m the only person in here with you right now. Don’t you want more of that? More of me?”

She thought it over.

“What if you ditch Mateo?”

“I won’t. I think you two should talk.”

“Dude, don’t fucking play cupid with us.”

“I’m not playing cupid. This doesn’t have to do shit with romance. It’s about finding a better place. Look, you’ve done a good job keeping me in check. I need you to do that for me here. No drugs. No booze. All of that’s gone now. But I need you and Mateo to keep me in check.”

She nodded.

“Okay, bro. Let’s go.”

I grinned. I looked down at her wrists. For a moment I thought I could see scars.

## 9. MATEO

The money question lingered in my head: Did we have enough? At this point, I thought it was reasonable to think that Susie could've pulled off some kind of big hit in the past and had been able to live off it for the rest of her life, but even then, I considered that maybe she wouldn't be so nervous about money if she actually had it. Of course, knowing her, I could think that maybe she had actually pulled a big hit in the past and probably burned through the whole money before actually being able to do anything meaningful with it. But whatever was happening with her, I had to figure out how to settle my own problems too. Of course, I didn't have a job, so I had to ask my parents. I was a bit scared to see how they would react.

Look, I can't say that my parents are overprotective. I mean, I suppose that compared to other people my age, they can come-off as Amish or something like that. They're definitely more on the conservative side but it's not like other people I've met whose parents ended up putting them in home school and have never seen the inside of a college but have seen plenty of churches in the El Paso and Juárez area. But when all the shit was going down in Juárez, they wouldn't let me out, they told me to never drink and I complied, they would always be on my butt about my relationships: Did I like anyone? Did they like me? Was I going to ask them out? If I asked them out, had they said yes? Of course, I never got to know what they would say if anyone had actually said "yes" to me.

So naturally I expected a similar kind of interrogation when it came to this trip, and that's exactly what I got; they were watching the news reporting yet another murder in the city. This time near the airport, in the southern outskirts of the city. I cleared my throat when I approached them. They didn't look at me. The TV seemed to have fully grabbed them.

"Mom? Dad?"

That did get their attention.

“What is it, honey?” mom said.

“Susie, Abby and I wanna go on a trip.”

They squinted their faces and hung their jaws, their expression of disbelief when they were trying to figure out if someone was bullshitting them or not.

“Where to?” Mom asked.

“Los Angeles.”

“That’s ten hours away in car,” she replied

“A two-hour flight,” Dad said.

“Yeah, we know.”

“What is it going to be: Riding or flying?” Dad asked.

“We’re driving.”

“No you’re not,” Mom said

“Yeah, I’m not. But Susie is. Abby probably will.”

“I don’t know if you should get in a car with Susie,” my mom said, shaking her head.

“I’m sure she’ll be careful,” I said.

“How long will you be gone for?” Dad asked.

“Maybe like a week. We’re going to see Cecilia Carrasco. She’s having this conference over there.”

Mom and dad stared at me for a moment and then they looked at each other. They sighed.

“Well, since you never went to any road trips back in high school...” Dad said and took out his wallet, handing over his credit card.

“For emergencies only. Okay? And this is for the trip.”

He handed me some two hundred dollars. Then mom also handed the same.

“You better come back in time for Christmas,” Mom said.

“We will. Promise.”

Then mom reached into her purse and pulled out a card of the Archangel Michael. I looked at it. Like gee mom, I’m not going off to Syria.

“It helps. Believe me,” she said.

“Thanks,” I told her.

I had the feeling that in a way she was right. I was going to need all the luck and blessings in the universe.

## 10. SUSIE

Ever since the failed trip to San Francisco I hadn't put my clothes back on my closet. I knew I wanted to make another trip. I knew I had to make one. I couldn't accept that kind of defeat. I never unpacked. I was "living out of a suitcase" so to speak, any time I had to get clothes. Any clothes that I had taken out, I'd compensate by packing another set. I was ready. I wasn't going to get caught unawares anymore.

There was the question of money. I looked at the drugs and everything and thought I could get a bit of money out of those. That was part of the goal of all this, to let go off that shit. If I sold them, would that be okay? Wasn't I hurting others? Nah, none of those drugs could kill anyone. It was basically pot and shrooms. Others could take them and be just fine. They just weren't for me anymore. Fuck it. I was going to sell them and get the money.

I called up friends telling them that if they wanted to help themselves to some pot and shrooms, to just stop by and take them, but they'd have to pay up some money, just a bit of cash.

"You're going to be a drug dealer now?" Alex asked me.

"It's a one-time deal and it's for a good cause. Take it or leave it."

People came in, paid up and that was it. We were good. I had the money, now all I had to do was leave. Abby called me right before, telling me that she wasn't going.

"Abby, come on. Don't start that shit. Not right now," I told her.

"I just don't want to do it. I don't see the point, and I'm going to be a pinche waste of time, a waste of money, nothing will change," she said, nervous.

“So just before, you were complaining that we didn’t see or talk to each other, and now that I’m asking for us to hang out, you wanna flake on me? On us?”

“I don’t wanna flake on nobody. I’m just...yeah. I can’t. I know something’s off because I just can’t get excited about it. I feel like something’s gonna go wrong. That I shouldn’t go, and—”

“Abby, if you don’t come tomorrow, we won’t talk again. Because this, all this makes me think that you’re just an attention whore.”

There was silence for a moment.

“How can you say that about me?”

“Because you’re making it easy.”

“Chinga tu madre.”

“I’m gonna hang up. See you tomorrow.”

I hung up. I started to worry that maybe I had said the wrong thing. I had no idea how Abby could react to anything now. But more than that, I was starting to get scared that she was right: That nothing would change and that we were about to make a big mistake.

## 11. MATEO

If you believe the CBP is insufferable in the bridges, wait until you have to ask for a travel permit in their offices. They make you take a seat and wait for a long time. Any time near Holidays or the start of school is the worst because that's when the lines get really big. The officers yell at anyone whom they spot with a cell phone out or being in the wrong line, even if it's a pregnant woman. Then they take their sweet time going over your documents. Being there I had to wonder just what Susie had gotten me into, but hey, I took the chance to renew my F1 stamp. Just some bullshit to tell the CBP that you were still in school. But when I was there, it turned out that I didn't need it at all. Now my permit was valid for my whole time in college. I wish they had told us that. We could have gotten away a lot sooner. I always wonder what would have happened, what we could have avoided or encountered if we had left within the time we wasted waiting to get for my permit renewal. I was just happy that neither Susie or Abby gave me any crap about it.

Susie picked me up early one morning, bringing McDonald's breakfast sandwiches for me and Abby. We stopped to pick up Abby at her place. She ran out of her apartment carrying a black backpack with some *Sailor Moon* keychains. She had chosen to cover herself in a black, long-sleeved shirt, black jeans and a black hoodie. She came into Susana's car, heading straight into the passenger seat and kissing Susie in the cheek. Susie sat still for a moment, not going anywhere. Abby seemed to treat the moment as if she had done no wrong.

"Mateo is in the backseat," Susie said.

Abby replied with an "Oh" and turned to face me, she gave the most apathetic wave imaginable that I timidly returned.

A long part of the road to Los Angeles is mostly desert. That's one thing I like about New Mexico, the scenery. You watch desert, but soon you also see green bushes rising from the sand, mountains. No wonder they like shooting movies in there. I didn't mind having the backseat all to myself. And of course, like any time where I would feel the slightest bit comfortable, Susie would disrupt it somehow.

"You wanna drive, Mateo?" she asked, looking at my reflection in the rearview mirror.

"Um, no. I'm fine."

"I want you to know how."

Abby turned to face me for the first time in the trip.

"You don't know how to drive?" Abby asked.

"No."

She turned to Susie.

"Estás loca? Este niño nos va a matar!"

Susana pulled over on the side of the road and she turned to face me.

"Susie, what are you doing?" I asked.

"No vayas a hacer ninguna pendejada."

Susana smiled.

“Doing what you’re doing right now is one of the things I haven’t done sober in a while. I’d like to do that now, but I also want you to learn how to drive. We aren’t in a rush. We can do it,” Susie said.

I just stared at her.

“How far do you want me to go?” I asked with a shaking voice.

“Let’s not think about that yet. Come on, let’s switch seats.”

Abby shook her head. It was clear I wasn’t getting out of this one, so I got out of the car and got myself seated behind the wheel. From the backseat, Susie peered at me.

“Okay, I’ll tell you what to do,” She turned to Abby. “You help him too.”

“I’ll try my best to not let him get us killed.”

Susie leaned closer to me.

“You know what to do first?” she whispered.

I looked at the wheel, the lever, all the little figures, letters and numbers scattered around the car. Trying to figure out what they all meant.

“What’s the car doing right now?” Susie asked.

“Nothing.” I said.

“Okay, how do you make it do something?”

“Start it.”

“How do you start it?”

I found the keys attached to the ignition. I twisted them and felt the car breathe, but I felt it had stopped, so I twisted them again.

“No!” shouted both Abby and Susana.

Abby grabbed my hand.

“You only do it once or we blow up,” she said.

I nodded.

“Do I turn it on again?”

“Yeah, but remember: Just once.”

I twisted the keys once again and the car started.

“Is your right foot on the brake?” Susie asked.

I looked down at my feet and they seemed to be in the right place.

“Yeah.”

Susie leaned forward.

“Switch your feet. And you just need one foot.”

I obeyed.

“Pull the stick down to D and then hit the accelerator,” she said, looking back to see if any cars were approaching.

I pulled the lever down and slammed on the accelerator.

“Dale despacio!” Abby and Susie yelled.

I took my foot away from the accelerator as I got on the road.

“Turn the wheel to the left!” Susie commanded.

I set the steering wheel in place and continued pressing on the accelerator. At times, I wobbled the car.

“Little moves on the wheel, Mateo. Just small moves,” Susie said, tightening her grip on the seats while Abby stared out the windshield, bug-eyed and pale.

I moved the wheel with better smoothness and soon, the car was no longer wobbling. I was moving on the road, free. Susie patted me on the shoulder.

“Good job, kid,” she said and started to take off her shoes. “Abby, you can watch him, can you?”

Abby was holding on tight to the window when she nodded. I saw her trying to breathe deeply and silently.

I kept driving, pretty proud of myself. The trip was quiet, except for when I would notice Susie roll down the window from the right side, and then from the left side.

“Hey guys, you think you could roll down your windows, please?” Susie groaned.

Abby turned to look at her. Her eyes widened.

“Dude! Te ves verde!”

I looked at the rearview mirror and Susie had a sweaty, pale look to her. Not exactly green as Abby had said, but fairly close. The shadows under her eyes had become more pronounced than ever.

“I’m just carsick, guys. I need some more air. I—I guess I can’t handle car rides without weed,” she said, clearing her throat and chuckling weakly.

“You wanna drive?” I asked, shaking my hand to glance at both Abby and Susie.

But Susie started to cough violently and covered her mouth.

“Pull over,” she groaned.

I went to the side of the road and pulled over. Susie got out, her bare feet lifting New Mexican dirt. She got to her knees and started throwing up, orange and brown from what I could see.

“I guess making her sick is a step up from getting us killed,” Abby said.

I got out of the car and approached Susie to hold her hair, but she brushed me away.

“Not now, Mateo. Thanks!” she groaned and then coughed, still holding her knees and bowing her head. I went to the trunk of the car and picked out some toilet paper and a bottle of water. I approached Susie with them again.

“Mateo, please, give me a sec, okay?” she said and then her head turned to see the bottle of water and scrap of toilet paper. “Thanks, Mateo. I’ll get them in a bit.”

“Do you want your toothbrush?” I asked.

She thought about it for a moment.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. My toothpaste too. Get that.”

I went back to the trunk and got her bag. I opened it, looking for the toothpaste and toothbrush. I was hoping I wouldn't find anything like drugs or the like. I was relieved I had made it to the toothbrush and toothpaste without finding anything I didn't want to find. I stood between the car and her, holding them in my hands. Susie turned around and grabbed the bottle of water, taking a sip to rinse her mouth and with her hand signaled to give her the toothbrush and toothpaste. She leaned in front of the rearview mirror and brushed her teeth.

Susie decided to drive herself, saying that way she wouldn't get sick. This worked as she kept herself driving and seemed just fine. What I found weird was that Abby was just in her seat, looking out the window. I don't know why, it seemed like after a group of people who are traveling regardless of how well they may know each other, when they're in a car together they may opt to not talk much for a moment. With Abby, Susie and me it made sense since we hadn't known each other quite well. Susie would often tell me to shut up, and going by everything that had happened with us at that point, I knew it would be best to keep my mouth shut. But Abby seemed to be in kind of a weird mood. I decided to just watch her to see if she would notice me watching her. They say you can, that people can feel this vibe that someone is watching them, regardless of how far they may be. As I watched Abby, I noticed her eyes seem to be getting red. Was she having an allergy attack of some sort? I really couldn't tell. I had no idea if she had allergies. But then I saw a tear streaming down her face. I don't know why Susie couldn't notice, I guess she was concentrating in feeling better and driving.

