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Francisco's Flowers

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FRANCISCO'S FLOWERS

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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FRANCISCO'S FLOWERS

By

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FRANCISCO'S FLOWERS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Kristopher Paul

Thesis II

Sheid

11/13/2016

Preface to Francisco's Flowers

I come from a family of storytellers. My grandfather told stories. Some were his own, some came from others, but he always told them with an enthusiasm that was entrancing. My grandmother often called him *chismoso*, he was always talking about other people in the neighborhood, telling their stories, finding ways to connect them to others, and bring them back around to how those events affected him, or someone in the family.

The stories ranged from him milking cows, in the tiny hamlet of Grangeville, Ca., as a young kid during the Great Depression— for a single biscuit with homemade butter, to crawling through the jungles of Papua New Guinea in the fight against the Japanese in World War II, to him seeing strange ghostly lights at night— he swore it was the Cucuy— while irrigating the fields of the Central San Joaquin Valley. I can't even remember how many times he recounted the time where he, at 14, along with his brothers got the rooster drunk by soaking a loaf of bread with wine and feeding it to him. He laughed so hard when he described how it tried to walk only to fall over every single time, reminding us that if we had only been there to see it.

I come from a mixed race family. On the surface, I appear to be a white person. I have light skin. I speak English, primarily. I hold an English degree from a California State University.

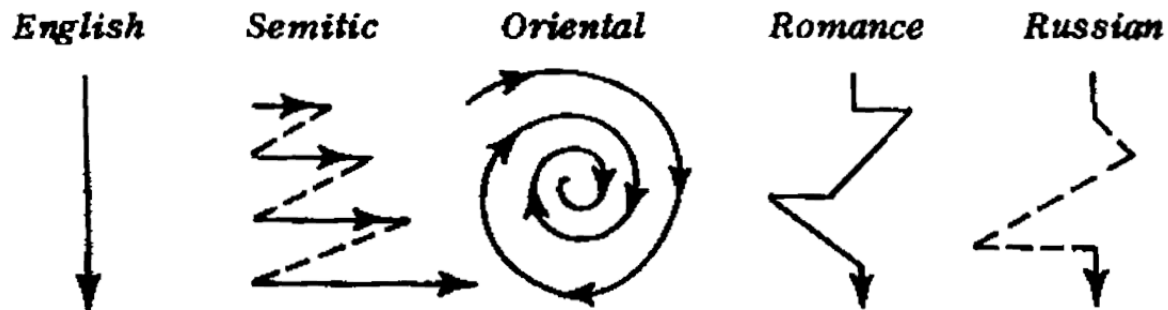
My name is that of a mixed Christian/Saxon origin. But, my mother's side, in the most simplistic terms, is Mexican American, but no history is as simple as that, the Mexican peoples are themselves a result of the European races mixing with the indigenous natives, my maternal grandfather was descended from Tarascan First Nations in Central Mexico. A more accurate term, or category, would be Chicano.

Although my family's direct connection to Mexico has been many generations removed, it was never really clear because the moving of the borders when territories were annexed by the United States, the language, and language patterns were held intact over the journey through time and space. My mother spoke nothing but Spanish as her first language despite both of her parents being bilingual, later speaking mostly English with family. This Spanish only period lasted only until she was to be enrolled in public school.

My father's family namesake were among the earliest settlers in the new Kentucky Territory, and remained there until my father's Navy enlistment took him to the West Coast. His sole language was English. Beyond the fact that the earliest known Paul, was born in Kentucky in 1826 and served in the Kentucky 10th cavalry regiment in the Civil War, not much more is known other than the names of his successors.

I live in multiple worlds. I code switch when the setting calls for it. I can speak the academic language of education, the slang of the 80's and 90's, a bit of Spanish, and the written word. The culmination of this experience has brought me a somewhat unique lens on the world. I see the overlapping of paths, the crossing of cultures, the mixing of language, and the interactions that lead to these phenomena with a consciousness about them that many may take for granted.

CULTURAL THOUGHT PATTERNS IN INTER-CULTURAL EDUCATION



Robert B. Kaplan wrote an article titled Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education, and in this article he published a chart that diagrams the speech patterns in regard to the cultural origin.

The English pattern is represented by a straight line that moves from the beginning of a narrative and proceeds directly to the end. There is no deviation from the main idea of the narrative. A simple example would be something like, "I went to the store and bought some shoes that were on sale."

The Romance language pattern differs from the English in that it wanders from point to point in a general narrative, while eventually wandering its way to the final point of the conversation. A simple example for this pattern would be something like, "I went to the store to get some shoes, while I was there though, I saw your cousin, you know the one that nobody likes, she was also shopping for some shoes, I found some on sale."

These are the two patterns that I am most concerned with. The English and Romance patterns are the most interesting to me because it is in these two categories that I have learned to

operate in a blended fashion. While I speak, read, and write in English, I have learned to follow patterns more akin to the wandering Romance pattern.

The expression “Time is money,” attributed to Benjamin Franklin, is common in American English. This saying rings true more often than not in the modern, service based, American capitalist economy. This idea that time is precious and is wisely spent investing in transactions that prove to be profitable has influenced the language to become very direct and to the point.

This direct to the point occurrence can be frequently observed in everyday business transactions from ordering fast food to purchasing gas, that is if you still use cash and enter the actual establishment.

“Can I have a number 4, medium with a diet?”

“That’ll be \$6.78 at the window.”

Or, in the gas station situation, there’s the, “\$6.78 on number 4.”

“Number 4?”

“Yeah, number 4.”

These are not accurate representations of all small transactions across the United States, but they certainly are indicative of many that happen frequently on an everyday basis.

There are other cultures where, though a business transaction may be at the heart of the interaction, it is customary to greet one with genuine attention to their situation before conducting the business transaction.

Many of the details of day to day life are often lost in the grander scheme of the universe. It is easy to overlook the potential impact that can be created in the small interactions with oth-

ers, in many cases they are interactions that may seem inconsequential due to the lack of intimacy in many of the relationships that come and go in passing.

These small interactions are the perfect setting for the genres of short stories and flash fiction. The formats allow small scenes to unfold and reveal a small slice of the world in the small spaces that they are allowed by the structure of the genre, but there is sparingly little, to absolutely no context for these small stand alone pieces. While worthy of their merit in their own rights, they have a way of leaving out other parts of the story that hold the potential to reflect a more complete and truer version of reality. A reality where the interactions catalyzed by our decisions inevitably influence the decisions of others, causing a rippling effect more commonly known as the butterfly effect.

While chaos theory, and the idea that even the smallest change in conditions hold the potential to create far reaching unintended effects had been developed some years before its publication, Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" is the source credited with the term where idea that the flap of a butterfly's wings could set the conditions for a catastrophic event such as a tornado in some distant land. It is also argued that the lack of a butterfly's wings could also create the setting for an equally undesired event. This work is important because it is an early example of contemporary literature blending science and art. While literature and science have differing approaches, they share a common goal of searching for answers, or at least an explanation to many of life's unknown questions.

Even though nearly every side of the argument can remain sound, none can be proven without the complete set of data, the whole picture. A scientific point of view attempts to remain objective and include only the facts as they can be observed. This approach leaves out an integral

piece of the equation, that when factored in, may influence the outcome of all events: the fallibility of human subjectivity.

If science's objectivity sits at one end of the spectrum, then art's subjectivity must lie on the opposite end. David Quinn's article, "Culture through Literature" references the work of Jean Piaget. In it he states that Piaget's *Structuralism*, which is made up of chapters dealing with topics that range from sociology, philosophy, and psychology, to literature, is a work that, "is a composite—without trying to play this role— of the latest thought with respect to the relationship between culture and art." Piaget's inclusion of scientific topics, as well as literature shows that the complete picture of humanity is not simply reduced to one category or another, but a combination of all parts.

Quinn notes that Piaget "stresses that each of these subjects can be understood only in to the degree that each one of them is structured, i.e., made identical with the contextual 'form'". That is that there is a completeness to a constructed reality that comes from the presence of context.

He also goes on to discuss the work of Roland Barthes. Quinn quotes him saying, "'structural man takes the real, decomposes it, then recomposes it...'" He concludes that in the end, "The final result is the creation of a work whose individual features—the cultural data, for example— are at best a deformed presentation of reality."

Quinn continues on with the intent to further study and illuminate in more detail "the culturally-important physical aspects, the role of the individual, group behavior" and "the underlying value system" using another piece of literature.

The short story is an appropriate genre to explore these aspects of humanity, but the limitations of space create a difficult problem for the author, the ability to explore the many aspects of humanity in one work.

James Cooper Lawrence defers to Edgar Allan Poe when it comes to defining the short story parameters. He distills it down to a criteria of two characteristics: “brevity and the necessary coherence which gives the effect of totality.”

He concludes his “A Theory of the Short Story” by declaring,

“The instinct for story-telling exists in substantially the same form in every race; all men recognize and insist upon the simple limitations of brevity and coherence; and hence, in this field of literature more than any other, it is possible for an artist to produce masterpieces who appeal, in spite of national lines, and racial characteristics, is truly universal” (p. 286).

Keeping this in mind, it is the artist’s job to exploit this ability to bring a work of synthesis, in that small space allowed by the short story limitations, that translates the personal “I” to a universal one that allows the work to transcend the learning experience of one individual to a point where it can be passed on to those on the other end of the work regardless of cultural and socioeconomic background.

Allan H. Pasco, in his work, “On Defining Short Stories,” argues that, “Certainly brevity constitutes the short story’s greatest limitation. For a short story to succeed, the author must overcome the restraints of limited length and communicate not a segment, a tattered fragment, but a world.”

It may be the author who creates the picture, but it is the reader who sees it, visualizes it, and if the author has done a good job of creating that, then the reader may also live the experience. The reader needs the author to defy the limitations of the genre and allow the created world to live through rich details, and believable characters.

The world that is created by the artist must be authentic. It must be consistent and within the bounds of plausible. The characters must behave as they would in the real world. This requires that the fictional world being created mirror the complex, and unique, relationships that occur in the real world.

Social scientists have been studying the phenomenon of human interactions in order to better understand human behavior. The early twentieth century saw a rise in the study of networks where connections between members of groups were observed, and it was found that the connections forged were not solidified in a way that made the connections permanent. The late nineteenth century also saw a rise in the literary period of Naturalism and Realism, which sought to find answers to human behaviors influenced by both their external as well as internal motivating factors.

The power dynamics that grew out of these connections shifted and created an unequal status that influenced behaviors. Many studies found that those who interacted in the largest networks were those with the highest status, and therefore were considered the most powerful. Accurately translating this dynamic to a fictional world on paper adds a whole other layer of complexity that presents a challenge to the author.

Social systems drive our interactions with each other, and with the institutions that govern our actions, such as education, religions, civil and criminal laws, and economics. The subject

has been the object of study since at least the nineteenth century. In more recent studies, Gary S. Becker illustrated the connection between economics and the social behaviors and interactions between people of different means. He notes, “sociologists have for a long time emphasized the central role of interactions and their importance in the basic structure of wants or personality,” (p. 1065).

This simple fact that has been recognized by scientist is just as important to the author. These “wants” are a catalyst for interaction with others. This is vital for the credibility of the characters in any narrative. The wants of the character are the motivations for their actions. Their actions often lead to consequences for themselves, and just as often for others. This need to satisfy their “wants” is what drives the plot forward. It sets up the series of events that arise as obstacles in the way of the protagonist. It also provides a backdrop for which the protagonist either progresses and overcomes these obstacles, and learns a lesson about life, or they do not, and the reader by extension learns what the protagonist does not.

The “wants” of characters may, at times, not match what they need, creating an internal conflict, which in turn drives the character’s actions. Those conflicts may even manifest themselves in unpredictable ways that affect the character’s well being, and possibly others who they interact with.

These motivating “wants” also, like in the world around us, can often conflict with the “wants” of others. This frequently results in external conflicts, compounding, and mirroring, the layers of the narrative, which play out as the narrative progresses toward its inevitable climax and resolution in the end.

Capturing the complexity of the world in a single genre already presents several challenges. The limitations of the short story and flash fiction do not necessarily leave the space to accurately show the intricate relationships that develop over time, not to mention the context for which the rest of the narrative may include important information that could lead to a deeper understanding. The novel, while possesses its own literary merits, with its massive body may be overwhelming for many readers, and therefore risks not reaching the audience that it may have been intended for.

Contemporary authors have blended genres before. Paul Fleischman's *Seedfolks* is a great example of a narrative told through different characters, in short story formats, whose interactions through a community garden tie their network together despite their, in many cases, extreme differences in cultural, historical, ethnic, socioeconomic backgrounds. Each chapter could easily stand alone as work of flash fiction, but strung together, they create a wider picture of a whole microcosm of the larger world in which we all live in.

Marcus Sedgwick's *Midwinterblood* is another work that transcends the limitations of genre by combining a series of stories that exist as whole stories in themselves, but are pulled together, through time, in the repeating theme of star-crossed lovers. *Midwinterblood* uses the setting as one of the means to pull the stories together, as well as recurring archetypes, especially the in the characters of the doomed lovers.

Another work which operates on a similar theme is David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Mitchell's work also follows the relationships between characters over, and throughout time. Both works play with the structure in unconventional ways as well, skipping around time periods, as well as traveling forward in the future, incorporating elements of science-fiction. The

blending of these works are so fine that their categorization is difficult because they are rooted in so many different genres.

While both works defy many conventions of classic literature, they both still draw on many of the principals that drive literature regardless of genre. Both works maintain a focus on character development. Both works also attempt to include multiple cultures that show a universality in human experiences. The characters have “wants” and needs that drive their actions and the decisions that they make when interacting with others which in turn affect the conditions of others, which forces them to make decisions, which affect others, and it carries on and on.

Many cultures have attempted to capture such worlds on pages since the earliest forms of narrative were written. The earliest appear to consist mainly of early religious texts filled with tales of creation, allegories, and parables that teach basic lessons on how to live a righteous life, and there were the ancient texts that come from the epics that chronicle the adversities of the heroes of the Greeks, like Achilles and Odysseus, to the Romans like Aeneas, but they greatly differ from the modern applications of writing in many ways. These works all make attempts to explain the unexplainable parts of the world we live in.

Critics have argued that one of the main purposes, or goals, of modern works are in attempt to look at man as a social being. As a social being, human interactions with each other create institutions that dictate proper ways of conducting social interactions, creating norms that govern our behavior.

I come from a family of storytellers. My mother’s brother, Charley Trujillo, like his father, is a storyteller He also, like his father, went to war in a foreign land, though a murkier and

politically unpopular Vietnam was much different. He came home a changed man. His interactions with others shaped another person who saw the world in a much different light. His G.I. Bill allowed him to transcend his position working in the fields, up to adjunct professorship, where he finally decided to pursue a project of discovery. He recorded the oral history of Chicano veterans who fought in Vietnam. When all of his options submissions were rejected, he founded Chusma House Publications and self-published. This project lead to another work of fiction, centered around the same theme. This lead to him publishing other author's works of fiction, all from minority cultures who interact with each other in the large cities on the West Coast.

The experiences of learning how to operate in multiple cultures, learning how they mix, and don't, as well as learning how to tell the stories of my family, both orally and in written form has culminated in my experiences leading to the Bilingual Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing: Fiction, from the University of Texas, El Paso.

My studies have included studies in form and narrative, and provided opportunities to practice the craft of writing as an art. I have had the chance to explore genres outside of my comfort zone, namely poetry, and learn everything I can about the art of writing from accomplished authors.

My love of movies has been furthered through the learning process of screenwriting, and even been put to use in my own personal projects.

Through practice and close study of acclaimed works, classic and modern, I developed a sense of aesthetics, imagery, voice, and even minute details that can have profound effects such as the combined use of alliteration and assonance, and how to cross them over into longer forms of prose and not limit them to use in poetry.

My experience is not limited strictly to written works of literature. Several classes included the study of film, both short and feature length, and how they contribute to the body of knowledge and the art of exploring humanity to answers that may help our understanding of it and our place in the order of the natural world.

My thesis project, *Francisco's Flowers*, has been influenced by a multitude of sources. The aforementioned works, as well as films such as *Magnolia*, and *Twenty Bucks* have had an impact on my work, especially in the structuring and formatting of character interactions progressing toward an ending that culminates in a tangled web that truly shows the interconnectedness of the world and its inhabitants.

It reaches out in an attempt to find a middle ground where the combination of more than one genre marries the best of all worlds in a way that brings together the most prominent characteristics of each genre, in an attempt to explore the depths of humanity through a close look at behaviors based on decisions dictated by wants and needs.

The characters in this case reside in Fresno, California. It is a large city with a diverse population where many sectors of society often interact in unexpected ways, places, and for unexpected reasons. These interactions, while in most instances, especially the innocuous and mundane everyday ones, may seem harmless and inconsequential, but in reality actually hold a potential to change the lives of many involved.

Each chapter is centered on a main character, who interacts with the main character from the previous chapter and passes on the focus of the narrative to the next main character through some sort of interaction, whether it be emotional, business, familial, plutonic, or physical. Each main character is unique in their backgrounds. They also all have specific “wants” that drive

them to make the decisions they inevitably make. Some are selfish, while others are selfless. Some conflict with others, and some may not fit into any category.

This combination format, and structure, allow me to take advantage of the wandering narrative style that is unique to my situation, while maintaining a long term focus that culminates in the last image at the end of the narrative. Each small story is able to stand alone without the previous, or subsequent, chapters around them, but with the inclusion of all, and the manner in which they interact, demonstrate more realistically, and accurately, the world, not only the one in which the characters reside, but the real world in which we reside.

Midwinterblood uses the larger setting of an island where all of the actions, and interactions, occur. *Seedfolks* is centered around a community garden in the city of Cleveland. This garden is what pulls the characters together in a web of interactions that show the various sides of humanity. *Cloud Atlas* contains a reoccurring image of a comet shaped birthmark that appears on one of the main characters that is the focus of that portion of the work.

I combined all of these elements with special attention to the use of a larger setting, a more focused setting, the ShopsSmartCo., and the use of a uniting real life object that is the centerpiece of the work, yellow flowers.

Fresno, Ca., grounds the setting in a real city. This adds to the function of reality that brings the narrative to life in a way that is much more difficult if it were a fictional setting. This assists the reader to understand that the facts of the work of fiction are no different from those in real life.

The ShopSmartCo. is an element of fiction that is based on the generic warehouse grocery store that is prominent in almost every town across the country. This is a place that blends

fiction with reality allowing the reader to pull their own image of the grocery store based on their own background knowledge.

The inclusion of the yellow flower is one of the most important images. This symbol operates on multiple levels that serve to further the narrative along. It is the cause of external conflicts, and yet present at the beginning of new friendships. On the surface it is an everyday object that subtly appears throughout the narrative in an attempt to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of such an innocent symbol, but its implication as a more obvious symbol as a flower of friendship has unpredictable consequences that go beyond the pale in the power of such a small and seemingly innocent object as a flower.

Over the last three and a half years, I have absorbed all that I could through reading and writing. I have learned a great deal from the great classic works of literature, and just as much from unexpected works as short as a few spare lines. It is my hope that this culmination of my work will contribute to a chain built link by link over many generations.

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Morning

Maria Esperanza

The Universe had given up on all within it long ago, but failed to notify those affected.

No one listened to the chimes of the clock tower at Tulare and Mariposa¹. Maria Esperanza was contained in the universe, but could not contain herself. She had been crying in the shower again as the sun broke into her bathroom window. This time it was because she started thinking about the yellow carnations again. They weren't roses.

The downtown clock tower had just announced the top of the seven o'clock hour. She still had to make three lunches for her kids, one for her, and another for her husband, and she hadn't yet made any breakfasts.

Anthony, the oldest, still in his underwear, was watching Pokemon. Stevie was attempting to scale the kitchen counter in search of a cereal more sugary than corn flakes. Marisela was still in bed and would remain stubbornly so until the last possible moment when she would magically turn into the "world's most adorable and cooperative angel" for as long as it suited her.

Francisco found his backup work-boots. "Maria, can you take my boots in to Jason at the boot shop? They need to be re-soled," he hollered down the hallway back to their room.

"I can't. Remember? It's Wednesday. I have class tonight, after work." Maria yelled back.

Francisco scowled and shook his head. "When can you take them in?"

¹ The clock tower was installed as part of the transformation of Fulton Street into a pedestrian mall Sept. 1st, 1964. It's to be removed as of 2016 as part of the restoration to a full service street.

“I don’t know. I work both jobs tomorrow. Why don’t you take them in on Friday, after you get off work?” Maria asked as she came into the hall with her shoes in hand. “Does this outfit look good?”

“He closes early on Fridays.”

“Well, then I don’t know what to do.”

“You can’t take them in on your break? Between work and class?”

“No, I have to pick up the kids and take them to my mom’s.”

“Well, then, who’s going to take my boots in?”

“I don’t know. I have to make breakfast and lunches,” Maria said, pushing her way into the kitchen.

“Stevie, I told you not to climb on the counters mijo. Get your brother to help you, he can use the stool.”

“Whatever. I’m outta here,” Francisco said as he turned toward the back door.

“What are you going to do about lunch?”

“I’ll pick up something.”