I kept seeing signs that pointed toward White Sands. I had only seen pictures Giovanna had taken a few times, and from an article and TV feature Cecilia Carrasco had written, the sky was overcast, so the sand was mixing with the sky together, like white waves frozen against the clouds. The Cecilia Carrasco report here about the nuclear tests, about how people were still getting sick from the radiation after all these years. I started talking about this when Abby took off her seatbelt. Again,

I didn't think much of it because people do that all the time. They probably shouldn't, but they do. I get it because seatbelts can feel like an annoying restraint. But then, I noticed she was reaching for the door handle. She plopped it open. Susie heard it click and turned to see Abby opening the car door.

“Abby, no!” she screamed.

She reached out for Abby with one hand, but couldn't focus on the road. She started throwing the car into the side of the road. She noticed just in time to steer the wheel in place, the push putting Abby back in her seat and loosely closing the door.

Susie tried to keep Abby in her seat with her one arm, but Abby pushed it away. I jumped from the backseat and tried to hold her in place. Susie pulled over and stopped the car. Abby jumped out, and Susie immediately followed after her. Abby just ran for the desert. I didn't know if to intervene. I just stayed in the car watching Susie running after Abby, making tiny explosions of sand with each of their steps.

Susie caught up to Abby and made her fall in the dirt. They lay low enough for me to not see what was going on. I had to get out of the car, who knows if they could get bit by scorpions or if Abby would go bezerk on Susie. Or Susie on her. Or both of them at the same time.

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?! I know Mateo's car talk is dorky as shit, but it's not suicide-worthy!” Susie yelled at Abby, who was just crying.

“Don't fucking do that. You hear me?!” she continued. “I know you're in a lot of pain. You're in a car with two people who get it, so why the fuck are you jumping out of it?!”

Abby just kept crying. Susie sat by her side and embraced her, letting her sob into her shirt. I just watched. It wasn't long until they came back towards the car. I got inside first. Susie started the

car and we drove off again. Like fifteen minutes of road went by when Abby cracked down the window and tried to jump out of it. Susie grabbed her butt and pulled her inside, grabbing her shoes. She couldn't control her driving, so she pulled over. Abby jumped out and fell on the side of the road, her face hitting gravel.

“Ow!” she yelled, emerging with a bloody lip and nose. Tears were streaming down her face again.

Susie caught up to her and grabbed her arms, placing her against the car.

“Just imagine that pain if you were jumping out of it while we were moving.”

She peered to look through my window.

There was a long pause. Typical of Abby at this point of the conversation.

“You told him about Dad?”

Susie hesitated.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“So he wouldn't say anything stupid.”

“Well, he did.”

“I know, and he's sorry. Aren't you sorry, Mateo?”

She turned to me, giving me a pleading smile.

“Yeah.”

I turned back to face her.

“I’m sorry, Abby. I didn’t mean to offend you.”

Abby nodded.

“What’s your story?” she asked me.

“What do you mean?”

“Susie told me you’d get me. Did they kill your dad too?” I didn’t sense concern from this question, but instead some kind of defiance.

“Nothing happened to my dad. But I did—they killed a friend of mine. Her name was Cecilia. She and her brother, he worked at an internet café and she would hang out in there. One day, these sicarios came in and they just dragged them outside the café. They put them against a wall and shot them in the back of their necks.”

Abby’s jaw dropped.

“My God, dude. What the fuck.”

“Yeah, and my mom almost got shot. This one time, we were driving home after shopping in El Paso. We were near Campestre, where the S-Mart is, and we got a red light. And just then, this guy broke the window with a tire iron and he pointed a gun at me. He was yelling for me to get out and—”

I felt my guts churn.

“And?” Abby asked.

I breathed in and out. Susie looked at me.

“And, my mom drove away right at the red light. I heard a gunshot just—just behind me. And then a car slammed against us. My mom caught whiplash and I broke my arm.”

Abby gasped.

“Oh my God, dude. That’s horrible.”

“Yeah. I got out okay, though. We got out okay. You know, considering.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, well. I’m here.”

“You’re close to your parents?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. Enjoy them while they last.”

Susie raised her hand.

“No bull on that. Your parents don’t sound so bad, Mateo.”

“Yeah, they aren’t too bad. I would say.”

“I have no idea about my mom. We haven’t talked since I left for Alamogordo,” Abby said.

“Why?” I asked her.

“She’s not talking to me, so I’m not talking to her.”

“You aren’t even trying?”

“She’ll either ignore me or just yell at me. Why bother?”

“If it makes you feel any better,” Susie said. “I’m not talking to them at all. I haven’t talked to them since I got into college. You know the Juárez Pride thing?”

“The commercials and stuff?” I asked.

“My parents make those. The copywriting and pictures.”

“So you aren’t talking to them because they make commercials?” I asked Susie.

“It’s not that. I mean, they’re fixated with how Juárez looks to us, to other people. But tell me, dónde chingados estaban were they when they were killing people and where are they now that they’ve kept killing people? It’s lies and my parents know it, but they still propagate it. They don’t give a shit. It’s all bullshit. When they killed a friend of mine, they just said she deserved it.”

Abby seemed to shiver for a moment. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“No way.”

“Yeah, all because we used to party together. I mean... you could say she was bad news, but she didn’t deserve what happened to her. It could’ve been me.”

“Like literally, do you mean that, that it could’ve been you?”

Abby rolled her eyes.

“Mateo question alert.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s simple. She was at a party I was supposed to go to, but I got sick. Some sicario ended up walking into the party and killing everyone,” Susie said.

“Shit. She was in Salvarcar?”

“No, in the Jilotepec party.”

“Jesus, Susie, I’m so sorry.”

“At least you are. They aren’t. But hey, whether they like it or not whether we like it or not, that’s the city we live in.”

“That’s the fucking world we live in,” Susie said.

You could get to California on the same day but that hadn’t been Susie’s plan. She kept stopping because driving tired her, and also being in the car kept Abby talking and listening. We had to make sure she wouldn’t escape and run off on us, and then jump off somewhere and get hit by a car. It made sense to tire her, to bore her. If she wanted to stop to go to the bathroom, she’d go with her. When the sunset got to us, we decided that we would camp. Susie started talking about this place called The City of Rocks and how we should spend the night there.

“It’s exactly as cool as it sounds,” she said

“It doesn’t sound cool at all,” Abby would reply.

But we got there just before the sunset. The City of Rocks were these rocky pillars that stood in different shapes against the sky, with the mountains in the distance. We parked next to one, allowing it to give us shade. Susie sighed and pushed back the seat a little.

“How about we don’t even camp? We just stay here like this? The rock gives us shade, protection. Should be cool,” Susie said.

“What’s the fun in that?” Abby replied.

Susie turned to both of us.

“You guys cool with helping me set up camp?”

“No shit,” Abby said.

“Let’s get this show going,” Susie said, grunting as she sat up and then exited the car.

We looked at the rocks all around us. Susie raised an eyebrow as she took in the sights.

“I’m kinda regretting going sober now,” Susie said “It must be a real trip to look at these rocks. Just imagine how the drugs and your mind would filter all this shit.”

“You’d probably start seeing all kinds of weird shapes and shit,” Abby said, laughing a little.

I couldn’t say anything, I just stared at the whole scenario. I felt like telling Abby how could she kill herself when you could see something like that any day? But it didn’t feel right. Susie moved to the trunk of the car and took out all the camping equipment. Abby and Susie would sleep together, while I would be in my own tent. Abby was the only one of us who had gone camping before. She told us of the nights she would spend in Puerto Peñasco, sleeping under the stars. She still had her old tent so she brought it with her, while Susie got one that Tony had left in her apartment but had never used before.

“Mom and dad taught me how to do all this. They had a camping honeymoon out in Ruidoso one time.”

“Can you hunt?” I asked, half-kidding, half-curious.

She gave me an angry look.

“No, what the hell do you think I am?” she said.

“Just something that people camping do.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. She taught us how to set up the tents. Of course, Susie got it right quicker than I did. I kept making mine and it would collapse, but it finally stood together.

Once we were done, the stars had come out and filled the sky. I wish I had a telescope and try to find the planets or see if there were comets, maybe look at the satellites. Anything that’s out there should be cool.

We lay on towels as we looked up, looking at the stars for a moment. We started to feel cold. The jackets and hoodies weren’t fully doing the job, so Susie decided to start her own little bonfire. She took out her cellphone and put on a playlist of Explosions in the Sky, early Death Cab for Cutie and other bands like them. We got close to the fire and warmed ourselves. There was a certain brightness out here you couldn’t get in the city at night. The stars were shining all above us and we could still see the silhouette of the rocks. Susie said that we didn’t need a telescope, we could just look at the stars and wonder. She had once heard that if the stars were blinking, they were stars. If they weren’t, they were planets. In that case, I counted three planets. My guess was that they were Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. We looked at the rocks together. Susie took out a notepad and started to sketch at the rocks. Abby and I leaned forward and looked at what she was doing. Scowling, Susie turned to look at us.

“Abby, come on. Draw something yourself,” Susie said.

“I don’t draw anymore,” Abby replied.

“Yes, you do. Don’t start that shit.”

“I really don’t draw anymore.”

“Then it’s time to draw again.”

We kept watching her.

“You’re making it look like a dick,” Abby said.

I laughed. I couldn’t say she was wrong. Then Susie looked up, settling the notepad and pencil on her lap.

“You know which one looks like a dick?” she said and then pointed at one of the rocks. “That one.”

Abby and I stared.

“No, it doesn’t,” Abby replied.

“I’m with Abby on this one. The rock on your notepad is the only one that’s looking like a dick right now,” I said.

“Oh, you know what?” Susie said and pointed at another rock. “Those look like my hand giving you the finger,” she said and gave us the finger to match the silhouette.

“You know what? It does look like it. Good eye, Susie,” I said.

We all laughed. She kept drawing but it seemed like she got tired after a while, because she just left it behind. Susie got up and came back with a six pack of Rolling Rock. I wasn’t sure what to address first: The beer or what I wanted to tell her. Maybe the earliest thought I had before I forgot about it.

“Susie...” I started.

“Hmm?”

“Sorry for giving you grief about your drawings a while ago. I really like what you do.”

I wasn't sure if it was the fire, but Susie seemed to blush. I couldn't tell straight away since she looked down at the beer can and opened it.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I thought you were sobering up,” I told her, in a tone that I think came off as exaggeratedly indignant.

“Oh, these aren't for me,” Susie said.

Abby lit up a little.

“Oh, thank you, Susie,” she said.

“They're for not you either, they're for...”

Susie pointed at me.

“What?” was all I could say.

“You drink?” Abby said.

“He doesn't, but now he will.” Susie said, opening one of the cans and handing it to me.

I looked at the can, unsure if this was all supposed to be a joke.

“You want me to drink?”

“Just one beer.”

“Um, okay.”

I took the can and just felt it in my hand.

“Drink it,” Susie said.

Again, I only held it. They started to chat: “Drinkitdrinkitdrinkitdrinkit.”

I drank it. The taste was a bit rough, kind of gross. A weird mixture of warmth mixed with a tiny tinge of cool alcohol. I wasn’t sure if I was going to be capable of drinking any more than that.

“This is garbage,” I said.

Abby and Susie laughed.

“No, no, you get used to it. Come on, give it another drink,” Susie said. I stared at the can and took another sip. I could say that I was getting used to it, but it still wasn’t my favorite taste in the world. But hey, it was drinkable. I just kept drinking until I finished the can.

“Good for another one?” Susie asked. Abby looked on enthusiastically, leaning over as if I was a movie she couldn’t get enough of. I nodded with a drunk shrug.

“Okay.”

“Yes!” both girls yelled and handed me another beer that I proceeded to drink. I swallowed the Rolling Rock and almost suppressed a burp, covering my mouth. Susie looked on with a bit of concern in her eyes, yet, she couldn’t stop smiling, looking as if she was ready to burst out laughing at any minute. “Dude, if you think you’ve had enough, you can quit right now.”

But I didn’t want to. I was starting to feel the most relaxed I had ever been. I felt like I could talk about anything. Like I could say anything and no one would give me crap and if I did, I couldn’t give any less of a crap.

“No no no. Another one. I’ll have another one,” and Susie handed me another beer. Now she had a movement and look I hadn’t spotted on her before: Reluctance. She probably couldn’t believe what she was seeing and neither did Abby who kept silently chuckling through the whole deal.

I drank the other beer, starting to feel a little woozy. But I was out in the open, the music was playing, Susie and Abby were out there. We were in the middle of the New Mexico desert. I felt amazing. The dizziness seemed to come as part of the thrill, not something that would get in the way of it. I could just say anything. I could probably do anything but I just wanted to talk, nothing else.