“Francisco, we can’t afford for you to always be-

Francisco had already closed the door behind him.

Maria thought, “One less lunch to make.” She spun around and began collecting their children. She forced Marisela out of bed, dressed her, fed them all scrambled eggs with tortillas de maiz, packed their lunches, shuffled them out to the car, and placed the car on a heading towards the kids’ school.

“Mom, can you put it on the School Bus song?”

“No, Mom, please don’t. Not again.”

“Mom, I forgot my lunch!”

“Mom? School Bus?”

A blunt pain blossomed behind Maria’s ear. It bloomed into her temples and spread into the hallows of her forehead. The pressure began to build. She rolled the window down just a crack, and breathed in deeply. She took in another deep breath as she desperately fought the urge to unleash a torrent of curses on her children. Then there was a sudden flash of the yellow carnations. She forced down a hot urge to burst. Her body stiffened in anticipation. Another deep breath and she was able to lean her head to the right and tilted in the direction of the backseat.

She simple stated, “Stevie, you’ll just have to eat hot lunch. Marisela, no. Anthony, just, stop.”

They reached the elementary school, where Maria told her kids that she loved them, to have a good day, and to get out.

The quiet refuge of the car made Maria want to let it all out, but something was blocking her. There was an emotional plug at work on her outlets. She wanted to cry, but the miniscule muscles around her eyes wouldn’t let her tear ducts the capacity to let the waterworks flow. Maria tried to gather her strength. She took in a deep breath and pulled the car away from the curb.

Maria’s position at the high school had her working with students who were still learning English. She was to support them, in the classroom, with their homework, and understanding the school culture, but it was Mr. Smith that captivated her attention in the ELD classroom. Life was easy in his classroom.

“Good morning Maria,” Edward said with a slight smile that leaned up and to the right.

“Good morning, Mr. Smith.” Maria tried to sound cheerful.

He was a hair under 6ft. tall, with the frame of a sturdy point guard. There was a persistent glare reflected off his ink black hair and his dark eyes could pierce a bullseye with a sideways glance. She always noticed that his shirt-collars could use a bit of starching, and that his neckties caressed his Adam’s Apple just snugly enough to be disturbed when he swallowed.

“Maria, how many times have I told you to just call me Ed?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Eight, nine times?”

“How many more time do I have to ask you before you actually listen to me?”

“Maybe another eight, or nine, hundred times.” Her lips curled into a genuine smile.

“Then I will ask another thousand. Please, call me Ed.”

“Okay, Mr. Smith.” Students began filing in to find their seats.

Mr. Smith walked to the door and greeted all of the students with a “Good morning” or a “How are you?” as they shuffled passed.

Twenty minutes into the first class of the day, Maria was hovering aside a student when she felt the presence of dark eyes on her. She looked up and saw Edward looking at her. She was bent over allowing her blouse to hang low and away from her chest, exposing her collarbone, cleavage, and just a bit of the strap of her cream colored bra.

Edward was caught glancing. He blushed, and looked away as quickly as though he had been looking at the sun.

He pretended to organize papers, but couldn't help looking guilty for as long as the class went on. When the bell to end the period rang, Mr. Smith blurted out "Goodbyes" as the kids stuffed their papers into their backpacks and began to leave.

"Okay Mr. Smith, I will see you after lunch then."²

"Um... Maria, I um... You look nice today," he shuffled his feet and looked around the room. "I mean, your outfit. It looks nice."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith." She smiled.

Maria turned to leave when Edward spoke. "Maria, umm...

She turned to face him once more when he spoke up, "see you after lunch."

The hallway was clogged with teenagers. Maria did her best to navigate the congestion, but was still stopped several times by slow moving students. They looked like humanoid turtles hauling large backpacks about, and nearly everyone of them staring at their electronic devices. They were oblivious to the world around them, which is where Maria wished she could be. Caught in the crowd, her breathing increased. Her muscles tensed and her heart thumped to the pounding in her head.

She made it to the staff bathroom when her mental block failed her. The yellow carnations appeared. She saw them as their petals curled and folded within. She saw the tiniest details form in her memory. Tears flowed for the second time that day.

The droplets gathered and let gravity take over as they fell down Maria's face. She starred into her reflection. *Why did they have to be carnations, damn it!? Why couldn't he have just bought roses?*

² Lunch: 12:05-12:55. The late bell rang at 1 o'clock.

Maria took control of her breathing and began to compose herself. She ran the water, rinsed her hands and face. She inhaled one last deep breath before exiting the lady's restroom.

The school secretary was standing in the hallway, directly outside of the bathroom door. She startled Maria. "Wha! Oh my god, Patty, you scared me."

Her slender form didn't take up much of the space, but she leaned in, stealing away any left for Maria. "I heard someone... I heard- Are you okay Maria?"

"Um..."

"You hesitated. There's no denying that, girl."

"I'm fine, Patty. I'm okay. Really."

"Really? 'Cause I don't think so."

"Yeah, I'm... I'm... okay."

Patty stood there waiting.

"He gave me yellow carnations," she said as the tears began to fall again.

"Girl, why don't you come into my little office and take a few minutes."

Edward Smith

Edward Smith had been teaching English as a Second Language for eight years. His first period had not gone as well as he had hoped, and his second period was not much better. He could not get his thoughts straight since Maria left. The students picked up on his absent mindedness and pressed for the full advantages. They talked, pulled out their phones, and played games on their school issued laptops. Mr. Smith did not care to enforce his posted rules that period.

The faculty lounge always had a line of teachers waiting to use the bathroom during morning break, but there was not one person waiting when Edward entered. The timing of break right after the class Maria had just left was perfect. His head was flooded with visions of bra straps, fingertips brushing against each other while passing student work between him and Maria. He shook them off.

He knew that she was married, and that he was not. His upbringing trapped him on a deserted island of doing the right thing. He knew he should leave his feelings aside and not act on them. “She’s married,” he kept telling himself.

He was examining the useless contents of his mailbox when the door opened and another teacher walked in.

“What you got there?” asked Jim, the only social science teacher who collaborated with Edward, mostly because they were hired the same year, 8 years prior.

“Huh? Oh, it’s just more of the same ol’ shit.”

“Oh, trying to get you to buy into some more of that ‘this text has been proven to raise your students’ test scores. That shit is so useless. Nothing short of getting on their asses is going to fix their problems.”

“Yeah, I hear that.”

“You alright Ed?”

“Yeah. Well... I’m okay.”

“What’s up?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“C’mon man, you can tell me.”

“Well, you know Maria, the EL aide?”

“Yeah, she comes into my 3rd period to help Yassenia.”

“Well, I think that there could be something between us, but I don’t know.”

“Oh. Isn’t she married?”

“Yeah, that’s also part of the problem.”

Edward shifted his weight from foot to foot. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his classroom keys, which he began to fidget with.

“Ed, I try not to get involved in things outside of work, but I think of you as a friend and I don’t want to see you get embroiled in some shit that’s way above your head. So, I think that you should do your best to avoid anything that could possibly turn out badly. I’d stay away. That’s an easy thing to say and a totally another to do, but I think it’s for the best in the long run.”

“Yeah, but I wake up alone, at 6 in the morning, and damn near every morning, she’s on my mind. My restless heart and brain are focused on her. I hear what you’re saying, but I feel like your words aren’t for me. I’m not so sure that I can simply stay away.”

“Ed. Seriously. It’s my professional opinion, you should stay away.”

“Jim, your professional opinion?”

“Yeah, I used to be Dear Abby before I took this job.”

“Shut up man, that was Pauline Phillips. I think that her daughter took over after she died.”

“That’s exactly what the media wants you to think.”

“You’re crazy, Jim.”

“Yeah, well we all have to be a little crazy to work this job. To work at all, in fact.”

“Yeah, but being crazy is the only way to get on disability and not work.”

“True, but those people don’t know they’re crazy, so they get a pass.”

“I guess ignorance is bliss.”

“Then wipe the smile off my stupid face.”

Edward walked back to his classroom at a slower pace than he normally would have. He sat behind his desk and starred at stacks of papers that needed to be graded, but his desire was elsewhere. His necktie suddenly seemed to be on the verge of choking him, so he loosened it just enough to fit his index finger between it and his skin. He took a deep breath and looked up at ceiling as though an answer to his dilemma might fall through it if he just kept starring at it long enough. Nothing happened for several minutes.

The urge to do *something* drove him to the internet. Edward opened up his Firefox and began browsing. His fingers, in subliminal conjunction with his brain, led him to search out advice columns. He was soon perusing old Dear Abby's, Anne Landers, and somehow even read an article on tips to being the perfect man. That's when he saw a link to an article titled "How to Get Her Attention". He clicked on it and after a few pop-up adds, that inconveniently could not be immediately vanquished, he was immediately engrossed.

The 2nd period bell rang and he went into automatic pilot. Students trickled in as he went to the door as he always did during passing periods. "Hellos" and "How's it goings" were tossed out as they grabbed their books. He gave an uninteresting lecture on topic sentences, then let them go with his usual "Chair in Spanish," but this time without much pep.

It was his prep and he was alone in his room. He locked the door, sat down at his desk where he found a pad of paper, a black ink pen and began scribbling his handwriting onto it. Thirteen minutes later he was finished. He signed it, folded the page, and placed it in an envelope that was sealed immediately before he could change his mind.

He opened the center drawer in his desk and gently placed the letter down as though it were as fragile as glass. He figured he still had 37 minutes left to get something to eat.³

Edward was a habitual bag lunch kind of guy. He made himself a chicken, or turkey, with Swiss, cheddar, or American cheese, a slice or two of tomato, and a leaf of lettuce. To drink, it was lemon water. He never forgot his water. A wandering mind left him with only his water and no sandwich on this particular weekday. He would usually buy a small bag of chips, to polish off his lunch.

³ 3rd period: 9:48-10:38.

It was the Bizzy Bee Market, across the street, where he usually purchased his bag of chips. He found himself having to buy two of the deep fried pizza pockets.

He thought he heard a clock chiming somewhere as he entered to a combination of smells: incense, deli foods, and dusty beer bottles. His eyes were assaulted with an array of yellows, orange, and reds. There were chips bags, candy bars and boxes, refrigerators filled with a number of sugary drinks at half the cost of a bottle of water.

Edward knew where everything was displayed after 8 years of visiting on a regular basis. He could walk through the Bizzy Bee blindfolded with the lights off, pick up a newspaper, a Snickers Bar, and get a fountain soda, pay for everything, and not bump into a single item.

“Eddie, how’s it going?”

“Maninder, what’s up?”

“Bag of chips today?”

“Nah, I’m just getting two pizza pockets today. I forgot my sandwich.”

“What? That’s not like you.” Maninder shot him a curious look out of the sides of his eyes as he turned to pull the pizza pockets out from under the warming lights.

“Yeah, well, I haven’t been feeling much like myself lately.”

“You all right?”

“Yeah, it’s nothing.” Edward thought about Maria. “Hey, Maninder, you believe in fate?”

“What? You mean like destiny? Like everything is preordained and there’s nothing we can do to alter it? No.”

“Really? Like what if the world seemed to be conspiring against you? Everything you do is pointless? Like the Universe has given up and nothing matters.”

“Nah, You can’t go around thinking like that. That’s just going to take you to a dark place where there’s no hope. You gotta be more positive. Keep things in perspective.”

“Yeah, that shit gets hard though.”

“You don’t, next thing you know, you’ll be in here going on about Nietzsche and fatalism again. I can’t take that shit again. I got enough problems with trying to run this place on my own, I don’t need you bringing me down on another front.”

“Ha, yeah. You’re right. That was a pretty dark time.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that again.”

“All right man, I won’t go there again.”

“Good. Here’s your pizza pockets. That’ll be \$3.90.”

“Hey, one last question. You think the heart is stronger than the mind?”

“That all depends on the individual.”

Maninder at the Bizzy Bee

Edward left the store, and Maninder was left to his midday TV. The slowest part of the day. He usually saw no more than one to two customers in that slow trickle of people. Two customers entered. They were wearing “Obey” shirts, baggy pants that tapered off into cuffs at their ankles, Vans shoes, and one of them carried a skateboard. One of them was wearing a khaki bucket hat. They approached the fountain machine and filled up a cup with ice, and half of the cup with fruit punch.

The two walked up to the counter where the hatless one asked for a 250ml. bottle of Seagrams Gin.

“You got I.D. kid?”

“Yeah, it’s right here.” He reached behind his back as though digging for a wallet, but instead pulled out a rusty .38 revolver.

“What are you going to do with that? Give me tetanus?”

“What? What the hell makes you think this has anything to do with a fucking video game?”⁴

“It’s not- never mind.”

The teen pointed it at Maninder and demanded the gin, as well as the cash in the register. “Well, I’d like to give it to you, but I think you will have to listen to a story first.”

“What do you mean, just give me the fucking gin, and the m-money,” he said menacingly.

“I will. I will, but first you must listen to a story.”

⁴ Tetris: Video game released on June 6th, 1984. Created by Alexey Pajitnov.

“Dude, I’m not fucking kidding you. I will shoot your ass.”

“Fine, or you could calmly put that gun down, listen to my story, and then leave with the cash, and the gin. Okay?”

The kid in the bucket hat urged his friend, “Dude, c’mon man. Don’t be stupid. Let’s just listen to his story and get the fuck outta here.”

“Dude, fuck this guy.”

Bucket Hat was getting nervous. “It’ll just be easier this way. Don’t shoot this dude.”

“All right. Fine,” he said with a touch of anger. “Tell us your story dude.”

“This tale comes from my parents’ home country. It starts off with a young prince, his betrothed bride, and a humble servant.”

“Wait, what the hell does betrothed m-mean?” asked hatless.

“It means that it was already arranged for her to be married to the prince.”

“What? Like she didn’t have a choice?”

“Exactly. She was from a countryside where the land was drying up, and dying. Their crops were dwindling, her people starving, and fighting a war of attrition with the land and aggressors on the borders, whose lands were also dying. On top of all calamity, a disease was rampantly running around claiming as many victims as was possible. And if matters were able to be compounded, they were because it was rumored that this prince was an ugly brute who cared only for his selfish ways.”

“What does, attri- attriation m-mean?”

“The word is attrition. It means losing, slowly. You want to hear the rest of the story now?”

“Yeah. What happened next?”

“You sure you don’t need a thesaurus or anything?”

“What? Nah, just get on with the story, and m-make it quick.”

“Alright, this betrothed princess did not want to marry this prince, but she was raised to obey her parents, who desperately wished her to marry this prince with the hopes that this union would bring the two kingdoms together and ensure the prosperity of their lands, for the next kingdom over laid on the coast, where its principle city resided on a peaceful harbor that was the center of bustling trade was conducted.

“Plus, there was a divine proclamation given to the princess’ parents. They were told, when she was born, that she would grow to become the uniting factor in the history of the two kingdoms. There was no two ways about it. Her fate was tied to the well being of the people in more than just their land.

“So, she found herself in a predicament that left her no leeway in choosing her own destiny.”

“That’s jacked up,” stated Hatless.

“Yeah, majorly. Now, she wandered in and out of their private library looking for a way to get out of marrying the prince, save her lands, and still not disobey her parents. She read and she read. She searched and searched, but she could not find an answer to her any of her problems.

“Time passed and she was running out of it. She would soon have no choice but to marry the prince. Still, she searched and searched her books, but found nothing. That is until she found a text in an ancient book bound in some sort of a strange skin. In it she found a story of an earlier

princess who found a Guru who lived on top of a nearby mountain named Sumat. She went to him to avoid a similar situation, you see arranged marriages have long posed something of a problem in my parents' home country.

“This earlier princess asked this Guru for help. He revealed to her that there was a certain flower that, if procured correctly, could cultivate a potent liquid that would cause the ingestor to fall into a deep coma of near death proportions. This would allow her to appear dead to all, including her betrothed. It should be arranged that a trusting servant should enter the chamber where her body would be laid out to prepare before being placed on the pyre, and rescue her.”

“What’s that word? Pyre?”

“Kid, you going to keep interrupting me?”

Bucket Hat spoke up, “It’s a fire that they burn dead people on. Like Luke did for Darth Vader.”⁵

“That’s right. So, as I was saying, this later princess was intrigued by this story and wanted to know where to find this flower so she kept reading, but the story did not reveal any details about this flower. Not one word about its looks, its color, its fragrance. Nothing. No descriptions whatsoever.”

“Why not?” Hatless chimed in.

“Well, it’s said that the powers derived from the liquid of this flower is so strong that the dangers posed by it are too great, and its secrets should be lost on mankind. But this princess, she was so determined to discover the lost knowledge concerning this flower that she would stop at nothing to find it.”

⁵ Star Wars, Vol. VI: Return of the Jedi, 1983.

“Damn, that’s pretty hard up.”

“Yeah, but she wasn’t going to be a patsy for this whole “something greater than herself” deal. She was going to find a way. So, with the help of one of her maidens, she found an apothecary, don’t ask me what that means, who, though he had no knowledge of this flower, was willing to help the princess.

“He told her that there was another chemist, an alchemist, who could help her, but he lived in the great desert to the west. She would secretly have to pack for the journey, leave in the darkest hour of the night and steal away with no witnesses. And this is exactly what she did.”

“She left? What about her parents? Her people? Doesn’t she think about anyone but herself?”

“Well, that’s a good question. She did leave though, and no one was any the wiser concerning her whereabouts, her well-being, or her intended end result.”

The door buzzer chimed as a customer walked in. He appeared to be clueless and focused on obtaining something sugary and caffeine filled. Hatless tucked his rusty piece into his waistband and acted casual, while Bucket Hat pretended to examine a pack of gum at the counter. The unaware customer walked to the coolers, found a liter of Dr. Pepper, walked to the counter, looking suspiciously at the two teens, politely asked, “You guys in line?”

“Nah, go ahead.”

“Thanks, man.”

“That’ll be \$1.89.”

“Here you go,” he said, handing him two dollar bills. “It’s cool, man, keep the change.”

“Thanks man. You have a good day.”

“You too.” He walked out, got into his car and pulled out of the parking lot.

Maninder was looking out of the front glass doors as the dirty jalopy turned onto Kings Canyon and stopped at the light.

“So, what happened next?”

“Hmm? What? Oh yeah. She traveled for days, then days turned into weeks. She walked amongst boulders the size of small mountains. She saw rivers so clear that they appeared as flowing airstreams rather than liquid water. She wandered through a pine forrest where she was stopped by a giant man covered with hair all over his body. There was so much hair that many mistook him for a wild beast. He carried with him an ax so large that it stood as tall as two fully grown men.”

“Did he kill her?”

“What? No. He took her to a safe spot in the forrest. You see, the people in a nearby village thought the hairy man was an actual wild beast, some called him a yeti, but there was rarely any snow in that part of the world, so it’s highly unlikely that he was the actual yeti, but this did not stop the ignorant villagers from carrying on about how dangerous he might be, and that to stop the threat of such a beast, the best course of action was to preemptively strike at him, and thus kill him before he could do any harm to their village.

“None of this was remotely true, but it is said that men who act in fear do not think with reason, but base all that matters in the heart. This is dangerous because the heart does not think about right and wrong. It only cares about what it feels, and when danger is always a possible, then the fear in the heart will always overrule the logic of the head.

“So, this hairy man took her to a secluded spot where she shared only the necessary parts of her story with him. He told her that he knew of this alchemist that she was in search of and that he would give her a map that would speed her along the way.

“All she must do is follow the river that flowed west until she came to a place where it emptied in to the sea. Here, she must turn north until she reached the sands that covered the land from horizon to horizon. Seven days of travel from the sea should be sufficient enough to find an oasis where this alchemist resided. There she would find the answers to her inquiries regarding this flower.

“So she left, but not before imparting a gift on the giant hairy man. She left him with a root of a tree that was said to have magical powers of defense. She said to him, ‘Carry this root upon your right side and no harm shall come to you.’ And so this he did. And it is said that no harm ever did come to him and he died a peaceful, old-aged death, in his sleep.

“The princess went on her way until the river flowed into the sea. There she turned northward and continued for another seven days when she found the oasis.”

“What did she find,” asked Hatless.

“Nothing. She found nothing there. The alchemist had died many years before and the oasis has long been abandoned.”

“What? What kind of story is that? What a fucking gyp?” exclaimed Hatless.

“Well, that’s how the story goes.”

“Yeah? Well, your story fucking sucks. What do you think about that?” he said, raising the barrel of the gun towards Maninder.

“Did she ever find the flower?”

“I don’t know. It’s been speculated the princess fell into a shock when she found the truth about the alchemist’s fate, but that she recovered, some even think that the hairy man went searching for her, when she failed to return past his forrest, found her and returned her to her kingdom. Her parents were so overjoyed that they heaped rewards of gold, spice and finely woven tapestries on the hairy man.

“When the trauma of the adventure subsided, the princess was married off to the prince in the neighboring kingdom. The two kingdoms were joined and both flourished under their stewardship.”

“What the fuck, m-man? What the fuck?”

“Hey man, I just told you that you had to listen to my story. I didn’t say anything about it being one that you’d like.”

“Yeah, but that’s m-messed up. I can’t believe that I sat through that whole thing and got nothing out of it.”