“Susie, I’m really glad you’re quitting drinking. I don’t know why I should do it instead of you but whatever,” I slurred. Abby and Susie laughed.

“You’re welcome!” Susie yelled.

“Abby, don’t be sad, okay? Please, for your own good, don’t be sad.”

Abby nodded.

“Okay, dude.”

“You two are so pretty.”

They laughed again.

“With words like that, how come you don’t have a girlfriend?” Susie yelled, trying to suppress laughter.

“Maybe because I suck?” I asked.

“You don’t suck, Mateo.” Susie said.

“You kinda do.” Abby replied and Susie nudged her in the ribs.

“It’s like, what’s wrong with me? Where am I fucking up?”

“You worry too much!”

“Yeah, but I know people who worry even more than me and they do just fine! Why is every girl I like so full of problems? They have boyfriends, shitty boyfriends, they drink too much, they do drugs and...”

Susie and Abby looked at each other. I could tell that I had said too much. I had to stop while I was still aware of what I was saying.

“Okay, I’ll shut up. I’ll shut up now.”

I took another sip of beer.

“This is good. I get it. I finally get it, but yeah, it’s also making me sleepy and dizzy, and talk too much, yeah. I think I’ll just sleep or something.”

“Lightweight!” Susie said.

“Hey, you said I could quit whenever I wanted to,” I slurred, wobbling toward her. Susie backed away from me in apparent fear that I was going to throw up or fall over on her. Susie smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right. Quit now. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’ll see you in my dreams,” I said and turned around. Then I felt overly hot. Not sure if I was blushing or drunk. Maybe it was a combination of both. I went right into my tent. I could hear Abby and Susie giggling. The last thing I heard before I blacked out.

The next day I woke up in the backseat of the car, moving, feeling as if I was rolling inside a barrel. I slowly opened my eyes and the light of the day pierced my eyes. I turned my eyes to the front seats and saw Susie driving and Abby sleeping in the passenger seat.

I got up from my seat, groaning, feeling as if I had never slept in my life. My esophagus felt as if it had been bathed in acid. Just looking up to the road ahead made me feel as if we were on a freefalling, spinning plane, hurtling toward death. I had to close my eyes as I felt a surge of nausea rising to my throat.

“Hey, look who’s up!” Susie said.

At that moment it dawned on me that I barely recalled anything that had happened the night before. I honestly only remembered taking a sip of the can and then nothing.

“What happened last night?” I asked.

“You drank like the motherfucking sailor I’m not!”

“Really?”

“Yeah! You drank the whole pack! Without peeing!”

And suddenly it all made sense, especially the next part: That surge of nausea from before struck back this time without relenting. I couldn’t hold it in my mouth and out it came spurting out of my lips. At first it seemed I might get lucky and just puke up a gob, but then what I think was all of yesterday’s meals came blasting out of my mouth, splashing the dashboard, the space between the front seats and bits of it attached to Susie and Abby, waking up the latter. To top it all off, I felt my guts churn and in the middle of all the shock, I couldn’t control myself and let my guts go.

“Did you just shart?” Susie asked.

“I think so.”

I was surprised that Abby and Susie didn't throw up right then and there. Their expressions amounted more to grossed shock than sick disgust.

“Sorry,” I said.

We made a gas stop where I got myself into the bathroom to change clothes, throwing away in the trash all that I had soiled and puked-up. Susie and Abby didn't need to change beyond getting some babywipes and disinfectant. We parked the car outside the convenience store for a moment and I thought I should be the one cleaning the car, using babywipes and towels.

They spent their time inside the store, sitting down at the Subway table inside the store. As I was cleaning, I would sometimes turn to the side and gag, thinking I might get sick again. At least it was my own thrown up I was cleaning up, I thought. I waved at them and told them I was done. They came over to the car and Susie congratulated me on a job well done.

“Now you can actually be a grown up,” she told me.

She thought it would be a good idea to just clean the whole car on the outside as well, so we took it into the automatic car wash they had outside. I remembered that time as a kid when I would get so excited by the spraying of water and soap on the car, the hissing from the pistons, and watching the drops of water and soap travel across the car. I told Susie that I wondered if it could be as exciting again, it had been a while since I had been in the inside of a car wash.

“Of course not, we're no longer dorky kids,” she said and Abby laughed.

I thought my mouth was getting the best of me again, so I shut up and remained quiet the rest of the wash. But so did Susie and Abby. We just sat inside the car, watching it getting dosed with water

and soap. Both Susie and Abby kept looking around the windows, as if trying to make sense of the whole process.

At one point, Susie took off the top window cover and the three of us stared at the machines. When the drying came, we watched the drops of water and soap slide across the glass. Sometimes merging with each other and make one long line of water until it clashed with another and became even greater.

We drove to the desert again and I could tell that just like me, they were watching those droplets to see how long they would evaporate or freeze or just be blown away by the winds of New Mexico.

## 12. SUSIE

Arizona sucks. I don't know what is it that gets people all kooky there. Is it the heat? The Republican government? Fuck knows, but Jesus, what an awful fucking state. Who would want to live there? And don't just take my word for it, there are other people I know who hate it with the same kind of burning that you can feel in there. So what happened?

You can tell you're in hell when the heat is so tough that you have to turn up the air conditioning and it hardly helps at all. But what's awful about Arizona is that then the heat feels as if its seeping into the window. You place your feet on the ground and even the fucking ground burns through your fucking shoes. What the fuck?

I really wish our stay there had been shorter. Also not sure what was going on with the weather; El Paso and Juárez are in the middle of the fucking desert and even then we have some cold-ass winters. Arizona IS a desert and somehow it was managing to stay as hot as usual. Even worse, it fulfills the stereotypes of the American desert by just being a bunch of sand dunes, maybe a couple of mountains but you can see cacti everywhere. You go into a town and it looks to be fast food central: McDonald's, In-n-Out, Whataburger, and then in order to break the mold: A Target.

We stopped to eat at a tiny roadside diner. I wanted to save us all some money and had heard that these diners weren't too expensive. The inside was fine, kind of a classical diner with booths and a bar. The waitress was a Mexican girl, no older than us. Her skin, eyes and hair brown with a blue waitress uniform wrapped around it. She was chewing gum, but not in an annoying way. Her name tag said she was called Berenice.

"How may I take your order?" she asked, her English was pretty good, her tone sweet.

"Yo quiero..." Abby started, but soon was interrupted by the waitress.

“Sorry, I don’t speak Spanish,” she said, all sweetness gone. Apparently, she’s been chewing a lot of bubble gum lately.

“Oh,” Abby said. I stared at her, she was trying so fucking hard to not roll her eyes. “In that case, I’ll have a steak and fries. And a Coke,” she ordered.

“Uh, burger. Well-done. Fries. And water,” Mateo said.

Fuck this.

“Hola, Berenice, yo voy a querer una ensalada, papas y un café,” I said.

Berenice just stared at me.

“I told you I don’t speak Spanish.”

“And I don’t speak English when I’m ordering food. So I guess we’re in a pickle.”

She looked at a loss for words, her stern look hiding it.

“I could ask you to leave, you know?”

“For speaking in Spanish?”

“For harassing me.”

“Speaking in Spanish is harassment?”

Mateo was looking at me, giving me one of those “Susie, let it go” looks. Abby just seemed to be finding the whole thing really entertaining, trying to hide her laughter. She didn’t have to be there, but I guess she was the target audience in a way.

“Now you are making it harassment,” Berenice said.

“All right, fine, if it so offends you: The salad, fries and a coffee. Black. Oh wait—” I covered mouth in an exaggerated manner, widening her eyes. “—Sorry, that word is probably harassment to you.”

Berenice rolled her eyes.

“It’ll be right out,” she said, walking away with our menus.

I couldn’t help but giggle but Mateo looked mortified.

“Why did you do that?”

“Oh, the Cecilia Carrasco fan suddenly gets all pro-racism? What are you gonna do next? Tell me there were terrorists on both sides at Charlottesville?”

“That wasn’t racism. That was just her being annoying.”

“In a racist way. Did you see how she looked at us? How she talked to us?”

Mateo nodded.

“Right. But Jesus, do it at a time she doesn’t spit on our food. You could’ve just waited.”

“If they actually spit on our food, if they actually get us sick, we could sue them. These gringos are all talk.”

Then three American guys walked into the diner, they were wearing red Make America Great Again caps. They were all white, looking sunburned, as desert gringos often do. We could see the outlines of their guns behind their waist bands, under their t-shirts. They sat right behind us.

“Are you gonna give them shit?”

Mateo asked me.

I bit my lip and we waited for our food to come.

### 13. MATEO

We ate in silence. The whole thing felt a bit awkward, as if we'd just had a fight and we were forced to eat together.

"You know, we could still talk," I said, in English.

"Shut up," Susie said.

"I mean, not forcing you to. You think they can't tell we're Mexican?"

"They're okay with that, but as soon as they hear us speaking Spanish, they'll freak out."

"We're not speaking in Spanish. We don't have to."

"Just...I feel gross eating with those people around," Susie said. "I can barely eat now."

"We could have takeout," I told her with a shrug.

Susie nodded.

"Nah, fuck it. I'm not eating anymore. You guys eat," she said.

We finished while Susie left her plate half-eaten. We went out the diner and spotted the red SUV the Trump gringos had come in. I looked at it for a while and turned to Susie.

"Do you still have those bumper stickers of yours?"

"Yeah, what for?"

"I've got an idea."

Susie and Abby grinned, they seemed to have caught on pretty quick to what I wanted to do. Not sure if they ever noticed, but I would've loved to have seen their faces when they stopped somewhere and realized they had a bumper sticker that said "Mexico is the Shit."

#### 14. SUSIE

We got into California, going through the Coachella Valley. I cranked down the windows and breathed the air. It was cool and refreshing, without letting go of the classical California heat. This was air I would be happy to wake up to and breathe any time. Abby and Mateo looked out, watching the plains and trees, glowing under the sun and the clear blue sky.

“Is this is where they do the concerts and stuff?” Abby asked.

“Yup. Next year, we should give it a try,” I answered.

“If I’m still around next year,” she said.

I gave her a look through the rearview mirror.

“Kidding,” she said.

We found ourselves in a long traffic line to enter Los Angeles. The cars were moving slowly into the city, all we had around were trees and ads. But as we we got closer, the trees started giving way to houses, fast food restaurants and gas stations. The Anaheim entrance.

“This is nothing compared to the Cordova-Americas,” Mateo said.

Abby and I laughed.

We made it to the Days Inn we were staying at, the three of us sharing a room; Mateo in his own bed while Abby and I would share one, or Abby could choose to sleep on the floor. We arrived to the hotel and each of us collapsed in our respective beds.

We decided that as soon as we recovered our energies, we would walk around town, see if there was anything fun to do, but mostly I just wanted to relax. Experience California in a different

way that I couldn't do so when I came with Tony. Yeah, I know San Francisco isn't the same as Los Angeles, but it's still California.

When the evening came, we got into the car and drove a little with all of the windows down. We drove into Hollywood Boulevard, where it was filled with guys sharply dressed in tuxedos, button-down shirts, shiny shoes and girls in dresses, I could guess on their way to parties and clubs. All of them had jewelry that was shining with the streetlamps and the neon signs from the buildings. Driving by Barnsdall Art Park, we saw teenagers with skateboards laughing as they walked on the sidewalk, looking at something on their phones. There was trash on every corner of the streets, yet they also felt clean somehow. I hadn't gone to a city like Tokyo or New York City, judging from movies and pictures, they seem to have their own magic in the evening, as if they jumped a decade or two into the future. Los Angeles wasn't like that, but its neons, blues and streetlamp ambers seemed to be guiding everyone in it, us included, into the future. Little by little, it seemed to be jumping ahead in time and maybe it wouldn't be instantly futuristic like Tokyo but it would sure get there a lot faster than El Paso would. That's the kind of place I wanted to be in.

When I sensed that traffic was going to get heavy, I looked for a parking lot. We managed to find one in Venice Beach. Paradise perfection. Again, I found myself wishing that I wasn't going sober so quick. I was so happy seeing the hipster girls in their vintage-style swimsuits with their bearded boyfriends in sunglasses, the old and new hippies on their rollerblades, I got the feeling that it would be very easy to find some great weed. I considered maybe getting some for Mateo, but if the point was for me to enjoy life sober, he should too without crossing him over into a trip. Once we were parked, we went out of the car and just walked. It's not like El Paso was a difficult city to walk on, but the sidewalks were small, there wasn't a whole lot that would catch your eye. It wasn't that way with Los Angeles; every corner seemed to offer something new or interesting like a food stand, hearing a

British girl talk with a girl with a Swedish accent, all sorts of street art that made me regret I hadn't brought a sketchbook for me to draw in. Abby hadn't brought hers either. "I don't know why you ask me, I haven't drawn anything in like five years," she would tell me.

We made our way to the Venice Fishing Pier and just watched the ocean in the dark.

"I kind of wish we didn't have the noise from the carnival back there," Abby said, nodding toward the Ferris Wheel and rides that were cutting through the night with their neon lights and Taylor Swift tunes. "It would be real nice if it was like Peñasco. Everything dead quiet. Maybe you could hear people having a party in their rooms, but nothing crazy," she said. I agreed, but I could still get used to that darkness, to the sound of the ocean combined with the games and fun going on behind that. So many possibilities in just one place. There was something for everyone there.

I caught Mateo texting.

"Put that down," I told him.

"Just telling my parents where I am," Mateo replied.

I rolled my eyes.

"Fine, but I better not see that phone again, okay? We've gotta enjoy this as it is."

He nodded.

"I agree."

I wondered for a moment what it was like to live like that. He was the only one of us who had any kind of okay relationship with their parents. I wondered if things would ever get to be that way with me or with Abby. At least Abby had a bit of hope. I wasn't so sure about myself.

We had tacos from a truck and we ate sitting on a bench, watching people go by. Mexican food can be very hit or miss outside of Mexico, but this hit the spot, as good as anything as you could find in Juárez, although maybe a bit more expensive than what it should be. It was all shaping up to be a good trip, but I wasn't sure if all this was shaping up to be anything else than a vacation. That was always nice, for sure. We were taking a break from the border. But whenever we'd come back, the same disasters would be in place. And wherever we were in the United States, Trump would still be president. Maybe Abby did have a point after all about how things don't change. What was coming after this? Nothing? I kept looking at Abby and Mateo. Was this actually doing them any good? They were having fun, of course. But could there be more to this? To this trip? When would I be able to tell that it was all working out? Maybe it was all meaningless.

I felt like crying and couldn't find a way to hide it. I just kept eating, hoping that would hide it. I just had to be careful or I would end up choking like Abby. We finished eating and again we walked back into the hotel.

"Hey, you guys pick whatever you want to do tomorrow, okay? Whatever you feel like, I'll follow," I told them.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I've got nada," Abby said.

"Well, the Carrasco thing is tomorrow," Mateo replied.

"It's not going to take up all day, is it?" I asked. Mateo's interest in the whole thing wasn't exactly contagious, but it was something to do.

"It should only be a couple of hours at most-," he said with a shrug.

"Well, think of other stuff to do then, before or after."

“Dude, what’s up? Usually you’re all about being spontaneous and shit. Why do you want to plan all of a sudden?”

“I just don’t want to make this whole trip about me, okay? Remember: You guys also have to come up with your own decisions.”

Abby shrugged.

“Well, if there’s something.”

And for a moment I caught Abby and Mateo looking at each other. Maybe they could tell that I wasn’t feeling that great. But at least she wasn’t avoiding him anymore. Maybe things had actually gotten to a decent start. I would have to wait and see.

15. MATEO

“Ladies first,” I told Abby and Susie the next morning so they could shower before me. They rolled their eyes. Susie called dibs on the shower and then approached me, putting her elbows on my bed and whispered in my ear.

“You may want to close your eyes when we both get out of the shower.”

I felt myself blush.

“I’ll step outside,” I told her.

She slapped my shoulder.

“I’m kidding.”

“No, yeah, it’s okay. For your comfort. I’d like to be outside.”

She nodded.

“Suit yourself. But you might miss out on boobs.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and she laughed too. Abby closed her eyes.

“Go back to sleep because that’s only happening in your dreams, you dweeb,” Abby said.

Susie and I laughed a little harder. I got off from my bed.

“I’ll be outside.”

I stepped out and stood outside of the room, looking at the Los Angeles streets before me. It was hot, but breezy. The air was cooling in a way that I hadn’t experienced before. I took out my phone and texted my parents, wishing them a good morning.

After what felt like an hour, Susie peeked from the door.

“Your turn!” she said smiling, her hair wet and already dressed up.

I stepped in and showered, taking all of my clothes for the day into the bathroom and when I was finished, I stepped out fully dressed.

“Why did you dress like that?” Abby asked.

I looked down to check out my clothes. I really wasn’t dressed anywhere out of the ordinary: Jeans and a t-shirt.

“How?” I asked.

“You know, we wouldn’t have minded if you had stepped out in your underwear,” Susie said.

“I would mind,” Abby replied.

I laughed and shook my head.

“Nevermind. Come on, let’s have breakfast,” I told them.

There was a Denny’s close to the hotel. We all had pancakes and scrambled eggs. Then we went back to the hotel to get the car and Susie drove us to the Hilton where the conference was going to be. We got there and the place was filled with cars, we recognized logos from all networks and outlets: NBC, ABC, CBS, CNN, Univision, Telemundo, you name it. Aside from that, there were dozens of other people our age. Communication students, I guessed.

“I can’t believe there are so many dorks,” Abby said.

“These dorks bring you the news, they keep you informed about the world,” I replied.

“Is it weird that I agree with you two at the same time?” Susie said.

“Who cares about the news? You know why Trump’s in office? Because they kept giving him a voice. They’re fucking inutiles, dude. They barely even fact-check him anymore. It’s gross,” Abby replied.

“Cecilia Carrasco does,” I said.

“Well, let’s see if she can bring down the Neo-Nazi Empire taking over the world,” Abby said.

We found our way into the hotel’s conference room, walking past more and more journalists and students. We also found some people carrying a giant Mexican flag, and others had signs that said things like “No end to DACA”, “No a una America Fascista”, “Trump Chingas a tu Madre.”

I found seats for us, but only for Susie and me. We quickly looked for a place where all the three of us could be together, but Abby interrupted our search.

“I’ll just sit here. It’s only one row behind, no biggie,” she said. We could tell she was annoyed but was managing it. It was probably for the best for us to sit this way. We waited. The voices in the room were overwhelming, with murmurs echoing all over the place. The lights went down and everyone went quiet but not for long. Cecilia Carrasco with her glasses, short brown hair and staggering height made his way to the podium. The whole room exploded in applause. I couldn’t help myself, I let out a little “Yeah!” making Susie laugh.

“Don’t get that excited the whole time,” Susie said. My face reddened but she joined the applause soon enough. I turned and saw that Abby was just sitting behind us. After a while, the applause died down and everyone went back to their seats.

“Thank you and good morning everyone,” Carrasco started. “It’s glorious that we’re still here, isn’t it? Sure doesn’t seem like it will be for long but here we are. It’s a wonderful morning here in Los Angeles. I’m so happy to be surrounded by so many friends and colleagues, and hopefully future colleagues. We are living in weird times to say the least. Dangerous, weird times. We still get up in the morning, have all the creature comforts, a little breakfast, our coffee, we find out that we are still headed toward hell, if not already in hell, through our cellphones, through our computers, through the paper. Even though we are constantly attacked, even killed, as enemies of the people, we’re still here. We’re still doing our jobs. In these times especially, that’s a privilege. Because of that, we don’t have a choice but to continue working. To continue writing. Let’s be honest here. Some of us have forgotten that that’s our job. Some of us have given our enemies ammo to dirty our profession, by not looking at the big picture, by not making enough questions, by not counteracting the lies our president and other politicians have made us feed our readers. We need to be better. We need to do better...”

She stopped for a moment to drink from a bottle of water.

“There are those here in the crowd who are only beginning a career of journalism. We can’t wait for them to take over the old guard. To you, the young people, I mean, not like I’m an old hag myself...”

Everyone in the auditorium laughed. Even Susie. I gave her a sideways look, but Carrasco quickly stole my attention back.

“...but you know how it is. You, the young, you must start writing among yourselves. You can’t wait for that opportunity to be published. You have to put your words out there. It’s not enough to have a blog or to be on Twitter or YouTube. These are great tools, but you have to remember that real journalism needs research, work, risk. It’s not about who gets the news first, but who and how we

get them right. If you can do that on your own, then you're already far ahead. Just know that this can be a dangerous job. Remember the bomb threats to CNN, the Capital Gazette Shooting. Some of you come from Mexico. We can't forget the murder of "El Choco" in Ciudad Juárez or the murder of Miroslava Breach in Chihuahua. We're sent out to war. Our job isn't an easy one, but when we try to make it easy for us, the truth, the job itself, suffers. If you are willing to give your life for the job, then that will make all the difference against monsters in the current administration. We can begin by being there with those who are suffering, like the caged children in the ICE Detention Camps or the families of those who have been murdered in Ciudad Juárez, to the people still drinking polluted water in Flint. There are so many people that need a voice. And we can give it to them. We will give it to them. That's why we have to do our job with crystal-clear veracity, for there is only one type of facts. Thank you very much and go on to write the truth."

As soon as Carrasco backed away from the podium, everyone stood up in applause, even Susie. I turned to Susie.

"You wanna stay for the rest of the speakers?" I asked her.

"Yeah!" Susie said as she kept on clapping.

We looked at Abby.

"Dude, we're staying for the whole thing," Susie said.

Abby rolled her eyes.

"Whatever."

After the other speakers were finished, there was a Q&A with all of them. I wasn't sure if there was something to ask, but Susie did. There was a short guy with glasses passing around the microphone in our section. He approached Susie and then she asked her question.

“Hi, my question is for Cecilia Carrasco. I'm not sure if there's anyone here like me, but I'm not a journalist and I've never thought of being one...but I'm an artist. I can draw, I can do graphic design. How can I help people in your profession? How can I help the larger cause?” she asked.

Carrasco looked at her, thinking for a couple of moments.

“What's your name?” Carrasco asked.

“Susana.” She replied.

“Susana, look, I could give you a really pragmatic answer and tell you that newspapers, blogs, anything related to the news often hires people to do graphic design for them. And that little bit of help is meaningful, always meaningful. But something tells me that you want something with a bit more impact. I know that this will probably sound lame, but I have the feeling that there is an answer you can think of. Something that will resonate with you, that I'm sure you will be able to pull off. So no, I don't have an exact answer for you. But I'm sure you will be able to find one for yourself soon,” she said.

Susie just stared at her, a bit baffled. But after a while I saw her smile.

“Thank you.” She said and took her seat back. And then just listened to the rest of the Q&A. And just when it was about to be over, I saw her eyes brighten. She leaned over and whispered in my ear.

“I think I've got an idea,” she told me.

“What?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you when it’s over,” she said with a smile and she put her head on my shoulder. I wasn’t sure how to feel about it. I felt my heart standing to pound.

“Hey, take it easy. It’s not a big deal. I just need a pillow. This whole thing’s running a little long,” she said.

“Okay.”

And we listened together. I wondered if Abby was noticing. I turned. She was gone.

“Abby’s gone,” I told Susie.

“Maybe she went to the bathroom,” she replied.

“You really want to risk that?” I asked her.

“We’ve gotta have a bit of faith in—”

Susie stopped herself, then she scoffed.

“Come on, let’s go.”

We stepped out of the conference room and made our way to the hallway. Abby was standing outside, sulking and texting.

“You got bored, dude?” Susie said with a smile.

“Yeah,” she said.

“It’s almost over, give us just a couple of minutes,” I said.

“Whatever.”

And we went back. But right before we went in, I could swear I had heard her sobbing. I turned, trying to figure out if she was really crying. But then Susie grabbed me, and pulled me close.

“After this, how about we go to the beach? I’ll tell you my big idea there,” she said.

As we were in the car heading toward the beach I asked Susie if we were going to head back to the hotel to pick up our swimsuits.

“We’re not going to get in the water. At least, I don’t plan to. But I bet you’d like to see us in our swimsuits, wouldn’t you, Mateo?” she said with a wink.

“I mean, I’m sure you look real nice, but—”

Susie laughed. I couldn’t hear Abby laughing which I thought was a bit weird. She really did seem to be quieter than usual ever since the conference.

“Look, I just want a nice place to talk for us, okay? I’ve gotta tell you all my idea,” Susie said.

“Can’t you just tell us here right now?” groaned Abby.

“Nope. I want us to be somewhere inspiring.”

“Wey, you sound fucking high.”

“I sure am about this idea.”

We got to the beach and walked toward the shore. It was a full day with college girls sunning, others playing with their dogs, kids eating ice cream, lone boys and girls reading books or tablets, taking selfies of themselves. Susie led us into the shore. I could feel sand getting into my sneakers so

I took them off along with my socks, tilting them so the sand could pour down into the ground. Susie and Abby were okay with their respective Toms and sandals.

“Okay, you guys ready?” Susie asked.

Abby and I both nodded, her movements far more apathetic than mine.

“Look, Mateo...” she said, making me look at her, so this really did involve each of us after all.

“You should consider being a journalist. Have you actually tried writing anything?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then it’s time that you start. Give it a shot.”

“What about?”

“You heard Carrasco. Something that you care about. About the people, things, the world you care about.”

“I...could think of something.”

“Please! And Abby...”

Abby didn’t even look at her.

“Abby...” she repeated.

“I’m listening.”

“Look at me.”