“Here.” Maninder placed two items on the counter. He offered the teen a \$100 bill and a yellow carnation.

“That’s it? I want it all.”

“Well, that’s what I’m giving you. Take one or the other.”

Hatless looked at the bill. His gun hand lowered. His eyes caught on it. They stayed stuck on it for a long moment. He reached out, snatched it, and ran out leaving Bucket Hat alone at the counter.

“So, what you’re looking for isn’t always where you think it will be?” he asked Maninder.

“What do you think?”

Bucket Hat

He stood there starrng at the man behind the counter. The man looked back, his face, serene. “Why did you give him that money?”

“He listened to my story.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, you are welcome. Have a good day. Come again.” Maninder held out the yellow carnation.

Bucket Hat found himself leaving the store with the flower in hand.

The sunlight warmed him and sent shivers cascading down his spine. He shook them off and laid his skateboard’s wheels on the pavement. He pushed off looking for something he couldn’t put into words. He pushed his way west toward Peach Ave. as his thoughts wandered more aimlessly than his physical form.

Hatless had run off, most likely in the opposite direction, but Bucket Hat didn’t care. He had chanced upon on a mission assigned to him from the universe itself.

He was going to skate on every continent of the world!

But there were things that needed taking care of before he could leave.

The first would be telling his parents, being three weeks shy of 18, still technically under their guardianship, and therefore completely dependent on them for money.

Second, there was his girlfriend. He would have to tell Sarah.

He found himself near a bus stop, in front of *Corina's Carniceria*, on Kings Canyon. He slowed down and slid onto the weather proof bench.

“Wait a second. Wait.. a.. second... This is crazy. It's stupid. I can't just up and travel the world...

A bus that had been stopped for approximately 4 minutes and 20 seconds, pulled away, loudly. His distracted state snapped and he was brought into the physical world again. He looked to his left, where he saw an advertisement.

HURRY! NOW! TRAVEL TO CHINA!

1-800-12C-HINA

ASIAN TOURS CO.

He knew what he had to do. He fished his phone out of his pocket and tapped his thumb on Messages.

He began to type out a text, but stopped and erased it all. He began again, and again, stopped to erase what he had written. Nothing he could write would be sufficient, so he decided to just write it out anyway it came out.

Sarah

Sarah i don't know how to tell you
this and im really sorry but i can't be
with you anymore

Sarah

Sarah sat in her 4th period seat, near the door, in chemistry. The seating chart had them arranged in groups of four, they seemed random, but Ms. Dooley had placed them according to who she liked the most were seated closest to her desk, while those delegated to the periphery were left to fend for themselves when it came to learning anything about anything.

The conversations permeating the outer ring rarely touched on the subject of the elements, or compounds, or anything remotely related to topics as such. They normally consisted of things that they liked, or things that they disliked, and there were other conversations where they discussed the things that they didn't care about one way or another. These conversations were most often carried out only with casual glances away from the screens of their mobile phones.

Sarah sat by herself, by the door.

She watched a spider work its way around its web in the corner above a shelf. Her phone buzzed. She pulled it out of her bag. A quick thumbprint and Messages was open.

David

Sarah i don't know how to tell you this
and im really sorry but i can't be with
you anymore

Unsure of what to make of it, Sarah replied,

WTF?

Im sorry

Yeah but why? What's wrong?

Its just that the universe is telling me that
I have to go skate around the world.

Are you serious? Did it tell
you to break up with me too?

Yea no. I mean it didn't tell me to break
up with you

idk what to say

Im sorry

Is that supposed to make me
feel better?

Idk

It doesn't

I am sorry. I do care for you but I have to
do this

Whatever. I guess you have to
do whatever it is that you have
to so good luck.

Sarah. Im sorry

Whatever. I hope you make it
around the world. Goodbye.

Sarah shoved her phone into her bag. The tears threatened to well up. She fought them back with blink after blink. There was a moment where they almost broke through, but Sarah breathed in deeply and held them at bay.

The bell pealed and the class arose without regard for the teacher. They noisily filed out the door and Sarah was the last out despite being the closest. She shuffled her way down the corridor sans sense of time and place, as she often had when faced with such inner turmoils of

mixed feelings. The anger swirled around the hurt; relieved to be rid of such a person as who would choose silliness over her. All together they created a tornado of emotion in the pit of her stomach.

The river of people flowing toward their intended destinations was interrupted by an apparition. Sarah thought she spotted a bucket hat on the far end of an eddy near the bathrooms, but it was just an odd hairdo of some student she had never seen before, and would never see again.⁶ She briefly stopped at her locker to drop her stuff off and pick up her zip up hoodie.

P.E. was next on her schedule. The theory of physical exertion as a means to relieve anger and stress had all been lost to her at that point in time. The smell of dusty metal and stuffy gym shorts in drastic need of a wash did not appeal to her.

Sarah, instead, opted to run. She found the gap in the fence behind the locker rooms. Previous students had exploited this hole in search of a better life beyond the confines of the hard seats, stuffy teachers, and hawk-eyed security watching nearly their every move⁷.

The mission to find the secret hole in the fence afforded Sarah a brief diversion from the dull ache that returned with a burning so fierce that she nearly doubled over as she ran from the chain links that kept so many others in.

She caught her breath, inhaling deeply, and found her legs again. Sarah ran from all of it.

She passed through rough neighborhoods where nobody paid her any mind.

She breezed passed storefronts and empty dirt lots.

⁶ Number of students at school that day: 4,112. Number of students wearing bucket hats: 42. Number of students with odd hairdos that Sarah would never see again: 5.

⁷ Exactly 310 students had successfully escaped using this passage. Sarah was 311.

She even passed an empty bus stop with a flier that had a number to call if you wanted to travel to China.

Her shoes squeaked with every stride.

Her jeans, a poor choice for running in, stretched with every sprint.

Eventually Sarah ended up slowing in a large parking lot. A block of a warehouse store the size of a small football stadium sat in the south end, with grapevine rows of cars leading to its automatic doors that welcomed anyone and everyone who stepped in front of them.

The weekday midmorning crew rarely had to deal with high traffic due to most people being at work while their kids went to school. Sarah entered the store in a state no different from its regular daytime routine where the stockers were polite but avoided offering help.

The sheen of the ShopSmartCo concrete floors was so slick that they appeared as though they had been recently mopped, but they held firm under Sarah's feet, and that reassured her. She found herself wandering through the cereal section, and then the chips, where she picked up a party sized bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. She headed to the coolers where they shelved the cold liter bottles of sodas.⁸

There were 24 checkout counters that loomed down on her like seaside cliffs. Their little aisles made little one way canyons whose walls were stocked with gums, candies, and magazines of cheap affairs, fitness & sex tips, and recipes that were guaranteed to melt the fat away.

The ends of these aisles were guarded by mini fridges stuffed with sodas that boasted of lower prices than that of the water that occupied the shelf below. Sarah opened the glass door to remove an orange Crush. She thought twice and then reached into her jean pocket to pull out four

⁸ Doritos Party Size: \$3.59; along with a liter bottle of soda: \$0.99 = \$4.58.

crumpled one dollar bills. The math did not work out. She couldn't afford both. Sarah wrapped her slender fingers around the cold soda and promptly slipped it into the right pocket of her sweater.

She picked a checkout with a light on, number 7. A reassuring breath helped lift her shoulders as she approached the check writing platform that now supported a debit/EBT card keypad. She laid the bag down on the black conveyer belt.

The checkout lady's name-tag said **Bridgette** in red letters. She gave Sarah a twice over and let her eyes linger on the pocket where the soda was concealed. She grabbed the bag of chips to swipe them across the laser scanner all the while keeping her eyes on Sarah.

"That'll be \$3.59."

"Here you go." She handed over the four dollars in a loosely crumpled ball form.

"Is this all for you?"

"Yeah."

"You sure?"

"Yeah." Sarah tried to swallow, but a bit of panic spilled out in her tone. "Why?"

"Because I saw you slip that soda in your pocket before you even did it. You in some kind of a trouble? You look like you been running from someone. You okay?"

Sarah's dumbfounded face caused her to fumble all her speech. Air tried to escape her lungs and force her vocal cords to vibrate, but there was nothing but sputters and puffs as even her lips and tongue failed to cooperate in the act of speaking.

Right there in the middle of the checkout canyon is where Sarah's dam broke. The tears flooded her eyes and she blubbered away nonsense in the torrent.

“Oh Honey, c’mon over here.” Bridgette snapped off her light, she needn’t worry about any customers at this time of day.

She took the soda and chips from Sarah, put her arm around Sarah, then led her past the customer service counter, through a door, and into an employee break room.

There sat a computer on a small desk, a counter with a microwave, a yellowing refrigerator, and a few tables surrounded by metal frame chairs with cushioned seats. The walls were covered with OSHA guidelines, sexual harassment policy, hourly minimum wages and in-house job openings.

“Go ahead and sit right here for a moment. I’ll be right back.”

Bridgette went over to the counter and found some plastic cups and a bottle of water from the refrigerator, then grabbed a few tissues before returning to the table with Sarah.

“Here, this is better for you than that soda,” she said, opening the bottle of water. “Now, why don’t you start from the beginning.”

Sarah looked Bridgette in the eye, sized her up, but came up short. Sarah gripped the bottle and drew it up to her lips taking in three long drafts accompanied by loud gulp, gulp, gulps. One deep breath and she felt steady for the moment.

Bridgette’s patient eyes waited for what seemed like forever, even though it was only a few seconds. Sarah’s breathing had fallen into a steady holding pattern that was abruptly interrupted by a sharp intake. “Well... I guess there was this one time, when I was about 4, my mom always says that I’ve always been one to fall quickly, so anyway, I was about 4, or maybe I was 5, because I think we lived over on Pine-“

“Honey, I mean like your name.”

“I’m Sarah.”

“Okay, Sarah. I’m Bridgette,” she said while pointing to her name-tag. “Now, why don’t you tell me why you’re so upset.”

“Oh, umm, well, I was sitting in class when my boyfriend sent me a text to break up with me.”

“Is that all? Is that why you thought you could walk out of here with that big-assed soda sticking out of your pocket.”

“*Is that all?*” Sarah was surprised even at her own tone of incredulousness.

“Oh, that’s nothing. I mean don’t get me wrong, I know it still hurts, but things could be a lot worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you could have been sitting in class and never had anyone to text you.”

“I’m not following.”

“Have you ever heard that expression, ’Tis better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all’?”

“No.”

“Girl, are you serious?”

“Yeah, I’ve never heard that before. What is it, like famous?”

“*Famous?* Yeah it’s- Never mind that. You understand what it’s trying to tell you?”

“I think so. At least I got to have the time with him that I did because some people don’t even get that?”

“Exactly.” Bridgette waited. “So, what happened? He find another girl he likes better than you?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. He said that the universe told him he has to go skate all over the world.”

“Now that’s a new one.”

“Yeah, right? I don’t know. I thought I loved him.”

“How long were you two together?”

“Umm, a year, next Tuesday.”

“That’s rough. You tell him loved him?”

“Yeah, I said it first.”

“You know what love is?”

“Yeah. It’s that warm feeling you get when that person is near, and that aching feeling in your chest when they aren’t there.”

“Maybe this is a good thing that he broke up with you.”

“How could that be a good thing? I really liked being around him. He’s funny, and smart, and he’s cute. He has this little dimple on his left cheek. Why would that be good that he would rather ride his skateboard all over the world than be with me?”

“You want to spend time with someone who’d rather be somewhere else than with you?”

“No, but see, it’s not like that. He’s different. Its…” Sarah’s face sank in defeat. “I think I see what you mean.”

“Now that you’re learning what love isn’t, you’ll know what it is when it’s true.” Bridgette looked at Sarah for a long moment. “You know what you need to get over him? To stay busy.”

“How am I supposed to do that?”

“Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

She left Sarah at the table and walked out of the door. There was a paper in her hand when she returned. “Here, you can repay me for not turning you in for the soda,” she slapped a paper down and placed a pen next to it. “You can leave it on the customer service counter, next to the yellow flowers.”

Sarah stared down at the blank boxes and lines to be signed on the ShopSmartCo application then picked up the pen.

Bridgette

Bridgette had nearly given up on going anywhere in life, and so she had accepted that she would clock in at the scheduled hour, and clock out at her earliest convenience. Spending the day passing goods across a thin red light, exchanging numbers of exact amounts- down to the hundredths decimal can take a toll on the strongest of wills, but resoluteness kept her behind the register day after day.

The bleep, ba-bleep, bleep, bleep of passing groceries grew too monotonous to even register in her ears. The customers could be so numerous that she lost track of all but a few regulars. There was the old white lady with white hair, who always paid with a personal check that looked as though it had been waiting to be used since 1977.⁹ There was the middle aged man and his slightly younger wife and their two extremely cute kids with absurdly good manners. And she could never forget Ralph, the aspiring entrepreneur.¹⁰

But mid-day shifts had their lulls that left lots of time to lose. The check-out register across from her was manned by José, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

He looked up with a big dumb grin on his face, “What up, Bridgette? Everything okay? I was restocking some last minute rejected corn. They were all like ‘Wait, wait, wait, hold up. How much is that corn?’ and I was all like, ‘This corn? This corn is \$0.58,’ and then they were all like, ‘Well then, I don’t want it. That’s too much for corn and I ain’t payin it.’ and then I was like ‘Okay, I’ll put it back’. So I did, and when I came back you were gone.”

⁹ Her account was actually opened in 1965, and also happened to be the same bank at which Bridgette went to.

¹⁰ He was currently marketing his 5th business, steam floor cleaners. His little brother was enrolled in 4th period chemistry with Sarah.

“Oh yeah. Everything’s fine.”

“You sure? You don’t sound so sure?”

“No, yeah. Everything is good.”

“Bridgette...” He drew her name out raising his tone at the beginning, descending as he went on to the last syllable.

“Yeah, everything’s good. There was this trouble with a girl who tried to stash a soda in her pocket. I mean I remember that one lady who tried to stuff another two pounds of apples into the 3lbs. bags, as if we don’t have scales built in to the register, that was ridiculous enough, but this girl didn’t even know that I was staring at her the entire time. She was just right in front of me.”

“Pshh, girls. They’re so stupid,” his tone joked, emphasized with a shake of his head.

“You better watch it José. I used to be a girl.”

“Ha, okay. I’m sorry. Where is she now? Did Jeff call the cops?”

“Nah, I didn’t tell him. She’s in the back. Filling out an application.” She threw a mischievous grin back at him.

“Oooo, Bridgette. You’re gonna get in trouble.” He drew this out as a 12 year old would do when informing a sibling of coming danger.

She smiled. He always made her smile.

“José, why you so happy today?” she asked across the empty space between their registers.

“This is my last semester at City. I’m transferring to Santa Cruz. I already applied and I am just waiting to hear back the official word. I’m not worried, I got the grades and requirements all sewn up, nice and neat.”

“That’s good. Good for you. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. It’s taken me long enough.”

“How long you been going to school?”

“Well, let’s see, I started when I was 4,” he held up three digits on his right hand and two on his left. He looked up and to his left as he rattle off random numbers. “Eighteen years?”

“You know what I mean. How long have you been going to City?”

“Oh! Three. I’ve been going to City for three years. This is my third year.”

“What are you studying?”

“Books, mostly. Sometimes on the computer.”

“You’re such a derp sometimes. You know that?”

“Derp? Me? Nah. I don’t see it. I’m just playing, I totally see it.”

“So, what are you studying?”

“I’m majoring in modern dance.”

“Seriously?”

“No.” José could suppress his chuckle enough to hide it. “I’m actually going for stage and film production.”

“Really? That sounds fun. I never knew that you wanted to be a movie maker.”

A customer rolled their cart up to Bridgette’s conveyor belt and began loading items on to it. A box of Nilla Wafers, the small container of Nutella, a few stalks of fresh broccoli, 3.31lbs.

of ground beef, a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs, small tub of butter, and a three loaves of ShopS-martCo bread came sliding on toward her and she began to pick them up without thinking and scanned and recorded each price.¹¹

“Your total is \$31.28.”

The customer said nothing and handed over \$32 in cash.

Bridgette counted out the minutiae of 72 cents, 2 quarters, 2 dimes, and 2 pennies. She handed it back across the mostly defunct check writing platform, which now served as a base for the debt card swiper. They moved on to bag their own groceries at the end of a second conveyor belt.

“Yeah, I made a few short movies and videos in high school. I even had a vlog that promoted creativity in the community.”

“Wow, look at you.”

“Yeah, I tried that once. Turns out, you can’t look at yourself unless you have a mirror. Hey Bridgette, how come you don’t go back to school?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’m getting too old.”

“What? There’s all kinds of old people at City. I mean, not that you’re old. You can’t be more than, what, like 33?”

Bridgette’s lips pulled back and the muscles around her eyes tightened into a genuine flattered bashfulness. “That’s kind of you José, but my two kids are just a few years older than you already.”

¹¹ Nilla Wafers: \$1.89, Nutella: \$2.58, 1.1lbs. Brocoli: \$0.85. 3.3lbs, Beef: \$7.24, 1 Gallon of Milk: \$2.14, 1 Dozen eggs:\$1.89, Butter: \$2.19, 3 loaves of bread: \$0.98 + tax 0.78% = \$26.50

“So what? You can go back to school. Your kids are on their own. It’s just you now. You should go for it.”

“You know, I started school once, right when I was out of high school.”

“Nah, I never knew that.”

“Yeah, way back before your time.”

“Well, what’s keeping you back now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, how long you been here?”

“How long ago did this place open? Seven years ago?”

“Yeah, about that long?”

“So, then...” This time Bridgette held up two fingers on one hand and three on the other. “Seven years.”

José laughed and then said, “That’s funny. That’s my joke. It’s funny because you used my joke.”

There were a few moments of silence between the two. This was broken by a young lady about José’s age approached his register. She pushed the cart up with a newborn riding in a car seat placed in the shopping cart along with two cans of soy formula, a gallon of milk, a dozen eggs, and four loaves of bread, and a six pack of Rolling Rock beer.¹²

José scanned everything and pushed the beer across last. “They say it helps with breast feeding, but I don’t know. I guess I’ll just try it and see.”

¹² 2 cans soy formula: \$25.99 x2, 1 gallon milk: \$2.89, 1 dozen eggs: \$1.89, 4 loaves of bread: \$0.99, 1 6pk Rolling Rock: \$4.99 + tax .078% = \$70.35

Unsure of how to respond to that, José replied, “Huh, yeah. I’d try it too. I mean if I was a girl. A mom.”

She smiled for a prolonged minute, then paid with a debit card and was on her way.

“Oooo, José, she was flirting with you.”

“Yeah? You think?”

“Totally.”

“Nah... Hey weren’t you telling me why you haven’t gone back to school?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Are you sure? Because I’m pretty sure you were.”

“I should, but it’s been so long I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“Starting is the easy part. Lots of people start, but as soon as they get their financial aid, they’re gone. A lot of my friends started school, but only one has actually kept going, and is about to transfer. That one is me. Did you get that? That I’m the only one who kept going, and is going to finish.”

“Yeah, I got it José.”

“Yeah, all my other friends dropped out like in the first year, but not me.¹³ I kept at it, and now I’m transferring out. You should do it. You should go back to school. My Tío, a very wise drunk, once told me, ‘Five years is going to pass no matter what. What are you going to have at the end of that five years?’”

“Your Tío sounds like a very smart man.”

¹³ The success rate at which junior college students complete a 4 year degree is between 25%-33%.

“Yeah, and he said that after only 2 pitchers of cheap beer. You should hear the real crazy shit he says after 5.”¹⁴

“You’re crazy José.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I hear that all the time.” He reached into his pocket and slid out his phone and started interacting with it. “Here,” he reached into his apron’s large front pocket and pulled out a pen with a fake yellow flower wrapped onto it to ensure that no one makes off with it. He then pulled up a bit of receipt paper from the register and began writing on it. “Here. This is the number to City’s Admissions and Records Dept. Call that number and tell them that you want to register for school and they’ll help you out from there.

¹⁴ A cheap pitcher of beer = \$7.

José

“José, you want to clock out early and head home? We’re kind of slow right now and the District Manager is pressuring me to keep payroll down.”

He turned toward Jeff, the day shift manager. “Sure, I wanna go home early.” José handed the paper to Bridgette. “Call them.”

He pulled the apron over his head, said goodbye to Bridgette and walked up to the customer service counter, where a teenaged girl was waiting with an application in her hand. He nodded in her direction as a sign of acknowledging her existence. Then he swiftly rounded the corner to the back, punched in his employee ID number, clocked out and left, but not before tossing out a “Good day” and a “Good luck” in reference to the application that she was still holding in her hand.

15 and 3/4 minutes later, José was home. His dad’s car, filthy from non-operation, it looked like it was anchored down to the cement driveway by the thick cobweb strands that had accumulated over the few months of nonuse.

The refrigerator’s interior held next to nothing. It contained a quarter of a gallon of milk, a nearly empty 2 liter of orange soda, some leftover beans in a pot, and an open package of tortillas that all staled on their edges.

He walked in saw the day’s mail on the table. José sifted through city bills, car insurance papers, and credit card offers at prime interest rates- to those who qualify- until he finally discovered a possible treasure addressed to him personally, from The University of California at Santa Cruz.