She raised her eyes at her, but just that, her head remained bowed down. This was a good way to multitask, eyerolling and then listening or at least pretending to listen.

“Abby...” Susie continued “...You and me, we’re going to do a website or a magazine. Something cool. We’ll make art about what’s happening. Realistic, abstract, anything and everything. Like we once thought of? Maybe even comics! It’ll be really really cool.”

“Okay. Sure,” Abby shrugged.

“But you’re gonna have to commit to it fully.”

“Okay.”

“You haven’t thought about school in a while, have you Abby?” Susie asked.

Abby scoffed.

“You have this view in front of you and you want to talk about school?” Abby said, nodding toward the beach.

“We haven’t talked about anything.”

“Pick something else.”

“Okay, don’t think of it as school. Think of it as the future. What do you wanna do?”

“I don’t think about the future,” Abby said.

I shouldn’t have, but I said it.

“What a surprise.”

Susie cringed.

“It’s a surprise to you because you’re an idiot,” Abby said.

“At least I’m going to school.”

“Like that means anything.”

Susana eyed us nervously.

“Take it easy, guys,” she said.

“Hear me out…” I started. “You would probably not kill yourself if you had some kind of purpose.”

Abby’s eyes widened and she raised her eyebrows. Susie bowed her head.

“Ex-fucking-cuse-me?!” she yelled. “What sort of shit do you have for brains to even think you know anything about me?! You think that because you’ve had friends die you know what it feels like to be me?!”

“It’s a start,” I said.

“To what?”

“So you know that you’re not alone. That you can get help.”

“I don’t need help from a forty carat cunt.”

Ouch.

“Okay, Abby. Forget it—”

Susie looked away and gave me a “Quit while you’re ahead” look.

“I’m not forgetting shit. You’re a real fucking *cabrón* and I’m not wasting any more time with you.”

She started to walk away from us. Susana rose to catch up with her, not before stopping to face me, her face had gone red.

“You’ve fucking done it,” she whispered.

Susie caught up with Abby.

“Abby, where the fuck are you going?”

“I’m not fucking telling you.”

“Don’t be a bitch.”

Abby stopped on her tracks and turned.

“What did you just call me?”

“A bitch.”

“You really think that’s how you’re gonna get me to live?”

“Well, you clearly don’t give a fuck. So what?”

“Oh, so what? You’re gonna leave me alone now?”

“You want that?”

Abby thought it over.

“Just remember that if you leave, you’re on your own. Have you forgotten what you were whining about just a few weeks ago?”

Abby closed her eyes and sighed.

“Okay, but he has to go.”

She pointed at me.

“Sure, how am I getting him back?”

“Look, whatever, do whatever you want. But you...” She pointed at me.

“...gotta quit asking stupid questions. *Calladito te ves más bonito.*”

“Look, I want to help. But we’ve already tried being nice. Susie told me you were talented,” I said.

“Susie, what the fuck?!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sakes, Abby. So you don’t want anyone to know anything about you?!”

“What for?”

“There’s stuff for you for anyone to gush about. Tons. I don’t think you should waste it.”

“Like it’s helped me in the last five years.”

Susana leaned down and picked up a bunch of sand.

“Because you don’t practice anymore. What’s your excuse? You didn’t do shit in Alamogordo.”

Susana kept collecting sand. Her fingers found a bunch of seashells and pebbles. She let the sand fall through her fingers, leaving only the rocky objects.

“I did practice.”

Susana threw a tiny pebble at Abby’s face.

“What the fuck?!” Abby yelled. I tried to hold down a laugh.

“Blizzard of two thousand and seven. Abby Ramírez came out the champion after a close battle against Susana Saucedo in a torrential snowfall. Los Angeles, California: Nine years later. Abby loses in an instant under less difficult circumstances. She can’t function in the ocean.”

Abby was backing away as Susie was readying more rocks and seashells to throw.

“It doesn’t mean shit because we’re by the ocean, not in a pinche blizzard.”

“No, but you can find pencils, paper and maybe even a few colors.”

“That’s it. I’m tired of your shit. I love you, Susie but I want to go home.”

“What for? You aren’t gonna do shit there.”

“What do you care what I do? You just want to force me to—”

“To survive? Big crime!”

“You’re a shitty friend! You’re the fucking Porfirio Diaz, *el pinche PRI!*”

“Don’t get nasty, Abby.”

“Look who’s talking!”

“Just take me home. This isn’t fun anymore.”

“Will you go back to school at least? Draw something? Draw for me?”

“I’ll do whatever the fuck I want.”

“Come on, Abby. At least give it a shot.”

“Susie, you have to understand. I know you’re doing this to—to save me or something, but you can’t guarantee how my feelings will change. Even I don’t know that. This isn’t going to make things better. You’re just gonna have me traveling forever?”

She had a point. And I could tell that Susie thought so as well. She sighed.

“Okay, let’s go home.”

“Home?” I asked. “Back to El Paso.”

“No, to the hotel, you—you know what I mean,” she said and stepped away. Abby followed and I just stood for a while, listening to the ocean for a moment. Then I followed them.

Back at the hotel, I stood outside the door. I looked at the stars, spotting satellites and airplanes. Abby walked out after a while, holding a cigarette between her fingers. She had a tank top on, I could notice a nicotine patch on her shoulders.

“What?” Susie asked, probably realizing that I had noticed the patch and the cigarette. I shook my head and didn’t say anything.

“It’s either this or the pot or anything else. There are things more addictive than a cigarette, but the temptation kills me a whole lot more. Smoking is something you can do casually everywhere.”

“It’s all right. You’re trying.”

“You’ve got that right,” she said, putting the cigarette between her fingers. She tongued at the cigarette.

“I...didn’t bring a light. On purpose,” she said, the cigarette dangling between her fingers.

“I’ll keep blowing on the fire if you try to light one,” I said.

“You do that, I’ll set you on fire.”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

We chuckled for an instant. Then her expression turned solemn.

“Abby...” I said.

“She’s asleep,” Susie replied. “Does she look okay to you?”

“I wouldn’t keep my eyes off her, if you asked me.”

“Look, Mateo. Don’t take this the wrong way. But I don’t want you trying to help me again.”

“Why?”

“Because you aren’t helping.”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t mean to say exactly what I said to her.”

“What I’m saying is that she doesn’t want to listen to you.”

“She doesn’t want to listen to anybody.”

“She’s willing to sleep in the same bed with me. That’s how much she trusts me. She doesn’t want you in the same car. That’s how far you both go.”

“Okay. If you think it’ll be better this way...”

“It’s not a bad mark on you. I just don’t think I need your help.”

“Thank you.”

The door started to open. Susie flicked her cigarette away. Abby emerged from the door.

“Guys?...” Abby asked.

“What’s up?” Susie said.

“Do you think we could meet up with Raúl?” Abby asked shyly.

“No?” Susie asked.

“He’s passing through. He’s been traveling and he wants to see me.”

“No,” Susie said.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s an asshole, that’s why.”

“Well, fine, I’ll go anyway. It’s not like I can’t.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t drive you there.”

“There’s buses, an Uber or he could pick me up.”

“That’s not happening.”

“It is happening,” Abby said and closed the door.

“What the fuck?!” whispered Susie.

“Is this guy really as bad as you say he is?” I asked.

“Yes! He’s crazy and dangerous! And even if he wasn’t, he’s a shitty influence on Abby. I don’t want him around her. Or around us, period.”

“If she’s really going, maybe we should go too. For her own good,” I said, shrugging.

“That sounds scary. And terrible. And like the only reasonable, good idea we could work from this.”

We stopped at a gas station. We went inside to get snacks and toiletries. I stayed with Susie while Abby was picking up beer.

“What stuff has Raúl done?” I asked Susie.

“He killed a priest.”

“He killed a priest?! Why?!”

“Because the priest was going to his neighborhood to get kids and teenagers out of drugs. Believe it or not, it was actually working. Raúl’s sales took a hit, so he was like “Fuck that” and shot him.”

I stood there with my jaw dropped.

“How come he wasn’t caught?”

“Because they pinned it on someone else. He was caught before. He made friends with police the time he was caught. It sounds super villainy, but you know, it’s Juárez. Cops are easily swayed,” Susie said.

“Did he kill again?”

Susie nodded.

“Who?”

“A guy who was standing outside a bar. Stabbed him because he felt like it.”

“What the hell does Abby see in him?”

“I don’t know. She’s stupid.”

“That’s not a good enough excuse!”

“I know we have to figure out how to do it. We’ll try, Mateo. We’ll really try.”

The party was in an apartment complex close to Inglewood. We couldn’t get a word out of Abby, but Susie’s head and mine were filled with images of some kind of big mansion party, maybe with Charlie Sheen or someone doing coke. But it wasn’t anything like that.

The apartment was small, a little bigger than what Susie had back home. The whole party was dark, underlit in blue and red. Everyone was a silhouette. Everyone seemed to have a joint or a pipe in their hands. I kept myself close to Susie and Abby. At certain points it seemed like Abby was going to step out. Every time, Susie would grab Abby by the shoulder and tell her “Stay close.”

“Abby!” a gruff voice called out.

From the silhouetted crowd, this tall, burly guy with glasses and a buzzed haircut approached us. The muscles on his arms made him look like he could easily demolish anyone’s face with just one brush. This was Raúl.

“Abby. And Susie,” he said nodding at the two of them. Abby lit up with a grin and ran to Raúl, wrapping her arm around him.

“How are you, baby?” Raúl asked. “What are you doing in LA?”

“What are you doing here?” Susie asked, crossing her arms.

“Traveling. Passing through. I’m headed back to Juárez in a few days.”

“You’ve got friends or family here?” I asked. All three of them gave me a weird look. But hey, I had to make things a little less weird somehow. And if anyone was going to be weird, it better be me. It was par for the course.

“Who the fuck are you?” Raúl asked with a smile.

“I’m Mateo. A friend of Abby’s.”

“Oh. What are you doing after?” Raúl asked Abby.

“We’re going back to our hotel,” Susie replied.

“Where are you guys staying?”

“In a hotel,” Susie replied.

“You guys can crash at my place if you want to,” he said.

“No, thanks. We’ll leave tomorrow,” Susie said.

“Huh, never took you for such a control freak, Susie,” Raúl said.

“College’s changed her,” Abby said.

“Good thing I dropped out,” he said.

Susie rolled her eyes.

“Abby, could I talk to you a minute?” said Susie.

“Can it wait?” she replied.

“No?”

Abby scoffed.

“Fine,” Her demeanor changed for a moment, turning to Raúl and telling him. “Be right back.”

Susie stepped out with Abby, leaving me with Raúl. We looked at each other from head to toe.

“You’re holding?” Raúl asked.

“No,” I told him.

“You’re packing?”

“No.”

“Pussy,” he said and he flashed a tiny pistol he had behind his pants.

“Is that legal?”

“Who cares?”

“You also carry that in Juárez?”

“Duh.”

I nodded.

“Let me go check on the girls,” I said and spotted Susie and Abby talking in whispers in a corner. I got closer.

“You can’t stay here! You can’t stay with him!” Susie said.

“Don’t you see me? I’m having a good time with him!” Abby replied.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Susie, you can’t just settle for him.”

“I’m happy with him. Maybe you need to do something big and altruistic to be happy, to change the world, but I don’t. I go for the simple things. He’s what’s been missing. It should have been obvious.”

“Oh, so if he dies, then it’s over for you too?”

“He’s not going to die.”

“Trust me, knowing him, knowing his life, it’s very very likely he will.”

“Well, we’re all going to die.”

I shrugged.

“You’re not helping, Mateo!” she said before getting closer to Abby again. “I’m sure he’ll be murdered eventually and maybe take you with him. Or maybe you will murder him in self-defense. There are so many things that could go shitfully wrong with him. The possibilities are endless!” She screamed, making quite a few people turn at her.

“You’re making a scene,” Abby said.

“Good! Fuck everyone!” Susie said, turning around and giving the finger to everyone.

“You’re embarrassing.”

Abby turned away, trying to get lost in the crowd. Susie followed.

“Abby! Come on! Please, Abby!”

Raúl got in the way.

“She’s not interested,” he said.

Susie could only stare at him. They looked at each other for a moment. Susie remained there with a defiant look. Finally, she grabbed my arm.

“Let’s get outta here,” she told me.

Susie drove furiously on the way back.

“I can’t fucking believe this. I should have seen this coming. I should have taken the phone away from her! Fuck!” she said, punching the steering wheel, making it honk that was soon accompanied by an “ow!” She glanced at her fist to make sure she hadn’t gotten injured.

The rest of the way she stayed quiet, holding back sobs as tears streamed down her face, the L.A. lights floating across her face.

“We’re going back to Juárez tomorrow,” she said.

The journey back was far more quiet. We hardly said anything to each other. Susie didn’t say anything but ask me the standard travel questions: “You need a bathroom?”, “Are you hungry?” Whenever she had to make a stop, she would check her phone looking for texts from Abby. But she didn’t get anything. She dropped me off at my house. When I came in, my parents hugged me.