His fingers worked to remove the innards of the envelope. A crisp tri-folded piece of bleached white paper slid out. He could smell how much the thick 8 1/2 x 11” letter sized paper costed. He unfolded it to see the official heading and the following lines. He read them in his head. Then he read them while moving his lips. Then he read them aloud.

To José Daveen Mendiola:

Your records have been reviewed and have been verified for conditional acceptance based on the completion of your current courses with a grade of C or better. We look forward to your attending UC Santa Cruz in the upcoming Fall Semester. Please be sure to contact our incoming students coordinator to obtain more information about the registration process...

There was more, but José couldn’t make it past “accepted”. He promised himself that he would get to it later. A more important matter had to be dealt with first. He half tucked the letter, along with the envelope, into his back pocket and made his way into the hallway. “Mom? Dad? Anyone?”

He was greeted with a momentary silence that was broken by his mom coming in from the backyard. “Mijo, what are you doing home? I thought you didn’t get off work until later.”

“Yeah, they let me go home early.”

“Doesn’t that mean that your paycheck will be less though?”

“Yeah, but it gives me extra time to finish my homework for class tomorrow.”

“But Mijo, you know we need the extra money to help with the bills. You know your dad is still trying to contribute, but disability doesn’t cover as much.”

“Mom, we’ll be fine. I worked an extra shift on Sunday, remember when they called me in. It’ll go on this next check.”

“Ay, Mijo. It would still help us out to have as many hours as you can.”

“I know mom, but...” He reached into his pocket and felt the stiff paper rub against his fingertips.

“But Mijo, we count on you to help us. Your dad is having a hard time. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know.” He headed off towards his room. “I’ll be in my room, I still have some homework to do.”

“Okay, I’ll call you when dinner’s ready.”

He closed his door, turned on his stereo and fell onto his bed. His eyes were closed and he tried not to think about anything except his homework. He removed the paperback text book from his backpack. He flipped to the bookmarked page where he focused his eyes to the last spot that he remembered reading before he fell asleep the previous night. The words concerned the subject of Drama as Literature. They ran through his brain, but they all failed to stick. He re-read them and again met the same results. He found them all fleeing and their meanings ran with them. He read the same page a total of seven times, but the paragraphs were nothing more than what could have been Greek to him.

His focus turned to the door where he found himself turning the knob to open it, and then he was waking down the hallway. His determination to inform his parents of his intentions to leave for college was building with each step toward the kitchen.

He needed some reassurance from someone, anyone, but there was no one around, so he told himself, *I'm going to tell her. I'm just going to say it. I'm not going to beat around the bush, or dig around the well, or... or... I'm just going to say it.*

He stepped up to the kitchen where he heard chattering. He drew nearer the kitchen, via the living room. He pulled in as much air as he could muster. He puffed his chest out and walked in to tell his mother that he was leaving and that they would have to find a way to manage without him, at least for a while.

"Mom," his words fell off after that. He saw her turn with the phone to her ear.

She cupped a hand over the mouthpiece, "It's your Tía Maria, she's having problems with Frank. I think she might get a divorce."

"Really? Tía Maria? I thought they were happy."

"No, I guess not. What do you need?" she whispered.

"Oh. Um... nothing. It's okay. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay Mijo."

José walked away with his disappointment following in his wake. He returned to his room where he took up his journal and began jotting down some ideas and scribbles that only he could read. His stereo was still running and he lost track of time while wandering through his thoughts on paper.

The sun hadn't seemed to have moved when he snapped out of it and came to. He quickly realized that he was still in the same place, facing the same predicament that he had been in when he chose to go into his head. His desire to leave had not diminished, nor had his difficulty in facing the fact that he had to tell his parents.

He wandered back into his mind and found himself in the middle of a fictional conversation with both of his parents. He imagined that it went something like...

“Mom, Dad, I’ve been accepted to UC Santa Cruz. I’ll be starting in the fall.”

“But Mijo, you can’t leave us. We need your help paying the bills.”

“I know mom. I’ll get a job once I’m all moved up there, and I can send money back to help you guys.”

“But, Son, how will we make it until then? Can you tell us that?” his dad asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe I can sell my car and you guys could keep the money. I heard you don’t really need a car in Santa Cruz anyway.”

“Mijo, I don’t think you understand how it works,” his mom added. “That won’t last for very long.”

“Long enough for me to get another job. Plus, I won’t be here to eat any food, or use any electricity, or gas.”

“Son, your mom is only trying to make you understand that we can’t afford to even pay our bills without you, let alone send you to college. How do you think we’ll keep the house?”

“You won’t have to worry about that. I qualify for financial aid and when I get a job I can-”

“José, you don’t get it do you? We will be homeless if you leave.”

Those last imaginary words stung worse than the hornet that bit into his earlobe one summer ten years back. The thought of leaving his parents behind left a sour taste in his mouth like the time his older brother, Oscar, held him down and shoved a lemon, from the neighbors

tree even though they had one of their own, in his mouth and made him keep it there until he cried.

That's it. I'll call Oscar!

A disembodied voice requested that José please enjoy the ringback tone. He heard the tunes of *Los Angeles Azules* play back on the phone until he heard a familiar voice, “Hey puto. What’s up?”

“Oscar, what’s up, man?”

“Nothing. Everything okay? I never hear from you at this time of day.”

“Yeah, everything is fine. Well, I mean they’re okay. And by that I mean they’re not okay.”

“What’s up little brother? You in some kind of trouble? You need some heads busted or something?”

“Well, yeah, something, kinda.”

“Oh yeah? Who?”

“Mom and Dad.”

“Ha ha.”

There was silence to convey José’s sense of seriousness.

“Oh shit. You’re not kidding, are you?”

“No.”

“Well, fill me in on the details.”

José spent the next few minutes relieving the pressure of his dilemma to his older brother. He breathed out heavily, “so there you have it. I don’t know how to break up with Mom and Dad.”

“That is a helluva problem.”

“I know. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. What should I do?”

“Okay, I got. Here’s what you should do. Avoid Mom and Dad like Hell and then when the time comes, you should just go, and then call them from Santa Cruz and tell them you’re already there.”

“Man, I’m serious.”

“I am too. Alright, I’ll come by after work and we’ll tell them together. I’ve been working lots of overtime and I’ll convince them that I can help out too.”

“You sure man?”

“Yeah I’m sure. What else is family supposed to do?”

José’s tense body finally relaxed a little. “Thanks man. For reals.”

“It’s no problem pendejo.”

He hung up his phone and laid back on his bed. His shoulders fell back and hit the mattress as the muscles loosened.

The single AA battery driven clock ticked seconds away as its hands coursed its face. José let his mind wander about the distant campus and all of the great giant green trees. He walked down cement sidewalks wet with fresh rains from the Pacific. He breathed in the ocean breeze and tasted the salt in the air as he waltzed about and in between the various buildings.

The tick-tick-tick of the clock came back into his ears where he realized his eyes were beginning to droop with a heavy sleep. He opened them quickly and shook the lethargy off of his body, but his brain persisted in pushing the boundaries of thought.

Imagination led to contemplation, which led to quandary, which led to conundrum, which led to conflict, which is where he found himself in the end. He thought about the things that he might do while away in another city, at a university, intensely studying the art of the stage.

He saw himself on the blacked-out focus of the theater. He saw the sable curtains hanging in the wings, and the apron thrust out into the audience seating. It was empty save his shape taking up center stage. It was there that he saw the first step to greater stages, in San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, and all points beyond in the wonderful world of entertainment. The lights shining down on him were so brilliant that he found himself squinting. The amount of joy, and sadness, and all emotions that lie between, were his to dole out among the audiences as though he were tossing candies to them from a moving freight train. They would throw bouquets of flowers at him.¹⁵ It was there that he belonged and wanted so badly to be. He knew because the universe had told him so, but the pull of family and all that comes with it drew him back to the center of his bedroom in Southeast Fresno.

José looked at the clock and found that it had only taken him 2 minutes and 34 seconds to travel the span of his imagined career, spanning a whopping 52 years in the “Biz”. An unsatisfied sigh escaped his lungs before his brain could consciously register its occurrence. Oscar said he

¹⁵ The history of flower throwing dates back to the Middle Ages where flower giving was a customary tradition of showing appreciation. It is also now customary to present flowers after a performance because gifting them beforehand would be a dangerous tempting of fate.

would help, but there was only so much he could do, he was a few years older and did have a life of his own to look after.

A sense of duty is bestowed on one's life when they are brought into this world, even without the consent of said one brought into the world. That sense of duty was no small source of irritation for José and he felt it cause the sag in his shoulders, dragging him down to a stature similar to that of Quasimodo.

At least Quasimodo had the towers of Notre Dame to climb. I bet he felt all tall and shit, like he'd accomplished something in his life. José chuckled to himself as he pondered that last thought.

He reached back, for the envelope that gave him hope in its ink.

It wasn't there.

His eyes darted around the room.

It wasn't on the floor.

His thumbs paged his notebook, then his Drama as Lit book.

Nothing.

Frantic turned into panic. Panic turned to dread. Dread into heartache.

There was only one place it could have been. *It must have fallen out in the hallw... Oh shit.*

His nervous hand wrapped the doorknob in a tight grip. He turned it, anxious with anticipation of what may or may not lie on the other side.

He stepped out into the walkway and rotated to his right. His eyes scanned the length of the tan carpeting.

Nothing.

There was no envelope. There was no letter. There was nothing.

José was a blank.

He walked on toward the kitchen where he remembered having it last.

They were sitting at the table when he walked in.

The letter sat center stage, a spot light on it tight.

His heart played the timpani drum, a low constant throb that increased as he stepped up.

“What is this José?”

“Uh, looks like a piece of paper. Looks kind of expensive. Fancy. Some heavy weight stuff. Like it’s official or something.”

“Quit joking around. Why is it addressed to you?”

“Is it?”

“It’s open, son.”

“Why did you open it?”

“This is not a joke José. Why did you go and do this? You didn’t even tell us. Talk to us. Nothing.”

“Dad, I had to do it or I would have missed the deadline, and I might not ever get that chance again.”

“Son, we talked about this months ago. We can’t afford for you to go to college. As much as I hate to say that, it doesn’t change how we are living right now. You think I don’t want a better life for you? You think that I’m not ashamed to say that? That I can’t provide you with a better life? Because I am.”

“Dad, that’s not it. It’s just that this is my chance to go and try to have that better life. I had to apply before it was too late. I will have all of my general ed classes at the end of this semester, and if I didn’t apply, then I would have to wait longer and since I have all of my credits I wouldn’t have any need to be at City and then wouldn’t qualify for more financial aid, which has helped us, and then I would be out of school and might not want to go back.”

The flood of words that poured from his mouth sounded as though he had rehearse them in front of a full length mirror because he had rehearsed them in front of a full length mirror many times before.

His parents sat in silence as he continued.

“And my counselor contacted another counselor at the school, and they contacted me and helped secure a spot on the incoming transfers list, and they said that I could be at risk of losing that spot if I didn’t commit...”

His mother sat in silence, his father breathed deeply before standing. He threw his hands up in the air, “Well then, I guess it’s settled, your mother and I will be homeless then.” He began to walk away toward the living room.

“Dad, it’s not like that. Oscar said...”

He was no longer listening to José’s speech. He was walking away while José’s mother, anchored in the front row, stoically remained motionless.

The front door opened and he walked through it, pulling it closed behind him.

Ramón

Ramón's shoes squeaked as he walked along the sidewalk broken by the growing grass that sprouted in between the cracks. His face turned to scowl. *I hate how they do that. Shoes always squeaked in those stories they forced me to read in school. What was that one about the guy in the future? He went for a walk and the computer/cop car arrested him. The one that that Blueberry guy wrote.*

He continued walking. Every stride took him farther from his financial problems, and son leaving them amidst all of it.

He had dreams when he was younger. He was going to be rich and successful. He had his own lawn and gardening business when he was only 17. Business had been good too. He was able to carry nearly 30 customers a month, visiting each in rotation, once a week, Monday through Friday, with some Saturdays when necessary.

He put one foot in front of the other and found his thoughts wandering back into the realm of José leaving while he and his wife were on the verge of having nowhere to live.

There were cars parked on a frontage road on the west side of Chestnut Avenue. They held plane watchers observing the casual plane taking off. They all saw Ramón amble past, but he took note of none of them.

The blur of houses, businesses, and the occasional side street grew into one mass that presented him with a landscape of despair reflected in his eyes. *Is this what it would be like to wander the streets? Will anybody know that I will have no where to sleep? Will anyone care?*

Trees as big as fire engines saw him aimlessly saunter past, but his eyes refused to register them.

The smell of Robertito's held no power over his olfactory sense, and the aromas swirled past him like the waters of an eddy. He kept walking.

He found himself in an unknown neighborhood when the pain shot down from his hip into the lower extremity of his right leg. Ramón clenched his right fist and inhaled sharply. He closed his eyes, and when he opened them he was greeted with a peppering of late 50's, West Coast bungalows with detached garages.

The nerve pain subsided and a slight turn of his head to the left revealed a small girl staring at him. Her dark brown eyes were peeking over a small white picket fence. They were as dark as Hershey Kisses, and her hair matched so closely they both appeared to be made of the same batch of chocolate.

"Are you okay mister?"

"Yeah, it's nothing."

"Are you sure?" Her voice peeped from behind one of the vertical boards.

"Yeah, really."

"Because it looks like you're in a lot of pain."

"It's an old sciatica thing. It happens to flair up all the time."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yeah."

The little girl spun on her heels, “Hold on, don’t go anywhere.” Then she ran away from the fence. She was holding a small yellow flowers when she returned. She handed them to Ramón, “Here, this is for you.”

Molly

The hurting man left Molly with a smile on his face. He turned around and walked back the way he came.

She was left alone to play in her front yard again. Her attention returned to her dolls, who were in various states of dress in a mismatched fashion similar to her own manner of dress. She had on a red t-shirt with a black line drawing of a 5 piece drum set, fluffy purple tutu, pink and white striped tights that disappeared into yellow rain-boots. Her dark hair was cut short like a pixie, and held in place with a flowered clip.

Her elf-like face was filled with large almond eyes, and her cheekbones descended into a diamond point chin.

Molly had friends at school, but was a ghost at home. Her 7 5/6 years were a series of exhausting trials that gifted her wisdom beyond her age.

She commonly found herself in front of the tv with a few of her favorite ponies watching cartoons featuring a newly found princess who was the only who could help save the day, every-day. She even fed herself, usually cereal that was only sold in plastic bags painted in the same colors as the cereal.

Most days she watched the world from the front window or playing on the front porch. Most days she saw the cat lady who lived across the street.

Molly always waved to her, and hoped that she would invite her over to see her cats. Molly never had a real pet and often found herself depressed by the fact that she had always been denied that kinship in her young life.

She was determined to make this day different. The forces of nature compelled her around the porch where she found the vase that held still more of the yellow flowers with wrinkly petals soaking up water through their stems.

Her left hand was relegated to opening the gate because she clutched a handful of the flowers in her right. She marched down the driveway, across the sidewalk, and forded the empty street. She finally exhaled her held breath once she reached the opposite bank of the street. Molly continued up to the front door of the Cat Lady across the street.

She knocked, with her left hand.

Cat Lady across the Street

Molly's visit had been nice. She had enjoyed her company, and her cats, George and Bootsy, appreciated the extra attention that only a 7 year old could provide.

"Why do cats have whiskers?"

"Why do you think cats have whiskers?"

"Because they're fashionable."

"That's what I was going to say."

They continued to pet the cats in the silence between the purring.

"Did you know some people can be invisible?"

"What do you mean? Like an imaginary friend?"

"No, like, some people can disappear."

"Do you know someone who can disappear?"

"Yeah, me. My mom never sees me when I need her to."

There were more moments of silence between purrs.

"Would you like to stay for lunch?"

She had placed the flowers in an old mason jar with some fresh water, and set them on a small entry way table just inside the door, and shortly after ordered for delivery. Lunch would reassure Molly that the world wouldn't let her go unnoticed as long as she continued her course of giving her most precious commodity of time to others. Karma would right that.

Steve, the Pizza Guy

Steve had been the daytime driver for nearly 5 and a half months. He knew the address. He had been to it at least 3 times before. A routine order every time. A large 1 topping, always pepperoni, a side salad with ranch, and a 2 liter of Sprite. It was \$15.36 all totaled with tax and delivery.

She would hand him a \$20 bill and he would dole out the \$4.64, of which she would tell him to just give her \$1 back.

The lettuce that made up the bulk of the side salad had begun to wilt, and the black olive slices were warming, but the carrot shavings were holding up just fine. She still let him keep \$3.64 dollars from the change.

He arrived ten minutes earlier than the anticipated time that was relayed over the phone when she placed her order, she might even let him keep all of the change this time. Though customers of a skeptical nature might question the quality of an early pizza, she did not seem to be one of them.

The thought that Steve had to potentially derive an extra \$1 would have the power to carry him the rest of the day. There were so many customers who left him with only a \$0.04 tip, and there were even those who held their hand out for that \$0.04 in change.

He figured that if, on an average night of 25 deliveries, every customer left him just a single \$1 tip, in addition to the \$0.80 per delivery gas allowance, he would make an extra \$46.25 in tax free unreported income every night, on top of his \$7.00 an hour¹⁶, but his faith in people

¹⁶ As per 2001 California State minimum wage of \$6.75.

tipping wained as his time as a driver dragged on. It seemed as though nobody believed in Karma anymore.

The door to her house was red, and the walkway leading up to it smelled faintly of vinegary piss. The bushes that lined the concrete were in need of trimming as the grass was dying on the other side of it.

He knocked and heard a voice begging for just a few more seconds.

She opened the door wearing a loose t-shirt, striped pajama pants and fuzzy slippers. Her cats circling under her gait as she steadied herself so as not to step on any of them.

One of her cats, the one with a black tail, bumped into a side table just on the inside of the doorway, and a mason jar with yellow flowers shook, but did not tip.

“That was a close one,” he said.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I guess that was close.” She held out a \$20 bill, and added, “Keep the change.”

“Really?” Steve voice could not hide his excitement.

“Yeah, you got here early, and we’re hungry.”

“Thanks.”

The lady took her food in, “Pizza’s here.”

Steve pocketed the bill, leaving the coins in his money bag until the end of the night so that it totaled up into bills.

He got back into his blue, 1994 Mitsubishi Mighty Max pickup truck and started the engine. His Pioneer stereo grew to life and began blaring the 90’s styling of the Stone Temple Pilots.

He pulled out onto Maple and turned left to head east on McKinley. Traffic wasn't bad in this part of town, especially at this time of day and he knew that he would have plenty of time to make it to his next delivery at the Fresno Yosemite Air Terminal, just about 3 major city blocks over.

Steve pulled into the left turn lane at the light at Peach. There were no cars in the oncoming lanes, and yet the light stayed red for an entire 5 minutes and 37 seconds. It stopped nine cars when it did choose to change colors to allow his blue pickup to turn across the lanes.

He immediately rolled into the right lane so that he could merge into the roadway that led up to the unloading zone directly in front of the glass doors that automatically opened to the travelers. Ignoring the "DO NOT LEAVE VEHICLES UNATTENDED" sign, Steve hit his flashing hazard lights, grabbed the two leather hot-bags stuffed with 4 pizza party pack, there were 4 one topping pizzas: 3 pepperoni, and 1 sausage, and he strolled on.

"Make sure no one dents it and there may be half a tip in it for you," he said to the curbside attendant who rolled his eyes at him.

The doors slid open for him and the smell of dusty suitcases, and sweaty passengers filled his nose, momentarily erasing any semblance of the sauce and dough smell of the pizzas he carried all day.

The tag on the bag indicated this particular delivery was to go to the American Airlines counter. He turned to his right, walked on past the Southwest counter, where he glanced over at the young lady working the ticket counter there. She wore her uniform with a certain dignity that told him she was too diligent when it came to keeping her collar just the right amount of stiff for

him to have a chance with her, but he did notice in his short check that she was not wearing a ring on her left hand. He, however, continued on.

There were two customers at the counter he was heading towards.

They were loading up their baggage and were nearly done with their check-in routine when he finally reached it.

They gave him a look of confusion, showing they certainly weren't expecting to see a pizza man in the vicinity of their departure point for wherever they were going. He also returned a look of confusion that was meant to exhibit his bewilderment in attempting to piece the puzzle together that would shed light on why a woman as beautiful as she was would be traveling with a man as unattractive as the winner of an ugliest dog contest.

Steve never got the chance. Another American Airlines ticket counter lady appeared from a door behind the counter. "Oh, you must be the pizza guy."

"Yeah, I have an order for..." He looked at the ticket for a name. "Tou."

"Hold on, I'll call for him. It should just be a minute."

Steve set the hot-bags on the counter and turned around to view the nearly empty airport terminal. They had just redone all of the interior and the light grey tiles and the mismatched taupe walls. He took note of the fake ficus trees that required no water and would never quite capture the real thing.

He saw all of the pictures on the walls that tried, and failed, to bring a sense of the history of the city to the terminal.

A slight laugh escaped his lips when he looked over to see the young lady from the Southwest counter leering in his direction. She quickly looked away when her eyes met his. He

knew in that one instant that she would like him for one night, but saw no future with him beyond that. He would have taken that knowing that he wasn't the type that would want to be in a long term relationship with someone like her.

It was closer to 4 and a half minutes before Tou appeared through the same door behind the counter as the other lady appeared from. He was dressed in dark blue overalls that had reflecting tape on the cuffs and waist. A large pair of headphones, for protection rather than high sound quality, hung about his neck like a doctor wearing his stethoscope. He was short, just a hair over 5 feet tall, and it made Steve feel like a giant, though he was no more than 5'8".

"How much is it?"

"The total comes out to \$34.61."

"Here you go," he said, handing over 2 twenties. "Keep the change man."

"Thanks."

Steve removed the pizzas and felt the heat radiate from the bottom. He handed them over in one whole stack. "Careful, they're still hot."

"Nice." Tou took the pizzas and turned to the lady nearest him at the counter, "Hey could you give him an extra 5? I can't get it right now, my hands are kinda full," he said while raising the boxes of food a little to show just how full they were.

She looked at him with a small amount of contempt emanating from the corners of her mouth. "I'll get you back, my wallet's in my locker," he added.

She reluctantly reached under the counter and removed a small wallet from within, where she found a \$5 bill and handed it over to Steve.

He accepted the cash, folded it, and placed in his left pocket along with all of his other tips he had already received from his previous deliveries.

“Thank you very much.” He turned and carried out the hot-bags in tow.

The curb-side attendant was busy helping an elderly couple unload their cargo from a Mercedes SUV, which made Steve feel better for avoiding him and splitting his tip with the man.

He clicked his hazard blinkers off and restarted his little truck. He pushed in the clutch and put the stick into first gear. The truck picked up and took off with a quickness that would qualify him for a good start if he were in a drag race.

The next stop would take him down Peach to Kings Canyon, the high school.

He hated going to the schools. The elementary schools were the worst. Kids mobbed him as he approached the main office in search of a teacher who would undoubtedly pay with a school check made out for the exact amount, leaving him with no tip whatsoever.

This was a high school though, and he was left with a small bit of hope that they would be of a more understanding nature and would leave him with a sizable tip that would make it worth driving through all of the hassle and dealing with all of the insanely annoying “Is that pizza for me?” comments.

Steve quickly left the parking lot, turning onto Clinton Way, where he just as quickly flipped a u-turn in front of the Hertz Rental car building so that he would be heading south. He stopped at the light on McKinley, where a loud Zack De La Rocha screamed “Fuck you, I won’t do what you tell me!” shining lights on the injustices people suffered in the name of good government, while Tom Morello’s fingers danced across the 6 strings of his electric guitar in such a

way that caused confusion to those who thought it was all brought about through an advanced synthesizer.

The light turned to green and Steve crossed the street so that he now headed south on Peach. There was no traffic on this part, and there wouldn't be any until he crossed the 180 freeway, and then there would be the morons who thought they were still on the freeway, and with no cops in sight, continued to drive like they were still on it.

A black Honda Civic, in the left lane, sped passed him. Steve's foot lightly braked the vehicle as he coasted to the light where he stopped right next to the Honda sitting at the red. He looked to his left and saw an attractive brunette who refused to look in his direction. He looked to his right and noticed that R-N Market had been replaced by a Dollar General. He wondered where people would buy their Asian specialty products, but then he remembered the South Asia Market down on Tulare and Chestnut, and thought that it might be less competition for their business.

The two year widening project to transform the 2 lanes of Peach to 4, had been complete for nearly 3 months. The results reduced the number of minutes it took to get from Belmont to Kings Canyon down to 4, from 10, and Steve had been able to reach the parking lot of Sunnyside High School in just over three.

Steve grabbed the last hot-bag in his truck. He made his way to the building labeled with large metal letters that spelled out OFFICE. He entered and found the smell of ink and paper along with the burning circuits of warm computers. He waited, patiently, at the counter, while a gaggle of secretaries furiously worked their consoles. No one paid him any mind, with the exception of a lone student sitting on the waiting chairs, obviously waiting to see the Learning Director

about some malcontent remark, or poor choice in decision making that resulted in some form of damage to school property.

“Is that pizza for me?” he asked.

“Nah man, unless you got fifty bucks.”

“Nah, all I got is two empty pockets and my dick in my pants.”

Malcontent remark, decided Steve.

“Can I help you?” asked a lady in her middle 50’s.

“Yeah, I have a pizza here for a Patty Ramirez.”

“Oh, okay. Hold on and I’ll get her up here.”

“Thanks.”

The office lady went behind a desk and picked up her dark grey Sysco phone, dialed 4 digits and waited. “Patty, I have a young gentleman here with a pizza for you.” There was a pause as she waited for a reply. “Okay, I’ll let him know.”

She hung up the phone and returned to the counter. “She’ll be up here in just a few minutes.”

“Thanks,” he responded again.

Before too long, a woman approached Steve.

Patty

Patty, tall and lanky, waltzed into the front office from hers in the back. She paid the pizza guy, tipping him \$4 and took her lunch back to her desk, where Maria was filling out her student progress sheets.

“Here it is. Lunch.”

Maria’s stomach hadn’t considered the necessity of food since it was angered by the yellow flowers from her husband. It rumbled to remind her that she needed to eat something.

Patty pulled out some paper plates, and napkins, handing some over to Maria. “You know what you need? You need a good divorce lawyer.”

“I don’t think I’m ready for something like that.”

Patty opened the box and pulled out the hot slices of pizza and placed two on Maria’s plate, and two on hers.

“Yeah, you are. You just don’t know it yet.”

“Patty, I’m not ready to just give up on my marriage like that.”

“Maria, how long have you been married to that man?”

“Um.. 13 years.”

“Didn’t you catch him cheating on you?”

“Yeah, but that was a long time ago, and I haven’t even seen anything to make me think he’s up to that again.”

“That doesn’t matter. Once a cheater, always a cheater.”

“That’s not fair. People can change.” Maria played with one of her slices, not terribly interested in eating anything.

“It’s totally fair. People can change, but that doesn’t mean that they do.” Patty raised her slice and took a large bite out of it.

“It’s a pity how easy it is to get divorced.”

“You know what’s even more pitiful? How easy it is to get married.”

Maria sat in silence, thinking about that last question and answer, while Patty greedily ate her lunch. A reluctant hand picked up her slice and she forced it down, not taking the time to appreciate the melding of flavors and soft textures.

Patty finished her share and reached for her purse. She dug through it for a few moments before she removed a business card and held it out towards Maria. “Here, take this. It’s the number to the lawyer who handled my divorce. He’s my brother, and he’s good.”

“Thank you Patty, really, but I don’t think I could do that.”

“You don’t have to call him. Just take it and know that you have options.”

Maria took the eggshell white card with blue characters printed in a Courier font and placed it in her purse.

“Thanks, and thank you for lunch. I can’t believe that I forgot mine this morning.” Maria had realized, after a bit of crying in Patty’s office, that she had completely forgotten to make herself a lunch, but felt the burning of embarrassment to openly admit that to Patty. “I’ll get you back next time.”

“It’s no problem. Don’t worry about it.”

Maria rose to leave. “Thanks anyway. I better be getting to the classrooms if I’m going to keep up with these kids.”

“Alright, I’ll see you later.”

There was a predictable click as the bolt shot into the catch in the doorframe.

Afternoon

Maria Esperanza

The dry air outside met Maria's now dry eyes. Her stomach was satisfied with the little bit of pizza that was ready for digestion. She was now on her way to the next classroom.

Johanna, Esmerelda, and Isela were all in there together. Johanna needed very little help with her English, she had learned a little English in the Madera elementary school system when she attended 3rd grade before going back to Jalisco, but now she and her cousin, Esmerelda, and new friend were in Biology together, and Maria was to be present to aid them in understanding the material so that they could comprehend the subject in which they were to be tested on.

Classes had already been in session for nearly 15 minutes, and Maria found herself wandering the halls and walkways alone.

It was an indolent sort of walk that Maria had taken on. There was no urgency to her gait that showed a desire to be in the appointed room at this time for her mind was busy with the possibilities that were plausible outcomes of what could have been if she had chosen differently, and even more, what could be if she chooses to act on those inclinations.

The walkway to the next class Took her past Eduardo's classroom. His door, pinned open allowed her to see him inside, front and center. His red Macy's tie was neatly, and snugly cinched up to his collar, while his white shirt sleeves were folded up to his elbows. His slacks were nicely ironed and fitted as though a tailor had taken them in especially for his body.

She stood outside for a moment taking him all in.

His lecture on American Romanticism momentarily paused. His eyes wandered to the door where he met hers.

She panicked and walked away quickly, hoping that he hadn't noticed her, but her brain desperately tried to persuade her heart that it did not see things the same way.

The door to room 6 squeaked as she pulled it open. Mr. Quail's room was a completed puzzle that was put together using pieces from different boxes. The walls were covered in a mural of numerous styles so eclectic they smashed into one another with such ferocity that they amalgamated into one solid mass of color and shapes within.

Student artwork from Art 1 occupied one whole wall in its entirety from floor to ceiling. There was no regard for standard to be placed on the wall, leaving as a result a myriad of quality in each and every piece. The spaces between the corners and the white boards that sandwiched a "Smart Board" was used to hold up a Ramones poster, posing in front of CBGB's, all in a tasteful black and white, while just below that was a reprint of the 1985 classic "The Goonies" movie promotional poster with the gang clinging to each other.

Beethoven's Symphony number 9 softly played in the background while an 8 hour track of the rain in a high mountain, German forest pittered and pattered along in the background of that.

Maria snuck in while Mr. Quail was illustrating the simple line drawing technique that the students would be using to create their own works. She sat down in a student desk that was next to Johanna, behind Esmerelda, and Isela on the other side.

The dutiful students, scared of the wrath that may come with stepping out of line, watched the dry erase marker trail over the white board to develop into a drawing of a man walking under an umbrella.

"What are you guys working on today?" Maria whispered to Johanna.

“El es haciendo nosotros dibuja pinturas con solo una linea.”

“Johanna, English. You need to practice your English.”

She sighed, “He’s making us draw pictures with just one line.”

“Oh.”

Mr. Quails finished his example, turned to the class and announced, “Okay, now it’s your turn.”

The students simultaneously inhaled a deep breath and collectively looked forlornly at their blank papers. A few reluctantly put pencils on paper and began pushing it around in order to find the drawing on the page, but most stared in bewilderment.

Johanna was one of the few who went right to the dragging of pencil on paper. “Maria, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“What do you do if... you know... you know a boy likes you, but you already have a novio.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know I have a boyfriend, but... another boy told his friend, and his friend told Esme, that he likes me, and he’s very chulo, but I have boyfriend already, and I don’t want to be with him no more, but... I don’t know how to tell him.”

Words did not come to Maria. Her mouth hung open as her brain fluttered and grasped at anything that tumbled through the air in her mind, but caught nothing.

“Well, um... Why don’t you want to be with him anymore?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t have feelings for him like that.”

“Yeah, that happens sometimes. Like when you’ve been with someone for so long that you stopped thinking about the little things that make you happy.”

“I don’t know, maybe. I’ve been with my boyfriend for almost a year.”

“I think you should just tell him how you feel.” Maria’s voice sank.

“I don’t think he’ll like that though.”

Maria didn’t know what else to say but, “Yeah, but you just have to be honest. Don’t you know the golden rule?”

“Que es?”

“Treat others as you want to be treated.”

“That sounds like a good rule.”

Art transcends language and this often left Esmerelda and Isela saying nothing the entire time, they simply drew on their papers.

“What are you drawing Johanna?”

Johanna withdrew her pencil from the paper. She held it up with both hands, then handed it over to Maria just as Mr. Quails announced the imminent end of the period.

The kids all mumbled to each other as they shuffled to put away their things.

The bell rang and they all shuffled themselves out. Maria looked down at Johanna’s drawing and found the one line drawing scribbled into a flower with wrinkled petals lying behind a heart broken in two.

Johanna

Johanna left Maria, and her cousin, and Isela, as soon as the bell rang. She walked off among the currents in the flowing river of students. She quickly found one that suited her and let it take her to her destination.

She tried to steel herself up for what was to come in the next few minutes. She reminded herself not to cry, there would be lots of people around and being pitiful in front of a crowd was not something that she would allow herself to be.

Richard was standing in his usual spot, leaning on a pole just outside of Mr. Staten's room. He was wearing his usual outfit, loose brown t-shirt, jeans that tapered off to the cuffs, and his black and red hightop Nikes, along with a matching black and red Chicago Bulls baseball cap with the sticker still affixed to the straight bill.

She thought about how she used to think that his weak cheekbones were the cutest features that she had ever seen, but as she approached him she noticed that they just looked like weak cheekbones.

She walked straight up to him.

He spoke little Spanish so she had to tell him in English.

"Richard, we need to talk."

"Yeah? What's up?"

"I think I shouldn't be your girlfriend anymore."

"What? Why you say that?"

"I think we should just be friends, not boyfriend and girlfriend."

“Yeah, I got that, but why you saying that?”

“I just think it’s better that way.”

He looked around. She thought she saw his eyes begin to mist up. She would have sworn that his hands began to shake. “Okay, okay. Listen here though, you’re not gonna be my friend no more ‘cause I don’t want you to be my girlfriend no more. I already got me another girlfriend anyway.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, and she prettier than you too.”

Johanna wasn’t sure of what he said. She just nodded. “Okay. So you’re not my boyfriend anymore.” Her heart was pounding so loudly she thought Richard could hear it.

“Yeah, that’s right. You’re not my girlfriend no more.”

“Okay.”

Johanna walked away and felt herself breathe for the first time since she approached Richard to break up with him.

As she put one foot in front of the other, she realized that she had just experienced her first break up, and that although she had felt that it had been due for some time, she did not in fact wake up that very morning with the intention of changing that part of her on this day. She smiled and felt a cool breeze flow past her cheeks.

Johanna felt herself grow taller with every step she took away from Richard. Her shoulders were lighter. Her smile brighter. That was until the toes on her right foot were trapped by a crack in the sidewalk and her momentum was halted resulting in a nasty spill onto the sidewalk.

Jenna

Jenna parked across the street in her 1994 Honda Civic. Her phone's camera zoom served as a telescope, as though she was searching the heavens for answers to the ultimate question, or at least a glimpse of her boyfriend's wife. She laughed as her screen displayed a girl fall flat on the sidewalk. She laughed absurdly loud for being all by herself in a car on the street.

He was always hiding things from her, but she had been able to get it out of him that she worked at the high school. She had even gone through his phone and seen some of the few pictures of her that he had.

She didn't think that it too much to ask that she be allowed to see her for herself in real life. She had even thought to follow her into a Vons and pretend to look at something in the same aisle as her. She might even ask her an innocent question concerning the better of two cleaning products or which brand of cheese she would buy if she had children in her house.

Her boyfriend always kept his wife and family a secret from her. They had even had a fight where she told him that it should be the other way around. She decided that life was not going to determine her destiny. She refused to accept that Francisco, her Pancho, belonged to someone else. He belonged to her, and the flaxen flowers he gave her were evidence that it was all true. She refused to believe that God would reward an ugly bitch like Maria with a man like her Pancho.

To Jenna, it was a widely known fact that when a man presented flowers to a woman that it was a promise to love her. It was a physical act, a manifestation of an emotion so deep and beautiful that the only equivalent was to transfer an artifact of such beauty to the individual who

was the subject of that sentiment. This was the only way to be sure that the connection was understood, and three weeks previous, to the day, Pancho had given her a bouquet of flowers in a red vase. It was that moment that she knew he loved her with a viciousness that bordered on the animalistic.

That was the day that she knew that Love was more potent than any other force. She knew he completely belonged to her. She felt it. Jenna's life force balled up in the center of her being only to disperse itself throughout her limbs, through her hot blood, into the nerves embedded in the muscles all the way up to her brain, and the world, the universe, and everything produced by it was powerless to stop her.

She sat in her car contemplating her next move. All of her energies collaborated to generate a plan to ensure all that had been promised to her.

Her life previous to Pancho's entry had been filled with disappointing tours through each stage of development. A boring childhood led to a mediocre school life which did not translate to a wildly successful job filled with satisfaction and an equally satisfying paycheck. Personal relationships fared no better and she found herself in a two bedroom apartment with no roommate.

Pancho's injection opened her eyes to the possibilities previously obscured by her shortsightedness.

Jenna had her phone in her hand. She brought it to life, keyed her password in with her thumb, and tapped her camera application.

The lens dilated to capture the depths and colors of the reality on the other side. She aimed the eye towards the girl who had just spilled out on the pavement and saw a woman. Jenna decided that she must have been in her early thirties, at least 7 years older than herself. She de-

terminated that her choice of wardrobe was neither hip, professional, nor sexy, and her hair was horrid. Her phone buzzed just as she was zooming in on her shoes.

She huffed and allowed her thumb to give the camera a rough swipe, then punch the talking bubble icon.

Panch

Hey sexy. How you doing?

okay. you?

...

Jenna's eyelids fluttered. Her heart revved up, pounding so loud her ears rushed, and her fingers began to shake.

Panch

Hey sexy. How you doing?

okay. yourself?

Good. Jes thinking bout u

Oh yeah? what about me?

About the things i will do with you later.

What will you be doing with me later?

Sexy thangs. I'll stop by on my way to my next site.

C U soon. ;)

Jenna ached inside. Her skin burned and her cheeks blushed deeper than her lipstick.

Time away from her man caused her muscles to tense. She breathed as deep as a young, new yoga student. She waited for her phone to buzz again, but several minutes had passed with nothing. She began to breath in the fashion of an older lady performing Tai Chi.

The woman, along with the clumsy girl, had gone. Jenna's thoughts had once again become her sole company. Several more minutes passed while she picture Pancho's well muscled arms pumping as he worked, and then how they would wrap around her when he came straight to her right from work. How he would refuse to shower before he left, she entertained the idea of him showering off as soon as he made it home, so as not to be too suspicious, but the thoughts of him going home to his wife and not her inflamed themselves to infuriating levels that raised her blood pressure to dangerous heights. She let it go that far once and only once.

Jenna looked at her reflection in the rearview mirror, feathered up her bangs a touch and noticed a police officer approaching her car.

"Everything okay here ma'am?"

Her eyes knitted together at the address as "ma'am". Her age did not qualify her as of age to be addressed as such.

"Um, yeah. Is there a problem officer?"

"No, it's just that sitting across the street from a school, at this time of day, for a prolonged period of time raises suspicions. May I see your ID, ma'am?"

Her lip curled at being called "ma'am" again. "Yeah, um, everything is fine," she said as she reached into her purse for her driver's license.

The middle aged looking officer accepted the card, looked at it, then at her, back at the picture on the card.

“So, what are you doing out here?”

“I was on my way home and my phone buzzed and I didn’t want to text and drive, so I pulled over to text my boyfriend back.”

“Says here you’re supposed to wear corrective lens. You have them with you?”

“Yeah.” She pulled her glasses out of her purse, and slipped them on. “Right here.”

The officer handed her license back to her. “All right, here you go. Just remember that you probably don’t want to sit in front of a school looking suspicious, unless you want to talk to the cops.”

“Thanks Officer, uh...?”

“Officer Michaels.”¹⁷

“Thank you Officer Michaels.”

Jenna knew that she would have to catch his wife somewhere else.

¹⁷ Officer Michaels was one of 683 officers employed by the Fresno City Police Dept.

Officer Michaels

He almost asked her to step out of her car, but then she leaned toward him to hand over her license. He saw all the way down her shirt to the skin between her breasts. They won. His brain short circuited, and rebooted, and then lapsed in recovery modes. He lost his train of thought, looked at the plastic card with her picture, and let his eyes wander over her stats. Height, weight, eye color, and last her age. He looked back at the thumbnail picture of her face and determined that it was symmetrical enough that he would definitely bang her if given the chance.

He was still under the spell of these thoughts as he watched her rear end drive away.

The high school girls were too young for him now. His late 20's had arrived quicker than he expected, and even the senior girls were now just that, girls.

There he was, sitting alone in his patrol car thinking about women. When he would find one for him. Where she would be. What she would be wearing. If she even existed.

The car rumbled to life with the twist of a key and he returned to the world of work.

No amount of preparation proved adequate when it came to knowing how much police work consisted of paperwork. Much of it is driving around in a car, anticipating something on the horizon, and paperwork.

The paperwork brought Officer Michaels to a bored place where his mind wandered the borders of a dreamland where women threw themselves at him. His suspicions led him to conclude that this was beyond his control; that he might have a problem.

His patrol car rolled through 4-lane avenues where he encountered several red lights. He hated how people always slowed down in front of him, and how they would speed up when he was gone. He had grown wary of only being looked at through rear view mirrors. The black-and-white shielded him from weirdness that lay in wait outside of it.

There were loads of domestic abuse calls, but they responded to some strange ones by any means of metrics. The man stuck on a telephone poll in the Tower District. A woman who had been up for 4 days. She was carrying a dead cat in her arms, then swung it at him and Officer Mendoza when they proceeded to detain her. There was an elderly Hmong woman with no teeth, who had been caught trying to leave the ShopSmartCo with her pants stuffed full of air fresheners and canned cat food.