“You came back quickly! Did something happen?” My mom asked.

“No, nothing! It was great!” I told them. In part, I meant it, but in part, I knew that Susie and maybe Abby had a totally different way of looking at it. Days went by, and I didn’t hear anything from

Susie or Abby. Neither posted anything on their social. All I kept getting was the usual arguments between my “friends” about Trump, immigrants, you name it. I texted Susie, even Abby, telling her to at least let Susie know that she was okay.

Then all of a sudden, Susie sent me a message:

-Help.-

## 16. SUSIE

To make me feel like shit, Abby didn't call me for days after the thing at the party. I didn't even talk to Mateo about it, I was so pissed about it. I got myself worried sick about it. Mateo did his best to distract me in those days, he invited me to come over to his house in Juárez so I could meet his parents and just hang out. Sure, I needed the distraction. The whole thing seemed a little icky, though because he would stop by at my apartment first for a while, and then his parents would pick him up so we could go to Juárez.

"I don't know, Mateo. I'm not sure if this is really the right thing right now," I told him.

"We'll have fun. My parents won't stick around the whole time. It'll just be the two of us. No big deal."

I considered for a moment until I finally said yes.

I don't know why, but the whole thing had me on edge. And not just that, but Abby, everything. I felt like my body was shaking. I needed to relax. But I couldn't drink. I couldn't do anything. And I don't know if it was by instinct or some other reason, but I thought I should set things in order in my apartment. There was still a lot of stuff from Tony that I could throw out.

I got myself up and started to set everything in order, digging into my closet for any little thing that Tony had left behind. All of his band t-shirts: The Strokes, Bright Eyes, The Clash. I used to think that someone who would listen to those bands couldn't be a piece of shit. But then I found his cargo shorts and I concluded that someone that combined those t-shirts and those shorts could be a real piece of shit, and now Tony had become the poster boy for that. I'm not sure why I couldn't see it before. And then there were his books; Foster Wallace, Palahniuk, *On the Road*, Bukowski. Good shit.

He was stupid to not have taken these. I kept digging deeper into my closet, trying to dig out every little piece of him that I could get. Then I found it, a tiny little bag of weed.

I quickly stood up, grabbing it and getting myself ready to flush it. But it took a quick shake of my hand to realize how nervous I was. And there it was, a little thing that could calm me down. Pot wasn't so bad, was it? Just this once. I could work without it. I didn't have to drive. I didn't have to do anything. I could just smoke it. I would be okay.

I looked for rolling paper, found it and lit it up. And took a drag. Then something happened. Something that I heard could happen when you smoke weed but had never happened to me. The thoughts didn't go away like they usually do. Instead, they got louder. I heard them buzzing like cicadas all over my brain. I couldn't breathe. My bad memories were avalanching down my brain. The Susie Fuck-Up Anniversary Tour. From newest to oldest. Starting out with my fuck-up with Abby, letting her go with Raúl. Having wasted my entire life, not doing anything of value. I had nothing to show for the world, for my life. I started to wonder if I had run away from my parents or if I had made them run away from me. If there really was any way out of the shit. The shit. The shit was everywhere, it was in Juárez, in El Paso, in Los Angeles, in London. Everywhere. Maybe the new place, the new plan that I had to find was going to Mars. Once I realized that these thoughts wouldn't stop coming, I tried to change my train of thought. I tried to figure out why this was happening. Then I realized that if there had been any weed in the house, we would've smoked it. Tony and I never threw away any drugs without good reason. Anything that looked suspicious, we threw out. I couldn't remember anything about this bag in particular, though. My guess is that he was hoping to throw out the weed because he thought it was laced or because maybe the strain was going to be too hard on me. Stupid fucker, why didn't he warn me? Stupid fucking me, why couldn't I remember? Maybe he thought I would be smart enough to figure it out. Yeah, right. He didn't believe that anyone could be smarter

than him. As if I couldn't control myself, I slid off my bed and landed on the floor with a thump. I found myself staring at the ceiling, as if overtaken by some kind of sleep paralysis. Once I realized it was likely that I wouldn't be able to keep moving, I turned my body around, watching my window and the wall swing by until I saw myself facing the floor. I placed the palms of my hands firmly on the floor as well as the tips of my toes. I started to crawl, unsure of where I wanted to go, or where I was supposed to go. I had no idea how to make it stop. What did people do in these kinds of situations? Ride it out? Was I going to die? Was this how I was supposed to go to Mateo's house? Shit fuck. Now I was going to disappoint Mateo. I had fucked up. I had totally fucked it up. I couldn't disappoint him anymore. Why had I done this to myself? I kept hoping the bad trip would end soon, but it just kept going. I don't know how long I was on that floor.

I don't know how long I was on my back, but I felt like my arms had just blended to the floor. Then I heard a knock on the door. I'm sure it was Mateo. I know I mouthed for him to come in, but I couldn't hear myself talk. In my anxiety, I had forgotten I left the door open. I had forgotten I had even texted him in the first place.

Mateo came in and he found me, sprawled on the floor staring at the ceiling.

"Susy, what's wrong?!"

I tried really hard to talk and somehow I managed.

"I think it was laced."

He kneeled besides my face.

"What was laced?"

"I smoked."

In all that time, I hadn't realized I still had the joint burning at my fingertips.

"Oh Jesus, Susie."

Mateo took the joint.

"Flush it down the toilet," I told him.

I could hear him running to the toilet and flushing the joint, then he came back to me.

"Why would you have laced weed?" he asked.

"I'm not positive it was laced! I don't know! I might be taking a hard hit for not having smoked in so long!" I yelled, but then controlled myself. "Sorry, Mateo, I didn't mean to yell but it's just, this is so shitty..."

"Do you need a hospital?"

"No, I'll be fine. I just need to come down. Can you help me come down?"

"Come down?"

"Just letting the effect wear off."

"How?"

"Put some music."

"What music?"

"Any music. But you better pick something good."

"Okay."

He went over to my albums and he picked a vinyl of Conor Oberst and the Mystic Valley Band, the one with the black and white photo of him on the hammock. I wouldn't find out until later because I couldn't really see anything in the moment. Then I heard the first percussion hits of "Cape Canaveral." I started to feel a tickle going on in my ears, and it traveled to my head and all the way down to my stomach.

"You did good, kid," I told him. "Come on, lie down and chill next to me."

And he did. And we looked up at the ceiling, going through Conor Oberst singing about how victory was sweet even deep in the cheap seats.

Turns out that all that worked. By the end of the album, I felt everything had come to normal. I still felt like I had some kind of sleep inertia. My reflexes didn't feel strong and instead of walking, I felt like I was wobbling. Mateo's parents gave him the call to come pick us up. I opened the door to go outside and the El Paso sun hit me like a reflector. I thought I was going to go blind. I put on my sunglasses and shield myself against the heat. Everything seemed louder – The birds, the wind rustling, the slight cold that hit my face. We walked down the stairs to my apartment. There were times where I thought I was going to trip but Mateo would hold my back. He'd ask me if I was okay and I would just nod. I was getting scared I wouldn't be able to talk properly once we got to his parents.

They were riding in a white Nissan, a huge truck. Mateo led me into the backseat and he sat next to me. He introduced me. His dad looked just like him, except he was balding and pretty clear-shaven, his eyes hidden behind glasses. His mom was a short, portly and pretty lady with long hair.

They pelted me with questions about what I studied and what I wanted to do after. I just smiled and remained calm. They weren't jerks, so that made things a little easier. It seemed like we would have a nice afternoon, nothing to worry about. I was thinking of commending Mateo on having

such a nice idea. I needed to forget about Abby for a bit, maybe after all she was right about that guy and that's what she needed. But Abby wouldn't leave me.

We were at Mateo's house and we were going up the stairs. I was looking at the family portraits and the whole house. There was a certain feeling of calm here, that I felt I couldn't find anywhere else. There was something nice about it all. I dug the aesthetic the house had, sort of the colonial Mexican style you could find in a place like Guanajuato. Yellows, greens and oranges on the walls. The family portraits were the three of them at different family parties across the years: Mateo in a bathing suit at the beach, Mateo in suit and tie at a quinceañera. I noticed that the pictures stopped at around the time Mateo had turned fifteen. I started to hope that everything was okay between them. Or maybe it all had coincided with the carjacking. Mateo wasn't like me. His parents fuck sure weren't like me at all. Something like the carjacking would surely make someone like him not want to go out anymore. It made sense to me. It made perfect sense to me. And it made even more sense when I went up to his room. It wasn't this palace of childhood and innocence I expected it to be. The walls were empty, but the whole room had his presence. I don't know how to describe it. It was orderly but messy in that Mateo kind of way; textbooks and notebooks scattered around. Dog, duck and hedgehog plushes that I assumed and hope that Cecilia had given him. I fell ass-first on his bed, feeling the most comfortable I had been in years.

"Dude, nice place," I told him.

"Thanks," Mateo said and sat next to me.

"Your parents are cool,"

"Thanks. I think they like you,

"With reservations?"

“Oh, probably,”

We laughed a little.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’m okay. I think. I think I’m okay,”

“Do you want to do something?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know? Talk? Watch a movie? Listen to music?”

“Let’s just sit like this. Quiet for a moment. Let me...let me get a real feel of this place,”

And we just sat there. I listened to the neighborhood sounds from outside. Those sounds of the calm Juárez I hadn’t heard in a while and that I realized I missed hearing. Children playing, dogs barking, passing cars, a truck selling tamales in the distance. I started to think about my parents. We weren’t that far away from them. I started to wonder what they were doing in an instant. If I was to go to them, would they open the door to me? Would they hug me? Did they still have my pictures on their walls?

My cell phone rang. It was Abby. I told Mateo and he told me to run to his room. We got inside and closes the door. We put the phone on speaker. The first thing we heard was a sob.

“Susie?” Abby asked over the line.

“I’m here, Abby. What’s up?”

“I just wanted to tell you that I’m okay. Don’t—don’t come looking for me. I’m really happy right now.”

“Abby, you’re crying.”

*“Por que estoy bien pinche contenta.”*

“Where are you?”

“At Raúl’s. I’m staying here. But I’m fine. I promise. I’m fine, don’t come looking for me. Don’t visit me. Don’t do anything. I’m really happy.”

“Abby...”

“You’re so cool, Susie.”

She hung up.

“Do you believe any of that?” Mateo asked me.

“No. It’s obviously bullshit. Anyone can see it.”

I was shaking. I started to feel as if I was running out of breath. Then, I couldn’t help myself.

“Mateo...you’re fine. I don’t need---Anyone that comes close to me I fuck up. I think you should stop listening to anything I say. I don’t think we should be friends.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Once you take me home, you stay the fuck away from me.”

“Susie, it’s okay. We can save Abby. Do you know where he lives?”

“We can’t do shit.”

“Yes, we can.”

“It’s done. I’m done. Abby is going to die in this town, just like I am. It’s done. It’s all happening again. Only this time we can’t be saved. It’s done. Done.”

Mateo held me.

“Listen to yourself. Breathe.”

I collapsed into his bed.

“I can’t breathe. I can’t calm down. It’s all fucked.”

“You haven’t come down yet?”

“I don’t know.”

I was just staring at his wall.

And I don’t know how long I stared at it. But later Mateo told me it was getting late. That I had slept the whole time on his bed. I didn’t remember sleeping.

“You don’t want to stay?” he asked me.

“No. I just have to get home. I want to get home,” I told him.

“Susie, what’s the matter?”

“Nothing. I just—”

“Please, relax—”

“I can’t. I just can’t. Let me go, okay?”

Mateo shook his head.

“No one’s stopping you.”

She left the room and I followed. We walked down the stairs together. His parents were in the dining room.

“Mom, dad, Susie’s leaving.”

“You won’t join us for supper?” Mateo’s mother asked.

“No, sorry, miss. I have to get home. Something I forgot to school,” I lied to them.

“You want us to drop you off at the bridge?” his father asked.

“No, no. I’ll just get an Uber. I’ll see you guys, thank you for everything. I’m so sorry,” I turned to Mateo. “Wait with me outside?”

Not sure why I asked him for that. It probably would have been better to have ordered the Uber first and then leave, but I wasn’t thinking clearly. We sat in the sidewalk outside of his house. He didn’t say anything to me and I didn’t say anything to him. He kept looking at me with concern. I couldn’t look back. The Uber arrived. I stood up and turned to him.

“Stay good, Mateo,” I told him and got inside.

At the bridge, I felt like I was walking back to El Paso on autopilot. I just kept thinking that I couldn’t let Mateo find me. I decided that I would call Alberto, Ricky and Nick. I hadn’t seen them since my party. We always had our crazy days and nights, and hadn’t had them in a while. It was time to fix that. It was my right place after all. I wouldn’t tell Mateo. I wouldn’t tell anyone. It was the best way to disappear.

## 17. MATEO

Susie and I hadn't talked in a while. She wasn't answering my calls or my texts or anything. What had happened with Abby had left me thinking that it was obvious she wasn't happy there. I had to do something about it myself. I just needed to find out where Raúl lived and pull her out of there. I was sure Susie knew, but I was also sure she wasn't going to tell me.

I decided to ask Abby just as I could, praying that whatever I did wouldn't get her into any trouble. I texted her number.

- Where are you?

She didn't reply immediately. It took her a couple of hours. I won't lie, I got as nervous as Susie about it. Given recent events, there was a chance that Abby could turn up dead. Especially if she was in Juárez.

- Juárez.

- Where's Raúl's apartment?

- Behind the med school.

- What's the number?

I wasn't going to argue with her. I had to find a way to get myself there. I couldn't ask my parents. But I could ask them to do something hadn't done before.

“Can I borrow the car?”

They just stared at me.

“But you don’t drive,” Mom said.

“I do. A little.”

“You never finished your lessons.”

“Susie taught me a little bit.”

“The keys are in the kitchen,” Dad said.

“Be. Careful.” Mom said.

I went out and sat down in the car. I breathed, holding the steering wheel tightly. I reminded myself of the road trip. I knew it couldn’t be so hard if I just kept going on a straight line and making turns where I needed to make them. I started the car. Doing it only once. I put the stick down on Drive. And I went off, making the way out of the street.

I drove carefully. Getting a bit nervous whenever I saw a police car drive by me. I went slowly. I didn’t think that was such a bad idea since that could help me keep a low profile in the middle of all this. It seemed like an eternity to get there, but I was doing it. Finally, I arrived.

I got myself out of the car and headed towards the apartment. And right then, that’s when I felt my nose snap, the cartilage bending and breaking with one crack. I felt blood bubble out of my nostrils. The shock made me bite my tongue and lips. I had been hit. I fell on the ground and soon, Raúl loomed above me.

“You dumb fuck,” he said, “You think I don’t read her texts? Stay the fuck away.”

But he wasn't done. He sent his boot flying towards my face and I could feel something popping inside my sinuses. I was smelling and tasting blood, like tinfoil. He wouldn't stop kicking. Then, he grabbed me and threw me to the street. I passed out.

## 18. SUSIE

It all started with Alberto, Ricky and Nick standing outside my apartment with cases of beer and smiles on their faces. They were all alike, having a similar taste for tattoos and Cruz Azul, Selección Mexicana, and Atlas t-shirts. They weren't brothers but you could think that they were. Alberto had a shaved head and dark skin, Ricky had a handlebar mustache and he'd grown muscles in all his years of gym-going, and Nick was the blonde, green-eyed guy of the look, people liked to tell him that he reminded them of the American dude from Molotov.

What followed was a blur. Maybe I was too hammered to really remember everything, but it probably wasn't so important. It was drink after drink. Once that got boring or if we were feeling like we were getting to drunk to engage with the world, we'd take mushrooms to bring us back down. Then smoke some weed to mellow. Some people would say that if we really needed to disconnect from the world, we wouldn't take the mushrooms or smoke weed but if I got into a bad trip again or if someone else did, someone else had to take care of whomever got fucked up. If there was any degree of responsibility it was in that we would leave ourselves enough space to let our bodies and minds clean themselves a little bit before taking something else. For Alberto this was all with the idea of celebrating that I had gotten myself out of the nunnery. A big exaggeration on his part, and a really stupid joke, but nothing no one could take it seriously, so I didn't make a fuzz. Then this numbness started to set in. It wasn't that the drugs weren't having an effect on me, but I wasn't feeling their euphoria. Instead, it was like a cloud of tear gas, with shafts of light cutting through it. But the light was still covered in the gas. I suddenly felt myself wanting to be in control of the whole thing. I remembered times I had been put under anesthesia, that grogginess that overtakes me, so numb to the pain but the lethargy that would slow down my movements and thoughts. I was walking but I could barely tell where, my whole apartment felt like a maze. I became scared of what would happen if I kept putting things into my body, of being lost in there forever. I realized that I didn't have anything

to talk about anymore. They weren't even trying to talk to me anymore. They were silent all the way, trapped in their own trips, with no sign of arrival soon.

One morning, I walked across the whole apartment, my head aching and dizzy as I moved from my bedroom across the hallway, popping my head into each room. I checked my reflection in the bathroom mirror. My eyes were bloodshot, my face pale and my hair messy, but I didn't look any worse than a lot of trailer park moms that go to Wal-Mart in their pajamas. I stepped outside and realized that one of the guys had thrown up on the floor. The smell of it woke me up.

"Who the fuck did this?!" I screamed, furious. The guys remained silent, staring at the ceiling. So no one was listening anymore. Fuck it. Barefoot, I walked out of the apartment into the street. I didn't stop, feeling the pebbles and the cold pierce the soles of my feet. Dizziness hit me. I nearly collapsed into a bus stop bench, holding on to it. Then I started to lose my breath. I couldn't explain why. I thought that if this was a panic attack, I should just let it happen. So I left myself hyperventilating until I slowly caught my breath again. I sat down and looked at the passing cars, at the sun through the cloudy, shimmering El Paso sky. I started to think that maybe I didn't have to leave. Maybe I had to return. But where? To nothing? In a way, I understood Abby. Dying was a way of returning to nothing. But I also wanted to return into being awake. I just had to figure out how.

I let the guys stay in the apartment. I was hoping that once they'd see that I was gone, they might leave too. At least on a beer run. We were running out already. I returned for my car and drove away into Scenic Drive, overlooking all of Juárez and El Paso. I put the front seat all the way down and tried to sleep. I kept waking up. I don't know if it was all the mushrooms and shit, but I started to feel like something was going to happen. Then, I got the phone call from Mateo.

## 19. MATEO

I woke up in a hospital bed with Susie next to me. I could tell she had been crying. She was pale, her eyes red. She was sitting next to my bed. I slowly woke up and called out to her. She tried to put on a smile, but she still looked worried.

“Mateo...”

“Hey.”

I tried to smile as well.

“How did you find me?”

“Abby called me. Told me where you were.”

“Am I going to be okay?”

“Looks like you’ve got a broken nose and a few broken ribs, but you’ll survive.”

“What about Abby? Is she okay?”

“I don’t know.”

“We have to try again. Or call the cops.”

Then my parents rushed into the room. They practically shoved Susie out of the way so they could get closer to me. They were asking me if I was okay and telling me what had happened. They turned to look at Susie.

“This was your fault wasn’t it?” my dad asked.

“Dad, don’t start.”

“You’ve been giving Mateo some really bad ideas!” my mom said, trying to control herself.

Susie just stood up and backed away into the wall.

“Dad...” I whispered.

But then, Susie spoke.

“I’ve made a lot of mistakes with Mateo. You have a good son here, and I want you to know to never try to change him. Because he’s good. He’s a good kid and this happened because he was brave enough to do something I wasn’t brave enough about. He’s smarter and braver than he thinks or that you may think. Don’t scold him. There isn’t anyone to be scolded. He just wanted to help a friend.”

They stared at her, and then at me.

“Did you help your friend?” mom asked me.

“Yeah. Everything’s fine now. This was the price,” I lied, pointing at my face.

“Okay. The doctors say you will be fine. You just need to stick around for a night,” Dad said, looking relieved. Susie and Mom exhaled at the same time. In a city like Juárez, getting the crap beat out of you was a shitty situation, but nothing compared to the worst things that could happen.

“Good.”

“Can you give me just one minute with Susie?”

“Sure,” Mom exhaled through gritted teeth.

And as soon as they left, I turned to Susie.

“Things aren’t okay yet, are they?” she asked me.

“No,” I told her.

Susie shook her head.

“You really really shouldn’t have done this,” she said, sniffing.

I nodded and closed my eyes, trying to think of what to do next.

“The cops would be useless, wouldn’t they?” I asked.

“They’re probably helping him out,” Susie said, controlling her sobs.

“I guess that we’re going to have to rescue her,” I said.

Susie turned to me and smiled, with tears still streaming down her face.

“You fucking bet,” she said.

We made the plan: Susie would drive us to Raúl’s apartment and then we’d break together into the apartment, tackling Raúl and pulling Susie out. We had to deal with the question if Raúl would have a gun, but with both of us carrying bats, maybe we had a chance at beating him and distracting him enough to keep him from shooting. But if he did fire, maybe he would call enough attention to himself. We would go ahead with it in three days.

Three days passed and I made my way out, telling my parents that I was just going out with Susie to a movie.

“You’re going to help that girl, aren’t you?” my mom asked, making me turn. I wished I had learned how to lie better, but by then it was too late to lie. She knew it. She didn’t have to do a lot of

detective work in order to figure it out. And soon, Dad emerged from the hallway, eating a chocolate chip cookie. So surely, he knew this now too.

“We can’t call the cops, they’re not going to do anything,” I said.

“And what are you going to do?” Dad asked.

“Do you really think you can actually help her?” Mom said.

“I have to try. I can’t just leave her like that.”

“What about your life?” Mom asked.

I trembled, feeling a surge go through my body. I could barely look at my parents, but I could speak to them.

“What about it? What’s it worth if I don’t do anything with it? It’s always about staying alive live enough for school, to go to work, but I can’t even do any of that here, because there’s always someone doing evil crap like this! All because we sleep through it. We don’t do anything to stop it. Something has to change. I can’t just sleep on it anymore,” I said.

My parents just stared at me, speechless. I couldn’t keep Susie waiting so I headed to the door.

“Mat...” my Mom said. I didn’t want them to interrupt me anymore. I opened the door and set a nervous foot outside.

“We’re going with you,” she said.

For Pete’s sake. They were only stalling me.

“No, you’re not,” I said and kept walking.

They followed me to Susie's car. She noticed.

"Mateo?" She asked. I couldn't answer. I think she felt just at the same loss at what to do since she just waved at them. "Hi Mister and Miss Saucedo."

But my parents ignored her. Dad grabbed my shoulder.

"Mateo. We mean it. We're coming with you," He said, making me roll my eyes.

"You're just trying to guilt trip me! If something happens to you or me, then you just want me to feel guilty about getting you and me involved in the first place!"

Mom shook her head.

"Don't feel that way. We're coming," she said.

Susie unlocked the doors to her car.

"We better hurry."

After hesitating for a couple of seconds, I was the first to get in the car.

Susie drove, while I had the passenger seat and my parents were right behind in the passenger seat. Raúl's apartment was in the southern outskirts of the city, close to the airport. Traffic in Juárez always gets heavy there. We drove in the slow ocean of cars, we might as well have been at one of the bridges. We finally made our way out into the streets, finding ourselves in a neighborhood that didn't look unsafe. It looked like most other Juárez neighborhoods of small houses in desaturated beige colors, some of them graffitied, but nothing that signaled that a guy like Raúl was living there. We stopped at a small apartment complex that looked more like a house.

Susie and I turned to my parents.

“Mateo will knock, I will go inside and take care of it. Anything happens, Mateo will follow me. Anything happens to Mateo and you guys will go after. Sound good?” Susie whispered.

My parents and I gave a nervous nod.

“Rock and roll,” Susie said and we both got out of the car and headed toward the main door. As she had planned, she knocked. We waited for an answer. Long enough to look at each other, full of nerves.

“Should I knock again?” I asked.

The door opened. It was Abby.

“Mateo! Get out of here! He’s going to kill us--!”

Raúl’s tattooed arm threw Abby away and his hand reached for me, dragging me inside.

“Oh shit,” was all I got to say before the door slammed behind me. Within seconds, I was on my knees along with Abby.

“Your stupid friends are here. I already did Mateo, how about I do Susie now? Don’t fucking move,” Raúl snarled.

I turned to Abby, at a loss of what we could do now. Susie or my parents had to do something. We could hear them slamming on the door and shouting for help. Abby stood up.

“What did I just fucking say?!” Raúl yelled, flashing his gun at Abby. Abby just turned around and went for the kitchen.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?!” he yelled again.

“Nowhere,” she said.

“Then lay the fuck down on the floor!”

“Just let him go. I’ll stay. I’m going to get something to eat.”

Raúl didn’t seem to know what to do. The gun trembled in his hands. He stared at her, his eyes moving as if confused.

“Fine! But I better see you come back here in a minute!”

“I will.”

Abby went to the kitchen. I had no idea what was happening.

She returned holding an apple in her hand. She put the apple in her mouth, taking a massive, crunchy bite. She held it inside her mouth and swallowed. Then, she began to give a muffled cough. She was choking. Raúl just stared at her.

“She’s choking!” I yelled.

“Jesus!” Raúl yelled and ran to place himself behind Abby, wrapping his arms around her stomach. He began to push. Then I noticed in her eyes that she was trying her hardest to keep her mouth shut, to hold the apple chunk between her teeth. And to confirm that she wasn’t kidding after all, she winked at me. I nodded and ran for the door.