Officer Michaels blindly watched from behind the windshield as the world slid by while he sped through it.

A hole existed somewhere in his being. It was a hole that he thought would be filled once he finished his police academy training and landed a job. His life would be consumed with fulfilling his duties to the best of his abilities. This he was able to accomplish at the age of 24 and it was all downhill from there.

A relationship that had been stable and secure since his last two years of high school fell apart just after he graduated the police academy, his girlfriend provided the reason of “not being able to see myself with a cop” for the rest of her life.

His apartment’s emptiness had never been replaced, not even by a dog.

He went to the gym and burned off the excess lack of emotions that had built up inside of him as he dwelled on the lingering effects of his unsatisfying life situation. Three miles on the treadmill, alternating front and back days, and even the occasional steam in the sauna.

He filled the in between hours with building model replicas of WWII fighters, bombers, and eventually the various ships that comprised the pacific fleet, but they all failed to replenish the gap that was left in the wake of his living.

At present, a red light held him immobile at an intersection too mediocre to be immediately recognizable. The light changed and he pressed the accelerator. The car pushed itself forward right as he noticed a small walk-up coffee stand. His lack of attention and focus called forth to him asking for assistance that could be found in the caffeinated contents of the percolated beverage.

He spun the wheel and entered the parking lot with the speed that might have caused suspicion of a crime in progress, but he quickly slowed down to allay any cautious onlookers.

The engine calmed down and stopped altogether. He exited his patrol car and walked up to the stand where there were two other customers ahead of him.

They turned around and looked at his uniform with more than a bit of unease. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and rested his hands on his holster belt, full of weapons, both lethal and non-lethal as deterrents. He attempted to display body language that communicated a desire only to purchase a cup of coffee, and nothing more.

He approached the window as it was his turn to order. The young lady working the window asked what she could get him. She asked with a smile that made his lips crinkle and tighten, and simultaneously lose their moistness.

Her auburn hair shone highlights of blonde in its tight ponytail, held under her red visor with the company's logo on the front.

He watched as her apron swayed around her hips.

“Uh... I'd like a large coffee, please.”

“Sure thing.”

She turned, grabbed a hot water proof cup, and a sleeve. She shifted her hips and spun to fill it with the black water that swirled with the granules of the ground beans.

“Would you like cream, sugar? Maybe Sweet n Low?”

“Um... Yeah, a cream and three sugars, please.”

“Sure thing.”

He saw another hint of a smile that pulled on the corners of his mouth. She held out a hand with a small creamer in a small cup, and three packets of raw sugar, which he added to his cup, after removing the lid. He stirred in the extra ingredients and inhaled a whiff of the aroma rising off of the surface.

The coffee slid over the lip of the cup and into his mouth. He felt its warmth flow down his esophagus as gravity pulled it down into the center of his being. The revitalization that came along with that warmth replenished his spirits.

This warmed drink would make his day.

He looked up to thank the woman who had served him such a vivacious libation, but faltered when he saw that she had moved on to assisting the next customer.

A step towards his cruiser led to a collision with two students wearing the uniform of the McCarthy Catholic School. His surprise at the bump caused his hand to release its grip, allowing the cup to fall under the authority of gravity.

It spilled onto the edge of the concrete walkway with a thud and splash. The mocha colored drink spread its contents into the flowerbed filled with blooming yellow flowers.

The startled students were too stunned to move. They froze in place. Officer Michaels, conflicted over his spill and the concern for students who were supposed to be in class caused no small hesitation in his demeanor.

The uniformed students stood there as he regained his composure.

Officer Michaels cleared his throat trying to forget the fact that his solace in that cup was now going to the flowers. “Um, aren’t you kids supposed to be in school right now?”

They were one boy and one girl. Their dark blue jackets bore the coat of arms for the school. The boy, slightly taller than the girl, wore khaki slacks, while she wore the same outfit, with the exception of a pleated skirt that fell so well below her knees it nearly mingled with her long socks.

The boy had a faint mustache that grew no darker than a sweaty upper lip that captured a bit of swirling dust from the air.

“Um, no sir.”

“No?”

“Yeah, we, uh, have the day off for a teacher conference. You know? Where they have to be at school, but we don’t.”

“It’s not one of those days.”

He eyed their appearance and concluded them to be no more than 16. They began to shift with unease.

Officer Michaels' mind asserted itself, taking control, it reminded him of his days evading the hours in a desk, listening to Mrs. Hook drone on and on about the fate of the characters in books written by white men who had been dead for centuries in some cases. It evoked the tricks like convincing his friend Damien to pretend to be his dad and call the school to excuse him for fictitious doctor's appointments. His abhorrence of wasting sun filled days in a classroom added to his desire to discover a job that allowed him to roam around the day instead of watching a clock tick away the seconds of his life.

Several moments passed before he realized that the two of them were locked together at the hands, their fingers interlacing each others'. They were a couple, and immediate jealousy washed over him.

The boy pleaded. "Sir, please, we were just going to get some coffee before we went to school, and we were just running a little late. Please, we already paid for our order. We'll go back to school. I mean, go to school."

He knew before the slip that this kid was lying.

The school's location was only a few blocks away. He knew what he had to do.

"What are your names?"

"M-my name is John."

"Um, my name is Jane."

"John, and Jane, what?"

"Oh, um, John, sir."

“No. What’s your last name John?”

“John Freeman.”

“And yours, miss Jane?”

“Jane Rambler.” She mumbled.

Officer Michaels reached up to his shoulder communicator, depressed the button to transmit, and spoke into it. “This is Michaels here, I need the info for any calls from the McCarthy Catholic School, there may be some students wandering off the grounds.”

There was a crackle and a moment of silence, then a voice on the other end responded. “Nothing has been reported at this time.”

He turned his cocked head back toward their direction. “So, they don’t seem to know that you’re missing as of yet.”

John spoke up. “Sir, I promise we’ll go straight to the school from here.”

He looked around as though he were waiting for back up to arrive, despite not having called any in. A deep breath and a moment to think was all he searched for in that space of 30 seconds.

“Come with me.”

“Sir, please. We don’t need you to take us. We’ll go. We’ll just go now. C’mon Jane.”

His mind’s constancy to this decision was unwavering. “No, you’re coming with me.” The car had been sitting warm as he escorted the couple to the back door.

“In you go,” he said as he opened the door.

The two of them apprehensively peeked into the open door.

Neither of them volunteered to enter first. Officer Michaels gestured again for them to enter, and when they still obey he added, “Don’t make me slap the cuffs on you.”

Without further delay, they moved to get in.

The back seat was cold, hard plastic, and there was a small niche cut out where the seat and the back met. Officer Michaels leaned in and met their curious faces. “It’s for when I do have to put you in the back with the cuffs on.”

He smiled and closed the door after being sure that they were secure.

Behind the wheel, he commanded the road, but remained subject to the power or red lights. They waited through four of them.

There was no talking. He didn’t try to exhort any more from them. They did not whisper anything to each other, even as there was chatter on his radio communicator.

It took them 12 minutes to reach the school established there since 1919.

The Spanish style beige façade wore a top of red Spanish tiles on its roof. The base of which was firmly planted in a green lawn that could serve as a putting green if only cups were placed into its carpet.

The parking lot allowed for a row of angled vehicles park facing in toward the front of the school.

He eased the cruiser into a space provided specifically for police business, shifted it into park and let the engine run for a few more thousand revolutions before shutting it all down.

He stared at the doors. Old anxieties flared. A heavy weight of numbness fell on him and the sentiments of loathing the feeling of being trapped in a schoolroom wrapped around him like a suffocating blanket.

Being stuck in one place all day long on a day like the one they were having that day appalled his better sense, but rules kept the masses in line and he couldn't let these two get away while others were not allowed the same treatment.

The back door only opened from the outside. They exited the cruiser, their fingers still interwoven together.

Officer Michaels waived a hand forward to spur them on toward the school. They released their grips on each other ten feet before they reached the entrance.

He opened the door for them and continued to chaperone them as far as the counter in the front office.

There were three secretaries working various tasks at their various stations. The one closest to the counter ceased her assignment, she looked past a vase of yellow flowers, asking, "Can I help you?"

Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of two of their students being escorted in by a police officer. "John? Jane? What is going on? Are you two okay?" She looked up at Officer Michaels, "Are they in any trouble? What's going on?"

"Yeah, they're fine. I caught them playing hooky over at the Coffee Stand a few blocks down the way."

"Thank you officer. We'll call their parents, I'm sure they'll be interested to hear this. You two have a seat right there and wait for Mr. Gianola to call you back." The secretary jabbed a finger at both John and Jane. They moved to sit down next to one another. This did not get passed her, "You over there, and you over there," she motioned them apart with her still pointing finger.

She turned back to Michaels, “Thank you again Officer.” Her voice held the indication that his role in the incident had concluded and he was now free to leave.

“It’s no problem really.” He paused as though there were more to add, but a hesitation caused a pause. “Um, is there, by any chance, um... is Father Cruz still around?”

Her face displayed a look of concern, “He is. I can call him over if you like?”

“No thanks, that’s okay. If you could just tell me where he is, I’d kinda like to surprise him.”

Father Cruz

Father Cruz was in the garden. He was still wearing his casual black short sleeve shirt with the traditional collar, and flat front slacks with a neat crease. He was near a flowerbed that he had helped students plant several months earlier. He was examining his wrinkled hands. Closely watching to see if he could see each pulse of blood as it coursed his veins under his thinning skin. His aged eyes struggled to focus so close to his face, but his refusal to wear his glasses bordered on supercilious.

He reached out to pluck a flower when he heard the crunch of heavy shoes, and a police radio rattling off jumbled nonsense.

“Father Cruz,” Officer Michaels proffered a hand as he approached the priest.

“Gabriel Michaels, how are you my son?”

“I am doing just fine Father.”

The two men heartily shook hands.

“How are you, Father?”

“I am doing well. I see that you’re a policeman now. That’s new.”

“Well, it was new, but I’ve been doing this for a few years now.”

“It suits you. I always knew that you’d turn out to be either a cop, or a priest.”

“Ha, that’s a good one. I’m not sure anyone knew that I’d be doing what I’m doing nowadays.”

“Well, it is that opposite of what was expected.”

Father Cruz always knew what to say, but fell into an easy silence.

Officer Michaels had been sure that he wanted to see the Father, but hadn't known why. The desire to talk to someone familiar tugged at his core, but now that the time arrived there was nothing that he could think to say.

"Father," he sat down next to the priest on the retaining wall. "I have missed this place. For all that I hated it, I really do miss it."

"Yeah, you really did seem to passionately dislike the space between these walls. You were always trying to escape, escape something we could never figure out."

They looked around the garden, taking in all of the foliage in bloom. The trees had grown many times over, some even fallen since his final days at the school. Michaels' eyes roamed the other parts of the grounds, searching for changes that he might recognize. Eventually they fell upon the aging cross in the center of the garden.

It had been the first piece put into place when the church was erected.

Now it was weathering away as the wind and sun, and occasional rain took their tolls, but it was still there, standing straight up and casting its shadow on the walks underneath it, at times shading wilting flowers, sheltering the delicate petals from the harshness of the sun's rays.

Officer Michaels didn't know what to say. He pushed some pebbles around with the toes of his heavy shoes.

The silence weighed itself on the two men sitting there.

"I'm not happy, Father."

"Why is that, Gabriel?"

"I don't know." He huffed, "I don't know, I guess I just thought life would have turned out different."

“Life doesn’t turn out any other way than the way that we make it. You should know that you didn’t become a policeman by accident. You made that happen.”

“Yeah, but it’s not just my job, it’s everything that makes up life. It’s love, it’s friendships, it’s family. It’s those things that are lacking.”

“So, what’s the problem?”

“I don’t have any of those things.”

“Neither do I.” There was moment of pause, “Well, that’s not entirely true. I have friends and family, and love.”

“You’re a priest. How do you have any of those things?”

“Well, there are many in this church that I work with that I consider my friends, and some that I consider my brothers and sisters, we even visit each other socially, outside of the congregation. And love, I have love for God, and receive love from Him.”

“That’s not the same, Father. I mean the love of a woman.”

“All things ultimately come from God. Why must love from a woman be different from that of God?”

“It’s just not the same. If it were, I’d have gone to seminary school and become a priest like my mom always wanted me to.”

“Being a policeman isn’t that much different from being a priest.”

“How do you figure?”

The words were now coming to him easily as he let all of his concerns spill out in this garden confession.

Father Cruz sat still.

“Do you ever have to follow through on acts that you’d really rather not?”

“Yeah, sometimes.”

“And what do you do?”

“I do what I have to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s the right thing to do.”

“You mean like returning runaway youths to their school?”

“Yeah, but they shouldn’t be out of school.”

“I remember one day,” the father started, “I was feeling a bit peckish and decided to go down to the donut shop, you know, pick up a dozen donuts or so for everyone in the office. When I got there, I found a young man who didn’t particularly want to be in school that day. I thought, I should march this young man right back to his classroom, but I didn’t. You know what I did?”

“Yes, I remember. You bought coffee, an old fashioned, and a chocolate bar, sat down across from me and said nothing. Just sat there sipping your coffee, tearing pieces off your donut, while I ate the chocolate bar.”

“You also didn’t say anything, for a bit. Just sat there eating that donut.”

“Yeah, I really didn’t want to be in the classroom.”

“How do you suppose those kids felt today?”

“Probably the same, but that’s not the same. I was all alone, they were not. Who knows what mistakes they might have made if I had allowed them to run off?”

“Yeah, they might have made some terrible decisions.”

Another silence took over.

“So when are you going to retire?”

“I already am. I work with Luis and tend my garden now.”

Officer Michaels looked deeply at the Father’s face. Time had worn away a youth, that was considered handsome, and shaped it into a wise face complete with the cracks and wrinkles that carve such a face.

“Why has it been such a long time since your last visit, Gabriel?”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Oh yeah? What’s kept you so busy that you haven’t come by to see me?”

“Oh, life I guess.”

“You mean work?”

“No, I don’t know. There are a lot of things that I don’t know anymore.”

The priest reached down and found a purple flower. He wrapped his fingers around the base and caressed the bulb from which the petals sprouted. His fingertips touched the stem and rubbed some of the scent from them and raised them to his nose where he inhaled the whiff of the flower’s essence.

“You see this flower here?”

Michaels nodded.

“If I leave it here in the flowerbed, then it will continue to grow, and flourish. If I pluck it, then it will lose its grounding, its source of nourishment. It will die.”

He looked the police officer in the eyes.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say Father.”

“I could cut it away from its brothers and sisters, and it would still live, if I support it and place it in water. It will continue to live.”

“Yeah, but it will only live for a few more days.”

“Yes, it will die. That is true, but if I leave it here and it lives the whole season, it will still die.”

“I’m still not sure what you’re trying to tell me.”

“If I take it, and place it in a vase with water, it will still live, and it will get to experience living in another place. See new things. It will go somewhere else in the world.”

“You think God wants us to uproot flowers so that they can experience something else? And then just let them die?”

“I don’t presume to know what God wants us to do. I just know that He wants what is best for us. Whether that is to live in a way so that we safely see the world from only one perspective, or to see the world in a way from a place that may be harder to live, but is possibly far more beautiful, it’s not for me to say, but I do know this, lonely flowers are the saddest flowers. Flowers should always be surrounded by other flowers where they can influence the happiness of those around them.”

He absorbed the words; their meanings and their associated images. He pictured a flower in a glass vase, sitting behind warm window panes as the sunlight streams through to land on the petals. He felt the warm sun on his face and a brief cool breeze fan past his cheeks and forehead.

Officer Michaels stood up. He bravely closed his eyes and felt for something, anything, anyone to whisper the secrets of the world into his ear.

“What are you going to do?” the Father asked.

“I think God is telling me to go pick some flowers for my apartment.”

The priest slowly gained his footing, and raised himself up to stand. Officer Michaels reached down and grabbed an elbow to support him as he rose. “Will you choose to listen to him, this time?”

“Who said I never did?”

“Our choices now affect our options for future choices.”

The policeman’s quizzical look played across his face and the priest knew that he didn’t get it. “You choose poorly now, you may not get better choices later.”

“What are you going to do Father?”

“I’m going to stay here and plant more flowers.”

The policeman smiled.

“Thank you, Father.”

“You’re welcome, but you don’t need to thank me.”

“Yeah, I know, but thank you anyway.”

“You should give your thanks to God.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll go light a candle.”

Father Cruz smiled as he watched the younger man walk away toward the door that led back out.

The work shed, where Luis would be cleaning up the tools they had used earlier, hid behind the main garage where they parked the church’s van. He found him there putting garden spades, hand rakes, and shovels onto racks.

“Luis. You hungry?”

“Yeah. Is it time to eat already?”

“Yeah, I’d say it’s always time for a meal. We can call this one lunch, but it doesn’t really matter all that much, now does it.”

The Father reached into his pocket and removed a wad of bills. He unfolded them and produced a \$20 bill.

“Here, take this and go to *Sam’s Deli*, and don’t forget to pick up some of those stuffed grape leaves.”

He smiled as he handed the money over.

Luis Sin Papeles

The walk to *Sam's Deli* was not a dangerous one at this time of day, and there was absolutely no reason for Luis to make the trip after the sun went down because the deli would already have been closed up long before.

It had nothing to do with Luis, he fit in the neighborhood just as well as the homeless hiding in alleyways waiting for an abandoned house to open up for squatters. The inhabitants of the area had all grown accustomed to the dreariness of the plastic grocery bags that lined the gutters. They accepted the graffiti on the walls and billboards. The fact of life on these streets were that everyone served as a potential target. They all wanted to desperately move up on the social ladder by any means available.

Luis graduated high school the year before, but only received a certificate of completion due to the inability to write an essay sufficiently communicating his ideas in a thoughtful and meaningful way that used proper English conventions. The language being his second, he had mastered the oral portion only two years before, still presented many obstacles through grammar and punctuation.

The church provided him with an opportunity to work, and Father Cruz stepped in to also aid him in obtaining proper papers so that he may participate in the American Dream, attend college, get a better job, buy a house and start a family.

That life seemed so far from reality that he simply concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other until he reached the deli.

The glass doors were wiped down and cleared of fingerprints, usually left behind by children of lazy parents.

The smell amalgamated greasy meats and oaky wines swept across his face. The cool air inside was filled with humidity and combined in it a thickness that removed it from the dry air outside.

“Luis, what’s up?”

Hovig, the burly Armenian manger, worked in the deli six and a half days a week. He fast became on friendly terms with Luis after the second time he entered the deli to pick up lunch for the Father.

“How you doing, Luis?”

He smiled at the 40 something Armenian. “I am well. How are you?”

“I’m good, my friend.”

“Business looks good.”

There were several older customers waiting in line with small numbered tickets in hand, each checking and rechecking their assigned digits.

“It is good,” he remarked as he watched the counter servers attend their orders. “You here for the usual?”

“Yeah, Father Cruz said for me to not forget the stuffed grape leaves. You know, he was not happy last time I didn’t bring any back, but he would not say so.”

“Of course, of course. Same for you? Italian sub?”

“Yes, please.”

“I got you. Coming right up.”

Luis received many nasty glares and dirty stares. This always made him feel uncomfortable, but Hovig never let an order for the Father go through the line. His status as a special customer had been solidified long before most of the customers, with the exception of the most elderly, had been born. Even before Hovig began working at the deli just over two decades before, the instructions had been passed down from Sam himself.

Hovig personally handled the order. He packed the sandwiches, stuffed grape leaves, and chips into a white plastic bag. He tied the ends up, handed the bag over as Luis exchanged it for the money, which Hovig took with him to the register to make change.

He returned with the cash. He reached over the counter to hand it to him. “Hey Luis, you ever think about working here? I could always use a good person like you back here.”

Luis felt the sincerity in Hovig’s voice, despite all of the humming conversations, the buzzing machinery and refrigerators trying to drown it all out.

“I would, but I have a job at the church and...”

Hovig leaned over the counter to get close to Luis’ ear. “I don’t care about papers. I didn’t have mine when I first got here either. My cousin made me some fake papers until I could get official ones from the consulate.”

“Thanks, but, I like working at the church for now, but thank you. If I need another job, I will come here first.” Luis grabbed the bagged food, the wrinkled plastic bore a yellow flower printed on its side.

Hovig the Italian Deli's Armenian Manager

He watched Luis pass through the double doors before turning to help the next customer waiting across the laminated counter top. A septuagenarian grandmother several times over dropped her ticket in the basket, asked for three meatball subs, placed four bags of kettle chips, along with four 1 liter bottles of diet Pepsi on the counter.¹⁸

The line posed no threat to Hovig as Diego, who reminded Hovig of his younger self, helped the next customer. They handled the lunch rush as handily as an ancient carpenter driving nails into a frame.

The lull that follows in the wake of a lunch rush feels like the sea falling away to lower tides. The calmness that is left behind is serene to the point of providing a false sense of security.

That sense of security was shattered not more than 23 minutes after the last lunch customer had been served. Hovig and Diego cleaned the counters, restored the prep station to a high degree of imposed order, and ensured the floors were free of debris.