“Wait! Motherfucker!” Raúl screamed.

I opened the door. Susie and my parents ran into the apartment, all of them yelling what I can only describe as a war cry. Abby spat out the apple and Raúl let her go. He ran toward me, but Abby grabbed my shoulder.

“Let’s go!”

I followed her, making sure that everyone was out of the apartment. I could feel Raúl's heavy steps coming towards me. I jumped out the door frame and followed everyone. I kept running, not looking behind me. We ran down the stairs of the apartment complex. I felt like I could trip at any moment. I saw Susie's Camry and got myself into the passenger seat. No, I didn't think anything of it at the time. I was just glad to be inside the car, away from Raúl. Not long after, Abby, Susie and my parents all jumped into the car. But the three of us came into two realizations that we weren't too happy about: I was behind the wheel and Raúl was right outside the car.

"Uh oh," I said.

"Look Mateo, who gives a shit. Just fucking drive," Abby yelled.

"Hey! Don't yell at him like that!" my mom yelled.

Raúl was less than a feet away from the car.

"Start the car!" Susie yelled.

I turned the key and started the car. Right as Raúl started punching the grill of the car, and heading toward the doors. I put the car in reverse and packed out of the complex and drove away, with Raúl running behind us. I kept speeding away until he was no longer visible. And right then, the three of us burst out laughing. Susie and I applauded.

"Fuck yeah, Mateo! Fuck yeah!" Susie yelled as she cracked down the window, feeling the night air fill the car.

"Language!" my dad said and we all laughed.

As I drove, it took me a while to realize I wasn't going anywhere in particular. I was just driving on a straight line.

“Guys, thanks for this. I’m sorry. I’m sorry for wasting your life, my life with this. I thought he could protect me from all the bad shit. I really thought so, but he’s part of it. He’s part of it all...”

Abby cried. My mom put her hand on her shoulder. Susie turned back to look at her.

“It’s okay, Abby. It’s really okay,” Susie said and then held Abby’s head, wiping away her tears. They stayed that way for a moment. I watched, until I realized I had no idea where we were going.

“Where should I drive?” I asked.

“La Chaveña,” Susie said.

Both Abby and I looked at each other and then at Susie, yelling “What!” simultaneously.

“You’re going back to your mom and Abril. I already saw I can take care of you. But they can. And I’m sure they’ll want to spend one Christmas with you.”

“They won’t!”

“Look, if they kick you out, we’ll pick you up, okay?”

Abby thought it over.

“Fine.”

“Okay, and how exactly do I head to this place?”

“I’ll tell you,” Abby said, sighing and gritting her teeth.

We drove towards La Chaveña. For long and forever, it was a neighborhood I had been terrified of. It was the place where a lot of murders and other crimes occurred. And once you got in there, it looked like an Apocalyptic wasteland. Many houses were demolished or crumbling, abandoned. There were sections of the street that were unpaved.

“Careful over the hill,” Abby said and soon I saw what she meant. There was a giant hill of dirt. I gulped, I wasn’t exactly sure how I was going to pull it off. It was too steep. I accelerated carefully. I felt myself struggle. I kept pressing on the accelerator and I got to the top. The three of us breathed relief.

We kept driving until we got to Abby’s house. A two-story home that stood over a hill. High enough for us to see Juárez and El Paso. I turned off the car.

“Don’t!” Abby said.

We looked at her.

“Just in case it doesn’t happen,” Abby said.

“Too late,” I replied.

“You want me to go with you?” Susie asked her.

“Yes—No. Let me give it a shot.”

She stepped out of the car and walked over to the house. She knocked on the door. After a while, someone opened. This girl who was slightly taller than Abby, pale and with blonder hair. This was Abril. She just stared at her for a moment and let her in, closing the door.

Susie and I didn’t see anything else but the door for a few minutes. Then, from the window we caught a glimpse. Abby sat down on a couch we could see from the window, framed by Christmas lights. She had a bag of ice to her face. Abril embraced her and after a few moments, a tall woman with sandy hair, wearing a sweater sat down as well. Her mother. Abril and her mother covered Abby in an embrace. We could see them sobbing, only to later smile as they held each other.

“I think it’s time for us to go,” Susie said.

While we were in the car, Susie and I talked.

“Mateo, you think that things between my parents and me are hopeless?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve not met your parents.” I told her.

“But you’re close to yours.”

“My parents aren’t like your parents or anybody else’s. Or so they say. I mean, back when I was in high school, they were always talking about how other parents were too lenient and stuff like that, so, I don’t know.”

“I think our parents would get along.”

“Well, maybe things are okay. Maybe they’re okay with you.”

“They stopped calling me. I never answered their calls or their texts, but they would call and text me.”

“Recently?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe it’s time you answered.”

Susie took out her cellphone and called them. She didn’t get a reply.

“Aw, crap,” she said.

“Hey, maybe they’re busy with something.”

“They would always pick up the phone. Always.”

“Maybe text them?”

She texted them. And a week later she called me to tell me that they hadn’t replied.

“Take me to my parents,”

I looked at her in surprise.

“Why?”

“Please.”

“Why me, though?”

“If this goes wrong. If I fuck up, if they fuck up, I want you there, okay? I need your help.”

“Tell me where they are.”

Susie’s parents lived in El Campestre, the rich people’s neighborhood of Juárez. Some of the houses are like colorful mansions. There used to be a guy that every Christmas had something of a little petting zoo of camels and donkeys to do his own little live-action Nativity set.

“So I guess you’re loaded afterall,” I said

“Ha. I wish.” Susie said and gave a nervous laugh.

Her house was a simple one-story house. It was white and wide, with a little gray marble stairway that led to the main door. Susie nervously looked at it.

“Okay,” she said and stepped out of the car.

“You want me to go with you?” I asked.

She hesitated.

“Uh, you don’t have to but that’s okay.”

I followed her.

We went up the stairs. Once we got to the front, she rang the doorbell. We waited a while until a woman who looked like Susie, except older and her hair a short buzz-cut of gray opened the door. She stared at us from head to toe.

“Hi.”

She kept staring at us.

“Can I come in?”

She kept staring.

“Look, I’m sorry about everything. I know we’re going to keep disagreeing about a lot of things but it doesn’t matter. I love you and I miss you. I think I should stick around. At least for Christmas.”

Then, the woman jumped and embraced her. Susie returned the embrace.

We went into her room that seemed a lot neater than her apartment. There were drawings she had made back in high school, pictures of her with her friends. The walls and her bedsheets were a faint blue color. Light was coming in softly through the thin curtains.

“Hey, this is really nice,” I told her.

“Whatever,” she said and fell on her bed.

I looked at one of her high school pictures, she looked relatively the same except her hair was a lot longer. Her smile and her eyes a lot more vibrant than I had gotten to see them. I ended up staring at the picture.

“Leave me alone,” she said, jokingly.

“It’s a good picture,” I told her.

“No, it’s not, leave it,”

I turned away and looked at her art: Simple drawings of trees, people, houses. I could tell she had grown as an artist since, but I could see the beginnings of her style and technique.

“You’ve always been so talented,” I told her.

I didn’t get a reply. I turned and saw she had fallen asleep. I smiled and left.

## 20. SUSIE

I stayed over for Christmas like they had asked; helping mom and dad with dinner, getting some last-minute presents. Thankfully, it was just us. They weren't quite ready to reintroduce me to the rest of the family again. I told them about the plan I had in mind for Abby, Mateo and me and they liked my idea, but told me that I should stay in school which is what I was going to do. I wanted to stay with them a while longer, so I decided to leave the apartment in El Paso. I gave my notice to the landlord and started to get things out of there. I wasn't looking forward to having to cross the bridge in order to go to school but I wasn't the only one who would do that.

While I tried to get things going with my move back to Juárez, I thought about how I was going to get the project going with Mateo. I looked through the paper and through Cecilia Carrasco's website, finding some pieces to write about, to draw. I wasn't sure about how successful it was going to be, but I didn't care. I wanted to do this with my friends, with as many people as I could.

Friends kept trying to get in touch to get me into parties but I kept turning them down. There were times before when I would lock myself up in my apartment and not do anything, usually get stoned or drunk, but now I found myself drawing, planning, even writing a little bit. I also started to work on some personal projects for everyone. They were all late Christmas gifts, but I made drawings for Mom, Dad, Abby and Mateo. I even framed them and everything. I was hoping Mateo would love his.

## 21. MATEO

Susie invited me for supper at her house, and then we crossed the bridge to pick up some of her things in El Paso so she could stay the Christmas break with her parents. I helped her get stuff out of her apartment. After we were done, we drove to the convenience store in Sunset Heights. During a red light she leaned over to the backseat.

“I’ve got this for you. Remember you told me about your wall?” she pulled a painting she did of two hedgehogs and gave it to me. I held it in my hands as I looked at it. It was drawn and painted in some kind of rough style, the hedgehogs looking a bit cartoony and exaggeratedly cute, but I still thought it was beautiful.

Susie and I were watching two high schoolers trying to score booze at the Sunset Heights Grocery. She was behind the wheel of her Camry while I had taken over the passenger seat. The high schoolers were a boy and a girl; the blue-tinted hair, pierced, Hot Topic type. Both were peeking through the window, the girl anxiously buckling her knees up and down as she watched a woman speaking to the cashier.

“You know how you can really impress Abby? Or any girl for tha matter?” Susie asked me, her foot shooting toward mine like a reflex. She ignored it and put it back over the brake.

“How?” I asked her

“Dancing.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know how.”

“I’ll show you.”

“I thought you said you wouldn’t.”

“Changed my mind.”

“But I dunno if Abby needs a boyfriend—”

“It doesn’t have to be Abby. It can be any girl, okay? It’s a nice bonus to have, Mateo.”

“I thought you said that I was okay the way I am.”

“You are okay. But don’t you want to learn something new every once in a while?”

“Okay. Sure.”

She put in a CD in her stereo; the Story One cover of “AM 180” began to play. Susie got out first, her face shadowed by the fluorescents from the store. Suddenly she pulled me out of the car and we began to slow dance. At first, our arms kept us at length. But as we would get closer, she would slowly pull me away. We were close, but not to the point where we could have embraced. Becoming faster along with the rhythm, we laughed as we did so.

“Hey, you aren’t so bad. Just let yourself go and you’ll be fine!” she told me as we danced.

I heard the bell of the store, the woman was stepping out. I noticed the high schoolers were watching us, as if in some kind of weirded out astonishment. The woman came out of the store now carrying a brown paperbag that she handed to the young couple. The girl laughed excited and opened the bottle, taking a swig and then passing the bottle to her boyfriend. Now we had an audience of three.

As I held her back and her hands, I felt her bones moving under my fingers. I remembered how I felt that time when we first met at the bus stop. My heart was a Keith Moon drum solo.

“What the fuck?!” the high school girl shrieked in laughter, almost making me stumble and making Susie and I pull closer to each other so we wouldn’t fall. One more inch and we would have kissed. She turned her face away, I could only see her profile. A pulse distracted me from her face. Her heart against her chest and mine. The closest I’ve ever felt one. The blood pulsing in my eardrum for a few seconds was also hers. An earthquake from a country rocking a foreign one. It was pumping so fast and so close that I could have mistaken it for mine.

## EPILOGUE – Abby

I don't know if Susie's idea to do a website or something is the best. I don't know if I'll actually do it. But una tarde, I looked through my old bedroom, trying to find paper. Looking through my papers, my drawers, trying to make sense of where everything was. Mi hermana y mi mama hadn't moved anything, but it felt like an entirely different room. I found a diario of sorts. Mentira. It was more like a standard notebook that I had turned into a diary. I flipped through it. Raúl. Raúl. Raúl. I wanted to throw it away, maybe even burn it. I just tore the first pages that mentioned him. I thought I must've left it behind when I ran off. I grabbed those pages and torn them away from the diary. I threw them into the basura. I thought about burning them again tomorrow, pero a la chingada for now. I flipped through the remaining pages, all of them blank. I wasn't sure where to start. I remembered the painting Susie had drawn for Mateo. I've gotta say, not her best work but oh well. Maybe it was a good starting point. I started to draw a little erizo slowly walking across the pages of my notebook. I didn't have much practica with flipbooks or anything animated, this was really my first try but it wasn't so bad. I gave it grass, trees and a rainy day. And it just kept walking back and forth, smiling through all the bullshit.

THE END.

## VITA

Oscar Moreno was born and raised in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico. He has a BA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso, a Master's in Art and Design from the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez. He has written reviews and articles for blogs and magazines such as La Radio 3.0, Monkeys Fighting Robots and The Black List. His work has been published by the likes of Levadura, Somos en Escrito and the Rio Grande Review. His short films and screenplays have placed highly in contests and festivals around the world such as the Sundance Lab and the Austin Film Festival.