There are times when the universe dictates where the mass of bodies are to exist, for Hovig and Diego it was in the quiet of the calm after what we call lunch that the universe dictated the mass of one hatless young man with a gun to enter the deli.

His *Obey* shirt carried a little more dirt than when he earlier entertained a story from a cashier, but his tapered pants were no worse for wear.

“What can I get you?” Hovig offered up.

¹⁸ Meatball sub: \$4.75 (x3) + kettle chips (x4) + 1 liter Pepsi (x4) = \$22.25

Hatless moved his right hand to the pistol in his waistband. He removed it to direct the barrel toward the face of the Armenian man. He squared it away, training it just below his dark hairline, on the center of his forehead.

“Give m-me all of the cash in those registers.”

Diego froze. Hovig’s hands were raised to show his defenselessness. “Okay, buddy, don’t worry. I got the cash right here. I’m just going to reach over and open the register. Okay?”

“Don’t fucking call m-me ‘buddy’. I ain’t your fucking buddy. Got that?” His sharp face grew more pointed with the rise of his anger.

“Sure. Sure. I got it.”

“Now, just reach over there and open the registers, put all the m-money into a bag... and I want one of those pre-made sandwiches in there too.”

Hovig slowly moved to the cash box with the black sidearm steadily held in his direction. “Listen man, I know what it’s like. You don’t want to do this.”

“Oh? I don’t? What the fuck do you know ‘bout what I want to do?”

“Look, you know 10-20-life? The law?”

“What the fuck are you talking about? Just fucking give m-me the fucking m-money already! Damn, what is with all you fucking cashiers today?”

“You pull a gun, you get ten years. Automatically. You fire a gun, 20. No questions. You kill someone, life. No one notices, and everyone forgets your name.”

“Goddamn it!” The unexpected pop blew Hovig’s left eardrum. The bullet missed his head by more than a length.

The metal slug spiraled through the air as its design dictated, but the mass of Diego's body forced its cessation. It entered the meat where his shoulder met his neck.

The blood flowed in its wake as the shot settled in and cooled to his body temperature. Diego's eyes dilated, his heart pumped more furiously as the pressure dropped. His body reacted by falling into shock.

Hovig ripped rags from the counter and pressed them to the wound. He turned to look at the gunman again, but saw only swinging doors.

"Hold on man. You better fucking stay with me. Stay with me Diego."

Diego was now on the floor with Hovig holding the washcloths tightly to staunch the flow of the red fluids necessary to life.

His other hand was already on the phone dialing for help. Blood smeared the screen of his phone.

"911 emergency services. What is your problem?"

"This is Hovig at Sam's Deli, we just had a robbery. They shot my friend. I need help now. Please. Please send an ambulance!"

"Okay, Hovig, my name is Oscar. I am already dispatching an ambulance and police to your location. I just need to you stay on the line with me for a little while longer. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. You said you're at Sam's Deli, that's 2415 N. First St., correct?"

"Yeah."

"You said you were just robbed?"

“Yeah. No. I mean, he tried to rob us, but he didn’t get any money. He shot my friend, he works here too, before I could get the money out of the register.”

“Is the gunman still there?”

“No, he left.”

“Can you describe the suspect for me sir?”

“Uh, uh, he was wearing a white shirt with the Obey company logo on it. He was white, maybe just under 6 feet, and short, buzzed, light brown, maybe blonde hair.”

“Okay. The police are on their way and so is the ambulance. Is your friend still conscious?”

“Yes. Please hurry.”

“Sir, they are on their way. Is he still speaking?”

“Diego? You with me man?”

Diego gaped and groped for air, then laid still.

“Diego. Diego?”

Hovig shook him a bit. Diego’s eyes refocused as he came to again.

“Diego!”

“I’m here. Stop shouting,” he coughed out.

“The ambulance is on its way. The cops are coming. Don’t worry. We’re going to do everything we can to help you. I have a few more questions for you. I’m on the line with an officer that is headed your way right now and they will be there as soon as they can. Can you tell me if the suspect fled on foot or got into a car?”

“I don’t know. I think he left on foot and I didn’t see any cars out there.”

Oscar moved a hand to his ear piece/microphone. He touched the communicator button to speak directly to the officers in the area.

“There has been a shooting during an attempted robbery at Sam’s Deli, on 2154 N. First St. Officers responding be advised that suspect has most likely fled on foot.”

Officer Michaels

Officer Michaels knew the procedures for such events. As a veteran of the force, this sort of event was sadly nothing new. He imagined that the first deputies in the county, over 100 hundred years previous, had responded to calls no different in nature than these same ones. He knew they chose bravely. He pictured them on horseback and in a position where they would have to head them off at the pass, but they would get the bad guys, and so would he.

He knew the power of choices, he chose to be a cop.

Officer Michaels heard the call to a robbery in progress, with shots fired and a possible victim, go out to all cars nearby. He responded naturally, punching the car southbound on Fresno St. when he spotted a figure dart across traffic shortly after crossing Clinton Avenue. The man ran toward Radio Park with a speed that screamed of suspicion.

Instinct overrode common sense and Officer Michaels' practiced routines were no longer simply practice. He sprung like a predator in the jungle, radioing it in to dispatch, he slammed the gas and flicked on the lights. The cruiser maneuvered through the lingering midday traffic as he approached the curb where the suspected figure ran onto the grass.

A fraction of an instant passed before the black-and-white reached its terminus at the edge of the pavement, the mass of a car that belonged to a one Francisco Esperanza smashed into his as they tried to defy the laws of physics and occupy the same space at the same time.

Francisco Esperanza

Little did Francisco know that the simple and nearly innocent act of handing a ubiquitous item such as red flowers to one, and yellow to another, could trigger a series of interactions that would lead to an outcome as devastating as the one that belied their fates.

Francisco's phone buzzed. His quick side break came to an end and he had just left Jenna's apartment nearly 7 minutes previous. She was already calling him. Voicemail could have accepted her call, but she had been extremely generous for the last hour. A slight nagging sense of obligation caused him to pick up the phone. His thumb selected the answer option and he switched it to speaker, but still held the device in his right hand.

"What's up, girl?"

"Nothing. I miss you already. Why don't you come back?"

"Dang, my little JenJen, I got to work, but I would if I could."

"Pancho, I think we should move in together."

That's when a man, wearing a t-shirt ran across the four lane avenue like coyote being hunted. Francisco caught only a glimpse of him, but his brain registered that something significant lied on the horizon.

"Hold up girl. I can't just do that. I'm married. I have kids. How would that look if I just left them?"

"I don't care. I love you, and you know we are good together. I'm coming to find you. So we can talk."

"Jenna-

He didn't see the lights, nor the sirens. The black-and-white police car's presence hadn't been known until it was physically felt.

The bark was much worse than the actual bite of the crunch.

Change in momentum is directly proportional to the force applied, a change where momentum is forced in the direction applied.¹⁹ The moment of silence that preceded the crash created a gulf for the echoes of the collision to fill. Metal, plastic, and rubber halted momentum for an instant. Wheels spun, air bags exploded, and they both ended up blocking the bike lane.

Time froze in the chaos of that instant and threw the fates of so many to the swirling winds.

The sightline between Officer Michaels and the hatless young man had been lost. Jenna lost Francisco on the other end of the line. Maria had lost Francisco a long time ago. Francisco did not know that his inability to see that he was about to lose much more would lead to an inevitable end.

The depleted airbags fell limp like popped balloons on his lap as the police officer moved up to the door. His hand instinctually to his firearm as he approached to offer assistance.

Shattered glass from his driver's side window layered the interior like snow on a mountainside.

Several others were now arriving to assist in the wreckage and many officers were surrounding them as many others continued to set up a perimeter and pursue the alleged gun toting fugitive.

Order was being imposed as the participants were still gathering their senses.

¹⁹ Sir Isaac Newton's 2nd Law of Motion.

“Are you okay, sir?” Someone was shouting at Francisco. “Sir, are you okay?”

A persistent bell rang in his head barring any sound into his ears.

The paramedics had arrived in a pair, as well as firefighters to assist in the extraction.

Francisco managed a back and forth head nod while pointing at his ears to indicate that he hadn't heard any of the words that the man had said.

They set to work and forced the driver's side door open. They reached in and the lead paramedic began a cursory exam of his head and neck. Once she gave the all clear to move him, they undid the seatbelt and hauled him out in one heave.

Francisco went to stand on his feet, but wavered so a firefighter and another paramedic supported his weight on their shoulders as they escorted him over to the back of a waiting ambulance.

He glanced around through the noise and saw them walking a policeman over to another ambulance. His mind assumed it was the cop who had been the other part of the two that it takes to make an accident.

Lights were shined in his eyes, otoscopes were jammed into his ears, then fingers pressed, prodded, and massaged various points on his face.

The ringing still persisted and nothing made it through his outer ear.

Francisco's penchant for change had always driven him to extremes. He would move the furniture around on a weekly basis, which annoyed Maria and the kids to no end. When every conceivable configuration had been in place for at least one week, he would add another piece of furniture, or remove one, then he would start over with a new plan of positioning; one that had never been done before.

His job as contractor enabled change in the workplace, he never worked in the same location for more than a few weeks at a time. Most days were spent overseeing one worksite after another, with a quick check-in at one or two of the spots. This schedule permitted him the opportunity to meet Jenna, after he had met a few others who didn't work out. This flexibility to roam from worksite to worksite also aided his possibilities for a change from his wife and kids.

Maria had been the one constant in his life. The kids were inevitable inconveniences that could not be avoided until after they were born. Then work allowed him to avoid them all like plague.

But this ringing exhibited no sign of subsiding. This led to no small frustration. A change of this magnitude, one that affected his inner self, presented a change that fell in the unacceptable category.

A change beyond his ability to choose and influence scared the Hell out of him to the point of a spontaneous prayer to God pleading for mercy and begging for hearing.

Oh God, if you please would not let this be permanent, I will change my ways. I will be faithful to Maria. I will be there for my kids. I will take Stevie to baseball practice, and Anthony to basketball, and Marisela to dance lessons, please, please, please don't let this be permanent. I'll do anything, just please put me back the way I was.

His moving lips showed the paramedics that something was transpiring in his head. They diagnosed a slight concussion, and temporary hearing loss, but Francisco's interim deprivation of sound had been drowned out by his transmission to God and he heard nothing else.

A hand on his shoulder interrupted his direct interaction with God. Officer Michaels wanted to inquire his well being.

RING-“Officer.... **-RING-** are you **-RING-** to be okay?”

Francisco looked to the heavens to simultaneously give thanks and curse God for bringing his hearing back.

His attention turned back to the policeman. “I’M OKAY. I THINK MY EARS ARE STARTING TO WORK AGAIN.”

“I just wanted to make sure that you’re okay. I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

Francisco only caught “wanted.. sure.. okay.. you’re not hurt.”

“Yeah, YEAH, I’m FINE. I think.”

“Okay, good. I’m glad you’re going to be okay.”

The cop walked off and began speaking with the sergeant on scene.

The lead paramedic leaned in and spoke to Francisco. “Can you hear me okay?”

The ringing’s persistence wavered and the words came through.

“Yes. I can hear you.”

“Okay, thank God, that’s good. It looks like you have a slight concussion, and your hearing should return to normal. Do you want to go to the hospital?”

“No, I’m okay, I think.”

“Okay, then, if your head continues to hurt or if you get dizzy, go to the hospital or call 911. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

She walked away leaving him to resume his plea to God.

He did not.

Hatless

His father's gun had been pulled for the second time that day, and fired for the first time only moments before, and he still had much less than he anticipated to show for it. Its warm muzzle snuggled up against his waist as he ran toward the park. Large bushes provided cover and the resulting crash diverted enough attention from the cops that a sense of security presided over his shoulders.

He peeked between the green leaves and yellow flowers as the cop walked over and talked to the Mexican construction worker standing at the back of the ambulance.

He made sure it was the cop who had seen him, and when he turned to talk to another cop, Hatless took the chance. He sprang from the bushes, briskly walking in the direction that pointed his back to the scene of the accident and deeper into the park.

Radio Park had become a den for needle pushers, homeless users, and the few tough children who laid claim to the apartment complexes that surrounded the park and Art Museum. He fit right in along with the other rabble.

One of the riffraff laid his head against the base of a tree while the roots straddled his body like a natural coffin enveloping him.

Another from the motley crew, a woman who appeared as though she hadn't slept in two weeks, nor eaten in three, picked sores on her arms as she sat at a picnic table.

He passed as a silent specter, a kindred spirit wandering through the skid row of life, and none who saw him paid any more mind than they would a mouse.

The city bus stop stood out as an island refuge, a life preserver on the edge of a sea of troubles.

He approached it like a ghost scouting a new haunt.

The plastic siding, along with advertisements, provided shelter from the sun and the world on three sides. The breeze was quieter, the noise softer. The walls were like a welcoming hug, wrapping their warm arms around him as he entered.

The bench within offered a respite from the weight of all that sat on his shoulders.

He sat and leaned into the side. An arriving bus let out a deep and loud sigh. He perked up a little as a young lady stepped off the lowered step and onto the sidewalk.

He thought her to be about 18, possibly still in high school, a fact that mattered little to him, having recently left the defunct high school system himself. His eyes were drawn to the lowest point of the V in her lavender v-neck shirt. They followed her fingertips as they pulled a few dark brown strands of loose hair behind her ear.

It surprised him to see her sit down on the same bench, not more than two feet away.

He liked her pointed chin. It reminded him of an elf.

She had still not looked once at him.

He couldn't stop himself from glancing over every few seconds.

She knew the area.

He could tell.

She held out the same expression as those in the park, the ones who saw him as nothing more than a phantasm.

He couldn't blame her, all sane people must proceed through this part of town with a healthy amount of circumspect.

"You uh, you got the time?"

She looked nervously around for someone to save her, and when no one appeared, she responded, "Uh, sorry no."

Unable to think of what else to say, he looked at the ground, then the street, but he still could not think of a single topic that they might have a conversation about.

He did not know the bus schedule and cared nothing about it, but asked her if she knew when the next bus was coming.

A breeze, caught in the plastic walls, wafted the scent of vanilla and candle wax his way.

"I think it'll be here in like 15 minutes."

"Do you know where it's headed?"

"East, towards the airport, then swings down toward Sunnyside."

"Where are you headed?"

"Uh, that's not really any of your business."

"Sorry, I was just curious."

The customary awkward silence followed.

"Really, I didn't m-mean anything by it."

She looked at him askance. She pursed her lips to the right. "It's all right I suppose." She paused, "Where are you headed?"

"Sunnyside."

"Oh yeah? You live over that way or something?"

“Uh, yeah, it’s just temporary though.”

She said nothing.

“I’m going to be m-m-moving soon.”

She still said nothing, but she shook head in a slight up and down nod. “My friend lives over in that area of town. She goes to the high school there.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, she was just texting me a little while ago. I think she applied for a job at the ShopSmartCo over there.”

“Oh yeah? They hiring over there?”

“Yeah, that’s what she was telling me. You should apply there, since you live in that part of town.” Neither of them said anything, but then started all at once.

“I’m sorry, go ahead,” he told her.

“I was just going to say that I guess it doesn’t really matter since you’re moving.”

“Yeah, that’s what I was going to say, but you never know. I m-might stick around and I m-m-might actually go check that place out. I’ve been trying to m-make better choices in m-my life.”

“That’s good.”

“Yeah. You said the next bus is going that way?”

“Yeah, you don’t ever ride the bus, do you?”

“No, I like to walk,” he lied. “Save m-money that way.”

A car pulled up to the bus stop and the girl rose. “That’s my ride. Take it easy.”

She left and didn't look back. She got into the almond green Honda, closed the door, and the car drove away while she looked down at her phone.

"That bitch knew exactly what time it was," he said to no one.

He watched the traffic swim past in clumps regulated by the stop lights. A cop would occasionally drive by, but none paid any particular attention to him.

Nearly a quarter of an hour lapsed before the large lumbering bus rolled up the street. It's huffing and wheezing could be heard nearly whole city block away.

It pulled up to a slow stop like a locomotive braking a mile away. The hiss and puff of the hydraulics indicated that the whole aging machine was working in concert to survive another day. It arrived at its stop and ceased forward momentum. The deck lowered to assist the disabled. He looked at the contraption for a moment and decided to get on.

He pulled out the correct change and added it to the fare collection receptacle.

Nearly every seat was open as there were few patrons taking the bus at that time of day.

He took a seat that was near the middle and behind the driver. He sat in the aisle so that no one would think to sit in the window next to him, though that would never pose a likely scenario.

The bus lifted itself with a loud groan and emitted a loud pop when it halted. The engine roared as it lurched forward.

City busses have a reputation that does not rank highly on any list of preferred method of travel and he saw this bus as the prime example of the number one reason why that was fact. The seat he occupied was worn threadbare as he could see the padding in the cushion through the up-

holstery. The whole body shook as they ran over every pothole that posed a threat to shock absorbers of even the most expensive ilk.

It smelled of urine, dried saliva, and faintly of antiseptic cleanser.

The grime on the windows collected in layers so that it faded the daylight like greasy tint.

Yet, it still forged ahead through the rough streets, stopping at assigned intervals to let the few riders off and pick up one or two in their place.

The rumble shook his bones in a way that rattled his vision. The poor souls that shared his experience were now shrouded in a veil of bad luck that depressed him to his core. His innards choked up and twisted. His heart ached and his anger swelled, thoughts ran through his head.

“This is not the way it should be. These poor people don’t deserve to suffer a life of riding on the bus. I shouldn’t be riding this bus. I should be driving my own car. I should be driving any car that I damn well choose.”

No one on the bus heard these thoughts nor would they have likely cared, but he let them run on anyway.

“Point a gun at a fool and all I get is \$100. What the hell is that all about? Point it at a second fool and I have to use it. What the fuck is wrong with people?”

They rumbled passed the airport, turned right and headed south. The 180 freeway wasn’t far off and they soon drove over it. They passed the old R-N Market, that had since become a Dollar General, no one noticed.

They crossed Tulare Avenue and he saw the giant 5ft. tall pumpkin on the playground that countless children at the preschool have crawled through.

The bus stopped at the light on Kings Canyon and the smell of Wong's Tea Garden overpowered the bus' fumes causing more than one stomach to grumble in protest of hunger. His stomach also joined in chorus, and even though he had the money from the earlier hold up, he already had other plans for that.

The light changed and they crossed the wide avenue and stopped at a designated pickup and drop-off spot.

The body of the bus lowered itself with a groan and sigh. He stepped off before it completed its downward procession. His right foot swept out and pushed him along towards the doors of the employee owned warehouse grocery store, characterized by its shiny concrete floors that allow customers to wander on 24 hours a day.

End of the Day

Francisco and Maria

With his truck towed away, Francisco would have to rely on Maria. He called her from his cracked phone. She agreed to come and pick him up from work, she was almost off, but she would have to take the kids to her mom's, and she would miss her class that night.

He accepted and told her he would wait for her.

A great deal of time had passed before she arrived. His head throbbed and the dull ache still accompanied a low ringing that refused to completely leave.

Maria pulled up to the curb where he was sitting down. He rose at the pace of a growing weed. His aching body wouldn't allow him any leeway on that front.

"What took you so long to get here?"

"I told you I had to take the kids to my mom's house. She can't drive the car because the transmission is going out."

"Well, you could have come faster. My head hurts. I can't believe that cop hit me."

"What happened?"

"I was on the phone with a client looking for an estimate, and then this crazy cop car comes flying out of nowhere, and then, and then he sideswipes me." Francisco took in a breath.

"And then, can you believe that they had the balls to give me a ticket?"

"You were driving while on the phone."

"Yeah, but he hit me!"

"Didn't you say he had his lights and sirens on?"

“Yeah, but... but he hit me. I didn’t hit him. They’re going to have to pay for this. That’s bullshit if they don’t.”

“You’re going to have to pay for it, but we have insurance. It’ll be okay.”

“What? No. No way. I’m not going to let them get away with this! That’s outrageous!”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’ll sue them.”

“With what? We don’t have any money for a lawyer.”

“That’s not the point. You don’t have to pay them unless you win.”

“Are you okay? Did you let the paramedics check you out?”

“Yeah, they said I was fine.”

“Is that all they said?”

“Yeah, and that I might have a slight concussion, some temporary hearing loss, but that I’ll be fine.”

Maria stopped at another red light. “Are you okay? Why didn’t you let them take you to the hospital let a doctor check you out, get an MRI or something?”

“Nah, those quacks can’t do anything for me. I’ll be fine. Can we stop at the ShopSmart-Co for some Advil?”

The light turned green and Maria took the car forward.

“Frank, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah. Why would you ask if you could ask me a question?”

“What were you doing way over there on that side of town?”

“You told me yesterday that you would be on the North side all day long today.”

“Yeah, well, I was planning on that being the case, but then there was a call about some repairs that needed to be done and I couldn’t get a hold of anyone else to go check it out, so I was on my way over when that damn cop hit me, and now my head hurts. Okay?”

Maria inhaled deeply and held it. She exhaled slower than a practiced monk. Her fingers gripped the wheel tighter until her knuckles whitened to ash. She reached down and fiddled with the volume on the radio, then abruptly decided to turn it off completely.

Francisco turned his head and looked out the window. The turn pulled on his neck muscles which shot a sharp razor straight up his nerves and tendons into the base of his skull, but he did not let on so that Maria could see his immense pain. He reached up and gripped the handle with his right hand and pulled down hard.

The rest of the car ride to the store remained silent save for the occasional knocking from the engine.

Francisco didn’t sit right.

Maria noticed his posture sagging. His shoulders were lower than they normally were, and his eyebrows were unusually close knit. There was a tension there that did not frequently reside around him.

He noticed periods where he would need to remind himself to breathe. It took considerable conscious effort to inhale and hold it long enough for his lungs to absorb the oxygen in the air and then to exhale the byproducts.

A sharp pain developed in his temples when he went too long without breathing in. Anxiety began setting in, which drove his heart rate up, which also caused sweats. He flipped on the air conditioner and adjusted the vents to all be directed on him.

Maria's level of fear shot up with his strange behavior. She had seen a change in him; one beyond his choice. Something happened inside of him. She knew he wasn't telling her the whole story, that his cheating ways took him to that part of town. She felt he also held on to more than he was letting on. There was more to the cop car hitting him than he admitted to her.

Maria gave thanks when they finally made it through another red light and made to turn into the parking lot, but had to pause for a mousey man wearing a t-shirt with the word OBEY written across the front of it.

A black Honda Civic pulled up behind her as she waited.

She found a spot on the East side of the large square building with no windows. She parked the car in the shade, gathered her things into her purse as she readied herself to exit the vehicle.

"Stay here while I run in to get you medicine." She reached for the handle.

"No, I want to go in with you."

"What? No, you stay here. I'm just going to run in real quick. I'll be right back."

"No, I want to go."

"No, just stay here. It'll be faster if I just run in."

A soft haze gently clouded his eyes. "Maria, I said I want to go in. Something just makes me want to go in. I don't want to sit here and wait for you. I'm going in."

"Fine, but I don't want to hear you complain later."

"You won't."

The pair slammed their doors with a vigor usually reserved for a wrestling ring.

They walked at a brisk pace, entered the store and turned right at the flowers, for the medicine aisle.

The six and a half foot walls carried balms, salves, ointments, powders, pills, time released gellcaps, general cures and treatments for all sorts of problems; all sorts with the exception of the problem Maria and Francisco were dealing with.

They reached the analgesic section of the aisle.

The choices had expanded over the years. Where there used to simply be aspirin, now sat a variety of products from basic generic acetaminophen to the name brand Tylenol, or ShopSmartCo brand of ibuprofen to the giant Advil bulk bottles. Naproxen in more than four possible brands and just as many choices of size selections.

Francisco reached for the largest quantity possible of Advil.²⁰

Maria wrinkled her brow in a mixture of anger and frustration. “What are you doing? We don’t need that big of a bottle.”

“So. It’s good just to have it around. You know, for other problems.”

“We don’t have enough money for that right now.”

“What do you mean we don’t have enough money?”

“Just what I said.”

“What happened to all the money I made?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

²⁰ 100 Gellcaps of Advil: \$25.95

Francisco's face contorted in a way that made him look like he tasted sour lemon at that very instant. "I used it to pay for everything." He grasped the green box with large yellow letters on it and roughly spun into a fast walk in the direction of the registers.

Maria reminded herself to breathe, and then she too turned in the same direction of the registers.

"Everything?" she called after him.

He turned his head just enough to holler back, "Yeah, your car, the house, the gas and electricity, and all the food. Your stupid classes."

Maria managed their finances and knew where the money for all of their bills went. She mailed some of the checks, rent and food. She arranged the automatic withdrawals for all of the rest, including his truck and insurance payments.

After were all done and paid, she still found overdrafts. She had suspicions, but knowing the truth and suspecting the truth are very different things and Maria could not prepare herself for the truth.

A memory washed over her at that moment. It was a brief image of the two of them just before they were married. His hair had grown long and his mustache, still thick and black as a raven, covered his lip in a soft push broom fluff. His smile pulled at the corners of his clay brown eyes. Her heart had been in a different world at that time. Its soft muscle tissue still vulnerable to illusions of love. That soft tissue calcified with the years of childbirths, and the absence of his presence. A glazed tint of willful ignorance allowed her to persevere through the pain of inklings and suppositions. Her heart focused on the physical and emotional well being of their children instead.

Needs and desires can be put aside for prolonged periods of time, but they have a way of emerging, and commanding attention louder than a middle child.

Mari's eyes registered the angry and annoyed face of Francisco the moment she snapped out of her brief flashback.

A burning welled up within her core. It bubbled and boiled. Deep within, she knew, rather than supposed, that his fidelity was beyond questionable.

They reached the line for the nearest register. "My stupid classes?" she said with the calmness and clarity of a lawyer questioning a witness on the stand. "My stupid classes?" she repeated. And then the hot mess inside spewed out. "You think I don't know about your fucking sanchas, pendejo!?!". She raised her voice. "You think I don't know? Huh?"

The other people waiting in line spun on them in the shock of such an unexpected outburst around them.

Francisco stood dumbfounded. His words were lost. The grey haze grew thicker.

"Answer me! Goddamn it!"

He said nothing. His throbbing head made his heart pounding feel exponentially worse. A wave of dizziness washed over him. He felt an ocean pushing him back and forth. A quake inside of him began to tremble.

Maria saw this and grabbed him. She walked him over to the bench in the front of the store, near the customer service counter, where the man in the t-shirt was waiting to talk to the large African-American lady working behind it.

She placed him on the bench, "I'm going to go get you some water. Just sit here. Got it?"

He nodded through the fog.

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

Maria left him there. She hurried over to the drink section while Francisco attempted to right himself. The room spun as people passed by without so much as a glance.

He reminded himself to breathe. An inhale motion brought pain to his temples, but he needed more. His heart strained and pounded the inside of his chest.

That moment his heart pumped out, Jenna poked her head through his clouded vision.

His condition left him stranded without reason, like a hit and run victim.

“Pancho, Love, come on, we’re getting out of here.”

Jenna tried to grab his arm and pull him along with her, but he resisted.

“Why aren’t you coming?”

“What are you doing here? My wife is here.”

“I came to get you out of here, but we need to leave right now, before your wife comes back.”

Confusion may have clouded his thinking, but now that Maria acknowledged his adulterous ways, he had nothing left to loose.

“Wait, I need this. My head hurts.”

Jenna reluctantly relented. “Okay, come on. We’ll pay for it here.” She dragged him to the customer service counter. The East wall held approximately 15 feet of liquor on shelves as high as six feet. Hatless paying no one mind still waited on the checker behind it. Bridgette still had her ear on the phone, as she waited for the shift manager to come and unlock the cigarette case behind her.²¹

²¹ Hatless would be Bridgette’s last customer before Priscilla took over for her, so that she could clock out and go home.

An impatient Hatless shifted from foot to foot.

Jenna and Francisco waited behind the posts with guide ropes holding the next in line back.

“Hey, you mind if we go before you?” Jenna asked. “We’re kind of in a hurry.”

The young man with short light brown hair, turned and replied, “Yeah, I do. I’m trying to apply for a job and get a pack of smokes.”

“Ugh. Is that how your dad taught you to talk to ladies?”

Another attitude set against his added to the pile of attitudes running contrary to his that day. One more needle that pricked his skin. It was one more straw than any camel could bear.

“Bitch. You don’t know nothing about my father.”

“With an attitude like that, it seems that neither do you.”

“What the fuck did you just say?”

“You fucking heard me, you little prick.” Jenna turned to Francisco, “Are you doing to let some fucking little bitch talk to me that way?”

Francisco had no intention other than to get some Advil and go home to relax until it was safe to go to bed. “Uh, um...” His head began to pound in unison with his heart. “What the fuck you little shit? You better apologize.”

“What the fuck you going to do about it, grandpa?”

“I’m going to teach you a fucking lesson you little shit.”

The last part of his sentence slurred a little. Francisco lurched forward with his fists clutched. His headache pounded and the dizziness spun him in a circle, but his body still went forward toward the young man.

Hatless panicked and pulled the pistol out of his waistband.

The two collided and a pop sounded. It sounded like a bottle of champagne being uncorked.

The two froze. They looked at each other.

Francisco stumbled back. His eyes still locked on the young man.

The young man let his eyes wander down the man's chest. He saw a fulvous stain blossoming. Its reddish-yellow glow spread across his shirt as it grew into a full bloom.

Francisco stumbled downward this time.

Jenna screamed and disappeared as though she were a figment of his imagination.

Bridgette yelled.

Hatless ran.

"OH MY GOD!" Jenna bawled.

Bridgette jumped into action. She dialed 911, handed the phone off to the next checkout worker to arrive. She then appeared next to Francisco and went into CPR mode.

She pressed a rag to his chest, checked airways, breathing, and then circulation. The first two were clear and subtle, but there. The last was more faint than the others.

The rag Bridgette had found applied pressure to the wound, attempting to staunch the bleeding, but it did little good.

Maria found the drinks, and picked up a bottle of the Aqua Fina that Francisco preferred.

She saw that he wasn't on the bench when she returned, but that there was crowd surrounding someone on the floor inside of the customer service counter area.

Her ossified heart dropped to the floor next to the man that everybody was surrounding. She knew. Her heart knew before her brain decided to register the situation.

She rushed over, pushed through the crowd with grunts of “let me through, I’m his wife.”

When she reached the center, she found Bridgette working harder than ever to resuscitate and keep him alive long enough for the ambulance to reach them.

One look into his eyes told Maria everything that she needed to know about his lifeline. Francisco was gone. The love of her earlier life had been physically removed from her life. There would be no messy divorce. There would be no protracted child custody battles. She would inherit them and they would inherit his traits and material goods.

He was gone.

He trekked to the lands where none could follow and still return. There was nothing that could tempt his soul back to this earth.

He had been gone from her for many years, but he was now truly and permanently gone from her life.

Maria sobbed, then tears broke, and she wept on her knees.

She did not weep for him, or for them. She cried because her children would never truly get to know their father firsthand. They might grow up and have questions that only he knew the answers to. They might turn out to be just like him and not know why. They might grow up and not even notice that he was never there to begin with. That scared her the most of all the thoughts that passed through her mind in that instance.

Maria's instincts dictated that she carry on stronger than before. Her brain reminded her that she carried on this long without much of his presence, and despite the ache in her recently softened heart, she would carry on in a way that would be fitting of royalty.

Their finances would be cut thin, but they would manage.

Her need for red flowers had grown greater than it had ever been.

Jenna

The crowd eclipsed a crying Jenna, who now faded to the back and quietly slipped away. Shock propelled her forward. Inexperience kept her alert and watchful as she walked to her car. Mascara and eyeliner dripped down her cheeks as her tears washed away the makeup she put on especially for her Pancho.

She whimpered as she unlocked her car door. Nothing would quell the feelings she held for Francisco, and she vowed to never marry anyone for as long as she lived.

She did not see the police officer who had earlier stopped her as she drove away sculpting her promises to God.

Officer Michaels

Off duty for less than an hour, Officer Michaels, still in his uniform, decided to stop at the ShopSmartCo to pick up some flowers for his apartment. Life was about to change, not entirely because he was letting it, but because of his decision to make it change.

His personal car, locked, was left in the stall. He moved to go in the store when a figure of a young man sprang out from between two cars and began running across the parking lot. His gait, familiar of that to the young man running from the scene of a shooting earlier, gave him away as the suspect in that incident. His determination to apprehend the perpetrator ran high before being interrupted by a distracted driver who sideswiped his patrol car, dearer to him than any partner had ever been, amplified his desire to ensure he would not escape this time.

Instinct drove his right hand to his service weapon, and he leapt into action without actuating any thoughts on the subject.

His near record breaking sprint broke like a cheetah out of the gates.

One foot in front of the other, he pushed himself towards the running assailant. Every step he leapt took him five feet closer to the man running from him.

Officer Michaels knew the old adage that one must crawl before one can learn to walk, but he also knew that one must learn to balance on one foot as the other swung forward in order to learn how to walk, and to run, one must push oneself to the limits of the laws of physics. Michaels practiced and pushed himself to his personal limits many times over, and the adrenaline coursing his veins aided his pursuit.

Great amounts of oxygen were required. This may at times require more than the possible physical boundaries, but the officer would not allow that to be the case in this instance.

The policeman, near enough to draw his weapon with the concern for others fleeing the scene, bellowed out, “FREEZE!”

The hatless young man turned to fire, and as he did so, the trigger tottered and stuck, then a simple click.

Nothing happened at the expected end of the gun.

Gabriel Michaels had never fired his weapon at an actual person, but he did not need to think about it. He squared off in a horse stance for stability, his practiced body acted. His trigger finger squeezed the little metal projection to fire the gun.

Time stood still, as it often does in moments of crisis. People ceased running from the scene, hiding and ducking for cover. Breathing in almost every case stopped, if only for that split moment. Cars quit moving as their engines halted their revolutions. A child dropped candy, it hung suspended in midair. People of all walks of life stood completely motionless for that instant. No one knew the gravity of that situation more than that of Officer Michaels.

His brain however, more conscious of the situation than he, and his subconscious proclivity to protect rather than harm, pulled his muzzle down and to the left. Officer Michaels’ bullet paused in that frozen moment of time, but flew straight and true, striking the hatless youth in the upper thigh.

The young man dropped in pain as the blood poured out of his flesh.

The officer rushed in to secure the scene. He tackled the young man crying in pain, cuffed him, then raised his head to find the nearest passerby. “Call 911. Tell them officer Michaels was involved in a shooting. We need more police here now.”

The woman heard his plea and did as he instructed.

“911 emergency services. What is your emergency?”

ShopSmartCo

The grocery store had been evacuated in the aftermath of the shooting that left one Francisco Manuel Esperanza, 42, dead.

The police department swarmed the lot, the building and surrounding streets as the information began to flow from all those who were there.

Witnesses were detained, their information pulled from some like wisdom teeth being extracted. Contacts were checked, verified and double checked. People were let go of their own recognizance with the warning that they were likely to be contacted in the near future.

The 24 hour grocery store, whose doors never closed, were now so as to allow only the lead investigators and their short list of known trustees.

Maria had been left by the wayside as they had already discovered that she held no information that could be of use to the police.

She did not see Jenna, and had no explanation as to who the woman that Bridgette described as being with Francisco, was. She could not figure out what was happening in the whole mess that spiraled out of control.

Her bankrupt soul held no answers as to what had happened all around her and the universe refused to provide any.

The cops told her to go home to her family, and try and get some rest. She would be more able to deal with all of the day's events after a bit of rest and time away from the whole situation.

Her tear streaked face nodded in numbness. She didn't know what else to do so she listened to them, and after assurances that she was in fact okay to drive herself, she entered her car, but called her mom first.

She would try to explain some of the greatest secrets of the universe but her words would fail her and she would blubber on to her mother about how unfair life can be.

Edward Smith

The sun, on its way down, left Edward with a long and lonely day that ended with a stop by Panda Express, for dinner for one.

The packed parking lot forced Eduardo to go around a median and enter the drive thru from the driveway near the Goodwill instead of the CVS.

Lit up police cars filled a large part of the parking lot. Media vans were taking up the trash filled gutters on the sides of the streets. Camera men set up the equipment while reporters roamed the crowds searching for information that came as close to the truth as possible, which they would then relay, as close to the truth as possible.

There were a few ambulances, and even the coroner van.

He figured another gang shooting in the parking lot left some young kid dead before his time, erasing any future where kids would run into his open arms that would wrap around them in a tight never-ending bear hug. There were soccer games that would never be attended. High school football games that would never be attended, proms that would not have pictures taken of them in all their finery. It was a shame, but what could he do? He was only one man who did his best to teach others to speak in English despite circumstances that became obstacles.

He would get his food and go home alone, like any other given night.

He would eat alone, wash his dishes alone, and put them away all by himself, and then watch a bit of the television before laying down in his bed alone.

The drive thru teller muffled an offer to help him, but he knew that there was nothing she could offer besides his favorite Mongolian beef with half and half fried rice and noodles.

She repeated his order, asked if it was correct, then instructed him to drive up to the window.

“That’ll be \$9.71.”

Edward handed her a ten dollar bill. She tossed out a strange look at the cash, as though paper money had been rather odd way of compensating the business for their product.

She took the bill, entered it into the register, then returned the \$0.29 to his palm.

“It’ll be right up in just a minute.”

“Thanks.”

He thought that the teller looked pretty, if only he had been 15 years younger, then he might have a chance to ask her out and she might have said yes, but as it was, there was no way he stood a chance with anyone her age. The amount of energy necessary for a relationship at that age was far beyond his ability. Younger women were full of life and vigor, on levels that surpassed his. He wanted a woman who knew the hardships of life, one that understood the satisfaction to be gleaned from small moments that filled the day, like watching the sunset and sitting on a couch with dinner. He couldn’t even muster the energy to imagine what it would be like to date a younger woman who wanted to go out to bars and clubs, hiking on the weekends, and the beach on Fridays.

His imagination entertained the possibilities, if only momentarily, but reality blocked any further exploration of the topic before his body grew as exhausted as his mind.

She reappeared before disappointment clouded his countenance. His food, boxed and bagged, came through the building’s window and passed through the space between, and into his car.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, come again.”

Edward accepted his bag and twisted the wheel in order to drive away from the mess of police officers.

He turned onto the road and directed his car toward home.

A tornado of thoughts whirled through his head while he listened to the radio banter of the DJ.

The yellow sun gave way to purple, pink, then red as the disk lowered itself beyond the horizon to illuminate the other half of the earth leaving them in the dark for the next 12 hours or so.

He spied a brief glimpse of the yellow star as it made its way downward, but the sun neither noticed nor cared. He drove on as the daylight faded, and his spinning thoughts died down with the dimming light.

His apartment complex welcomed him the same as it would any other resident, or visitor, or some random person who made a wrong turn into its parking area, as someone who didn't matter.

He unlocked the deadbolt to his apartment and entered.

Edward placed the bag of food on his counter which separated the living space from the kitchen, walked to the restroom and relieved himself. He washed his hands, dried them on a towel that should have been dropped into the wash long ago, and flopped down on the couch with his styrofoam box of Chinese fast food.

The TV tuned into channel 30, where he found the Action News Team standing on the corner he previously departed.

“I am Greg Pierson and this is the Action News Team reporting live at the scene of a shooting inside the ShopSmartCo this evening..,”

Edward’s attention turned towards the food in front of him. He pushed the little round bits of chicken around the compartments and then stabbed the ice cream scoop pile of rice. He grasped the remote control and surfed the channels in search of anything more interesting for a man his age to watch.

He saw a recap of the day’s sporting events, some special on micro-houses, some food guru promoting the ease of a new cook grill that laid claim to the revolution in healthier food cooking options that cut prep times in half so that even working people could enjoy a home cooked meal fit for a king.

Nothing satisfied his curiosity and he soon gave up on the television.

The styrofoam quickly smelled disatisfying and was just as quickly pushed aside as he looked for something more in his life. A hole in his life had developed over the last several years as he wasted away his evenings in a similar manner night after night. He reached for the nearest book to read in an attempt to divert his attention away from his life.

An hour passed since he decided to pick up his copy of *Red Rising*. 42 pages later found Edward blinking more and more heavily.

The day's events were finally catching up to him as the drowsiness of sleep was dropping its cloak over him.

His kitchen was nearly spotless, the rest of his apartment in fact had never really contained enough to fill it completely so it had never truly been found to be a mess.

A resigned sigh demonstrated his resolve. He rose and readied himself for bed.

His brain still whirled away as his body, muscle and bone, fought to relax enough for sleep.

The fairness of life's dispersement's weighed on his mind. The universe found some to be more worthy of more material goods, while other were gifted with the presents of good company. Several were given good looks, charisma, confidence and unwavering persistence. Others were granted sharp intelligence, or even wit, while he was given only a small dose of many of those things, they were not imparted with a great generosity that allowed him to flourish.

Edward laid down alone in his bed that evening while only thoughts of Maria Esperanza floated through his imagination.

Even in the midst of such thoughts he felt that the Universe possessed powers far greater than anything his moderately intelligent brain could fathom.

The conspiracies of the universe collaborate in such ways as to allude to a premeditated plan. Converging the paths of its inhabitants, crossing them in order to bring about a seemingly sense of order, if even for only a moment.

All of the wrongs in the world can be righted, if only for that second its chaos is reined in at the end of the day, in order to make sense of the universe's plan.

So it was that Edward Smith passed into the world of dreams, dreams of Maria Esperanza, comforted by the thought that the Universe knew what it was doing.

Curriculum Vita

Kristopher A. Paul is many things. Some of which he considers most important are, husband, father, teacher, student, amateur musician and filmmaker. He hails from Central California and holds a Bachelor's of Arts: English from California State University, Fresno, and a Single Subject Teaching Credential: English. He has taught high school English and Drama Arts for the last 11 years and currently teaches Theater Arts at Hanford High School.

His flash fiction work has been accepted on two occasions. *The San Joaquin Line*, was published in January of 2016, on flashfiction.com, as well as another piece, *Picking Peaches in Del Rey* was accepted for publication on everywritersresource.com.

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